

# Polish Journal for American Studies

Yearbook of the Polish Association for American Studies

Vol. 11 (Spring 2017)



AMERICAN STUDIES CENTER UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW



INSTITUTE  
OF ENGLISH STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

# **Polish Journal for American Studies**

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Warsaw 2017

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Julia Fiedorczuk

## **“All of the Bees in a Hive Are Having Imagination”: An Interview with Brenda Hillman**

Brenda Hillman has published chapbooks with Penumbra Press, a+bend press, and EmPress; she is the author of nine full-length collections from Wesleyan University Press, the most recent of which are *Practical Water* (2009), winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award, and *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire* (2013), which received the International Griffin Poetry Prize for 2014. With Patricia Dienstfrey, she edited *The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood* (Wesleyan, 2003), and has co-translated *Poems from Above the Hill* by Ashur Etwebi and *Instances* by Jeongrye Choi. Hillman teaches at St. Mary's College where she is the Olivia C. Filippi Professor of Poetry; she is an activist for social and environmental justice. Hillman's poems draw on elements of found texts and documents, personal meditation, observation, and literary theory. Often described as “sensuous” and “luminescent,” her work investigates and pushes at the possibilities of form and voice, while remaining grounded in topics such as geology, the environment, politics, family, and spirituality.

Large parts of this interview were recorded in Berkeley in March 2016, the conversation was continued through e-mail over the period of several months.

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*Julia Fiedorczuk: I would like to start with a question that's been on my mind for a long time. How does being a woman relate to one's work as an avant-garde poet? Are women poets allowed to be experimentors? Is there a specifically feminist or feminine kind of experimental poetry?*

Brenda Hillman: My interests in experimentalism and innovative writing have always involved more than features of style or affinities with movements, they have always had to do with my experiences as a woman in western culture. I don't think there is a “feminist” style or set of styles but there are styles that correspond to women's experiences and most recently this is true in experimental writing by women. Since the 70s in the Bay Area, women have played important roles in the development of the literary scene but we have also been trend-setters in breaking open form, in what is included in poetry. There were important women's presses and publications started by women, including *How (ever)* and Kelsey Street Press. When I came to Berkeley in the mid-70s I thought a lot about writing in relation to the “outsider” traditions, and my experience as a woman writing poetry, especially as a young mother, felt “outside.”

*It seems to me that avant-garde movements have tended to betray women. They promised to open things up for experimental women poets but never kept the promise. There seems to be an assumption that if one is a woman, and if one writes poetry, one should at least write in a way that “schoolgirls can understand”—to use a phrase from your poem.*

I gravitate toward the poets who are rocky in relation to official avant gardes, like Michael Palmer. Very often groups that are self-proclaimed avant-gardes like Surrealism, Objectivism, Black Mountain School, Beat Poetry are understandably organized around friendship groups and common interests; in each of those groups there are usually only a few woman poets—Denise Levertov for Black Mountain writers, Lorine Niedecker for the Objectivists. Barbara Guest was a friend of many of the New York School poets. I don’t think Emily Dickinson would have belonged to a movement; I tend to like iconoclasts like C.D. Wright and writers who cut across the categories with anarchistic irreverence because I like impurity and odd combinations.

Art movements have been primarily boys’ clubs. The Beat movement included a few women—Joanne Kyger, for example—and those poets did not mean to be exclusionary or sexist or unkind to women or anything—that’s just how things were. Duncan was close friends with Levertov, she was one of his main correspondents, but his social circle was primarily male—Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser etc., and they were all great writers, so I’m not faulting that. It’s just that literary history is based in part on the neglect of the work of women and minorities, and only later do we discover the important voices of women and minorities that were busy making art throughout history. The last few decades have been a major watershed. I always say to the younger women friends just to remember it took a lot of people to beat back the underbrush so you could walk more freely. I’m glad all of this loosened up after the 80s but there is still a lot of work to be done.

*You edited a book of essays on poetry and motherhood. Can one be a mother and a poet, or is there a conflict between those roles?*

The coeditor of our book *The Grand Permission*, Patricia Dienstfrey, is one of the founders of the women’s press at Kelsey Street, and one of the things we say in our introduction to the book is not that poetic form influenced our experiences raising children, or that raising children determined our poetic forms, it is that they occurred in the same decades, as parallel experiences. After Plath and Sexton and others paved the way, for the first time it was all right for women to put their own issues of body and experience in their poems. They didn’t have to stick to traditional domestic subjects; women poets who chose to write about historical events or other forbidden subjects were freer, and we were also free to use abstraction, formal invention and to identify as rule-breakers. On the one hand there was more allowance for domestic material in poetry, and on the other hand, women were suddenly not limited to

traditional presentations. Many of our contributors were women who didn't really write using traditional subject matter and wanted to write about interesting formal choices in relation to their parenting. When we put our book together we got several "no's" from prominent poets; one said she didn't think poets should have children, because "Art and motherhood do not mix." Another wrote that she never included her children or household matters in her poetry because she didn't want to be thought of as a woman poet who wrote that way. And in the process of our editing, we came across a male editor who said if he saw a note that a woman is a mother in her bio, he closed the book. It took women poets of several generations so much effort to get to where we are, especially as experimental poets; some were afraid of losing their rights even further, and so they were wary of these topics. Adrienne Rich and Lucille Clifton were real rule-breakers in that way, including the subject matter of women's bodies and women's work. But a lot of the younger women poets are now including motherhood and family life, gender identification issues (lesbian motherhood) as topics of their experimental poetry and I feel we showed the way. Some of the older experimental women poets in our volume—writers like Kathleen Fraser, Fanny Howe and Alice Notley—pointed to the ways in which their experimentalism and their mothering overlapped. Things are freer now. I think of the work of the younger poets like Rachel Zucker and others who are cutting across boundaries. And we never wanted to be told that being mothers meant you couldn't be a full practitioner of poetry.

*Your poetry cuts through the dichotomy between experimental or avant-garde poetry, on the one hand, and the more lyrical or confessional, sometimes even narrative, political poetry, on the other.*

In connection with what we were just talking about, I didn't like being told what I could or couldn't do in my poetry—whether it was the then avant-garde having suspicion of subjectivity or subjective states or the general distrust of abstraction and theory in the broader poetry cultures. It just felt too much like Junior High School. When I was a kid I had a very rocky relationship to being categorized and I didn't want to be bossed around. In the 80s, I got bored with some of the seemingly restrictive conventions of narrative autobiographical poetry, so I looked for women models for stuff I wanted to do, particularly in experimental environmental writing. I looked toward writing with freer play and reference and always felt poetry should sound like the experience that made it, which for each writer is different, not a set of rules.

In America it's conventional to think there has been, since modernism, a binary between one kind of poetry versus the other kind, but then they disagree on what terms constitute the binary. Perceived binaries can be tracked in all kinds of ways—between more expressive kinds of poetry, including apparently autobiographical, sometimes narrative work, versus a more material-based kind of writing, most recently Language poetry and the fallout of that. Or some people

use the words “mainstream” vs. “experimental” loosely without being able to say what they mean. Some talk about “cooked” and “raw,” a more “polished” poetry vs. more process-oriented, hybrid kind of writing. I am interested in the way these arguments are set up but it all gets too rigid for my own practice. These categories probably represent not just a search for aesthetic definition but also a need for purity that artists do not enact as a practical matter and now they mostly have outlived their usefulness. The twentieth-century versions of this in the U.S. might have come out of the resentment of the dominance of T.S. Eliot. I think I was drawn to SF Renaissance writers like Robert Duncan because they muddled the divisions, and included emotion, politics and formal freedom.

*Do you think about language as arbitrary and alienating, or rather, as continuous with the material world? Your writing is both sophisticated and sensuous.*

Well, knowing the primacy and importance of language doesn't mean you can't acknowledge there is experience that is non linguistic. I am drawn to Wittgenstein but also to Theosophy, magic and to naturalist guides to local animals. I'm interested in the fact that a little lizard has experience and can't call it experience. Language and its sign systems are of course arbitrary—otherwise we couldn't have a thousand different words for “tree,” all of them equally beautiful—and at the same time, we have to recognize that language flirts with abstraction in a different way than paint, or music, or sculpture; each word when we use it has something to do with reference and meaning and does not remain purely abstract. There is so much energy, great beauty, outside of language. In this way, it is different from the note of middle C, played on the piano. When I say “as,” a very generous, amazing word that means thousands of things, it means in context in very different way from what a musical note means. So our words have got to be both: referential and non-referential. Stein was a big influence on women poets and feminist poetics, including me; Steinian poetics helped many poets from the beginning of the twentieth century play with language, and that helped a whole strain of invention, collage, nonsense sentences, making language playful—it was very magical. I feel the same about Baudelaire and Rimbaud and Mallarmé. They helped the unconsciousness of the poet fight for its rights in the nineteenth century. And yet, what brings people to poetry, even as children, is often a deep feeling about the world that couldn't be satisfied without that kind of intense linguistic expression. In my case, I find myself searching for meaning for experiences that seem otherwise unmanageable, especially in the dire times of emotional distress or of political upheaval.

*I know you practice meditation and trance. Could you talk about the impact of these practices on your writing?*

I started doing trance in the early 80s. It was Jungian therapy-patterned on the work of Carl Jung. In each session we would do hypnosis. I did it for about 14 years and

I worked through a lot of things in my writing and life where I would be stuck—for instance in my poetry. In Jungian therapy you talk to certain archetypal figures—I can do it on my own now. I set the timer on my phone and I sit for a couple of hours. There are so many aspects of your mind that you don't know unless you pay a visit to them.

*So trance is a kind of dialogue?*

Actively dreaming has to do with asking a question and looking for an answer. The Jungian writer Maria Von Franz is amazing on the subject of active imagination. In my sessions I usually ask a question—and then I go to this active dreaming space. You might think that you know in advance the answers that you are going to get but it is not true. Since childhood I have made my own little rituals and spells; I am always trying to navigate experiences on multiple levels, so it never seems the exterior world or action is completely detached from the interior world of images. I found this particularly useful in moments of stress in a public action; sometimes these mini-trances are active invitations with the figures from dreams. Poets have to bring more imagination to things. But it's good not to confuse this kind of poetic behavior with the sort of work that needs to be done in political or social justice work; dreams cannot change systems or laws, they can only accompany this change. I have been reading the letters of Rosa Luxemburg, and am especially inspired by her letters from prison.

*The theme of the imagination fascinates me. You write about the imagination as something that is material, natural. Once again, it cuts through these fundamental dichotomies—matter/ideas, body/mind, things/words.*

It cuts across so many things... How can we say, for instance, that bees have no imagination? Imagination is maybe also a collective entity. All of the bees in a hive are having imagination. They don't have language the way we do, but they have a collective enterprise. There is no certainty about how many kinds of material there are, and the majority doesn't have to rule.

*You write: "If bees can detect ultraviolet rays, there are surely more possibilities in language and government. The possible is boundless" (Practical Water, 33). That, too, has to do with the imagination, right?*

People think humans are the highest order, better than non-human animals. I disagree. I think we are not higher, we are beside, and bees are just as important as we are though of course they cannot control our destiny and we can control theirs. So you can do ritual practices and things to bring you together with the non-human, including bringing letters of the alphabet outdoors. And if you think about the imagination as a huge collective enterprise in which we all participate and not just

one species, I think it makes possible more boundless ideas about what's possible. So far we are not working very well with the non-human animals. I think one of the areas for opening up hope is in the mental power: the power of the mind we know very little of.

*Do you think that practicing the imagination like you do—through trance, poetry—is a way to communicate with the non-humans?*

Yes, I do. I am enchanted by the non-human nature and the elements and the many conceptions of them in human society. There's a range of thought about this. There is a range of materials. I had worked on a tetralogy of books about the elements. *Seasonal Works With Letters on Fire* is the fourth book—the fire book—and it began when Bob [Robert Hass, JF] and I were driving, it was October, and I saw pumpkins in the field—and I was just overwhelmed by how beautiful they were. And I looked out there and I thought—each of those pumpkins, they are having an experience, their own experience. There are seeds inside of them, and they are all white and they look like eyes inside the pumpkin. And it has nothing to do with me. They are not involved in my life. They don't need me. It was beautiful. I began to think of the fiery energy in all things, how it is alive apart and in relation because I have become more of a witch over time, a pagan worshiper. At the same time, this does not obviate the need to see the world with other models as well, like the fact that the pumpkin were possibly being raised by agri-business, and were the workers receiving fair wages. We are committed on all these levels. Donna Haraway and Angela Hume Lewandowski have written beautifully about this.

I think that by imagining other species we can have more freedom and beauty in our lives and this imagination helps us live more ethically. And we can also empathize. To think that other species have their own experiences is a way of expanding our life and also a way to free us from our own murderous ways. Whenever I get very stressed I think about foxes in Tilden Park or in the hills beyond that, or the woodrats under their piles of sticks. They are there, doing their thing. I think there is an animistic kind of relationship that we can develop. Sometimes I think everything has some kind of sensation that we can't understand. That's part of what inspired the book and what the poems are about—the non-human life we have no access to as human agents.

*I came across a new poem of yours in the last issue of Poetry magazine. The title is: "Describing Tattoos to a Cop." Does it describe a real experience?*

Yes. There is a wonderful organization called 350 org. They were doing a demonstration in Washington DC against the Keystone Pipeline. The extraction process of fossil fuel and the dangerous transport of oil are very important issues. Bob and I heard there would be a protest at the White House and we decided to go, knowing we were risking arrest. It was a high visibility affair because it was the first

time Sierra Club was doing civil disobedience. It was on Ash Wednesday 2013. And so we were arrested and booked. And when they book you you have to tell them about your tattoos—so I described my tattoos to the policeman, who had tattoos too.

*At the beginning of the poem you talk about the worms—perhaps this is an example of what you just talked about, imagining the non-human entities, what they are doing, while we humans are having our demonstration. It is important to acknowledge this perspective, to understand that we and our affairs are not alone. A really moving moment comes when the speaker actually seems to empathize with the policeman—and it is the tattoos, these markings on the body, that make some sort of empathic identification possible. I see this as a comment about poetics—the markings on the body become a kind of language which constitutes grounds for communication—even in conflict.*

I was a little stuck: there is a lot of police-hating around. And I do have problems with law enforcement right now; I perceive we are living in a police state with regard to minorities and protest. But this young officer was so clueless and was trying to be helpful. I felt I could not cross the gap of our difference—differences of goals and class. I was a white woman coming out to protest, to be arrested. My job was not at stake. He was a young man having a day of work. It is important to see how we can get real about white privilege in the environmental movement. Yet poetry can be empathic in ways that political treaties can't. I think it is right to protest and to remain conscious that sometimes we can cut across the divisions.

*Poetry as non-violence?*

I think we start with the assumption that we can use non-violent tactics. If we harm other humans, we lose. But on the other hand I personally feel more and more anger and I understand increasingly that violence is being done by the State to the working people on a daily basis. When I think about the exploitation of workers I do not feel non-violent and yet I value each human life. I do agree with what you said about non-violent qualities of poetic imagination. I started off as a complete pacifist and I still believe in non-violence as a starting place in interhuman relations. When it comes to the corporations murdering human beings, there is a limit to my tolerance. One of the poems in *Seasonal works with letters on fire* is about Monsanto [“The seeds talk back to Monsanto”]. You know Monsanto sells the seed that can only grow once—they will never grow again. They sell African farmers these seeds and make billions of dollars. They have to sell them every year—they are called terminator seeds. It is a one-time use. This is violence to humans: a corporation like Monsanto acts violently towards people in Africa. American government knows about it and tolerates it; they even make special acts of Congress to protect Monsanto; so yes, in response to this there is anger in my poetry. Systemic violence is at the very center of our woes, and can't always be dealt with by the victims in non-violent ways.

*In the face of this, poetry does seem quite useless?*

I think it's very far from useless; I concur with Williams that it is a different kind of news that can save lives, but I also think we can't ask poetry and art to do too much. We can ask it to accompany us in our resistance to injustice and oppression. Art accompanies, and it is also its own world. Seeking justice and political resistance is beside art—it doesn't exclude art but we can't confuse one thing with the other. We should ask poetry to do what it can do, which is a lot, but it should not be mistaken for the work of getting bodies in gear against the oppression we see around us. Art and poetry can give people a sense of being spiritually connected in so many powerful ways we've been talking about. Imaging the animals, imagining other human beings, imagining the cop—instead of being brutal. It gives us deep spiritual gratification to be involved with language on such a bountiful level. But of course it won't change the violent system on its own. However, in the process of changing the system, we need a lot of poetry to keep us going. I want to say, wake up, artists, it may be the end of the world. You will not be in your chambers for long.

*I know you study lichens. Where does that interest come from?*

Lichens resemble similes and metaphors, because they are about two or more things coming together, fungus and algae and it turns out there are also other elements too—perhaps yeasts—that enable the symbiosis. In simile and metaphor, things come together. And in lichen it is a layer of algae and a layer of fungus, sandwiched on to each other. There is no root system. It is a good figure for metaphor, the way it works.

I fell in love with lichen because I love the way it looks, and there are so many kinds. In California there are 1200 kinds of lichen. And there are very few people that study them. They are not as popular as, say, wildflowers.

*Not as “pretty”?*

Well, Kant makes the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, and I've always preferred the sublime, which allows a very wide range! But lichens with their ruffly edges and many different shapes to me are some of the most attractive life forms on earth. They look like consciousness.

*If in lichens we see that matter composes meanings (like metaphors), in your work we see that meaning is material. I'd like to ask you about Loose Sugar a bit—could you talk about the sources of this book, the procedures it uses?*

I had been reading early second- and third-century gnostic texts for a while, working on what I thought were the “problems” of light and dark, male and female, spirit and matter, had been working on two books Bright Existence and Death Tractates,

to address a kind of feeling about non-existence, that it is really a strength, not a weakness. The study of these texts and that writing led me to the study of medieval alchemy, and the alchemists; they were always experimenting with elements, as I wanted to do in my poetry. I was also thinking about sex and the origin of sexual feeling in adolescence, the body and so on. At the time of that writing, the first Gulf War was starting, so it turned into a book about alchemy, sex, war, and after a while, depression and the emergence of language, my mother's language. So the book has many sections, each with a different form.

*Western thinking usually separates spirit from matter.*

Maybe it is because I'm older but I feel things are more and more embodied and immediate. So that you sense the presence of the invisible world where you are. I grew up in a Christian family, which had a very faraway sense of heaven—heaven was something else. And now I have a more immediate sense of other entities and existences being folded in like egg whites into a soufflé, that it is very close by and abides in an available but mysterious way. This particular experience is way less isolating. It is possible that there are many forms of matter that we haven't yet experienced.

In fact, we don't know what matter is—not even scientifically (think about gravitational waves...)—there are so many things we don't know, it's silly to pretend that we do. I feel impatient with people who are making simple divisions or making fun of spirituality. In America it is very hard to be politically engaged—to practice radical left-wing politics—and to recognize that neither rationality nor irrationality offers the whole picture. I like that there's a group of Oakland mystical poets—some of them are my friends, Melissa Mack, Sara Larsen, David Brazil and many others—who are very politically active and do not opt out of spiritual affinities. CA Conrad is a really terrific poet doing a lot of work in this area. One of my most admired writers is William Blake, who ascribed to spiritual and folkloric presences and also made up his own combination. It's not as if because you like blue you can't also like green. I like science, I am very politically engaged but I also like the practices of folklore and magic, which I consider a different realm of investigation. I think of the Christianity I grew up in as a kind of folklore I happened to participate in a using a different model from science. This ability to engage with different models of experience, different types of knowledges helped me through a very demanding childhood. Did Jesus actually heal people so that they got well? Did he come back to life after being killed? I don't know about levels of literalness for these stories, and I don't care much about that, as long as you don't hurt others with your experience of cultural tales. I always give the example of George Bush saying that Jesus told him it was ok to invade Iraq, and then I say, well, actually, Jesus told me at the same time it was not ok. The literal, physical aspect of these miracles doesn't matter; these are metaphors with wide parameters. What matters is that we live on a very limited level and poets have never liked that.

*Can we think about poetry also as a form of knowledge, or wisdom?*

Of course. With the arrival of postmodernism and the use of the internet, research, elemental and conceptual poetics, poets are free to use all kinds of materials in their poems—documents, lyric meditation, beauty, ugliness.

Poetry does help you to slow down. It brings you into contact with your intuition in very different ways. With the physical world. But also words. Learning about various words, the roots of words. All the Indo-European languages come from the same common words. So that kind of knowledge—the knowledge of the self, of society, the language people use.

*Jan Zwicky says the metaphor is a tool for learning.*

Jan Zwicky is right about almost everything; she is a very cool poet. Metaphor is like diplomats from countries that don't get along who are forced to sit at a negotiating table, two opposite points of view can converse—this is like metaphor. They have no choice but to get along because they are in the same place. You are totally different from me, so how are we in the same phrase? You know. That's metaphor. The central paradox of existence is that very unlike things have to get along. It's really true. So there are many different kinds of knowledge, many different layers of knowledge in poetry.

*Do you feel like you belong in a particular place on earth? The lichens you talked about at the beginning come from your garden.*

In a physical sense, I think of the West Coast—the West in general, including Arizona—as home. It has a particular Eros, a particular life-force. I love the plants, the species. But I also love the free thinking in the West. So both biologically and sociologically I am connected with the West. But in a bigger sense I think of a place as the site of consciousness, the site of the poem. Wherever you put the poem is your sense of place. *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, for instance, is a very European book—written at the beginning of the Iraq war. We were in Berlin, and I was thinking about the whole world, the whole universe, as my place, because air was the matrix.

Another way to think about the place is the location of language. The site of the poem is language—your place is always with you in this way: it is your human mind and consciousness. But I do really feel terribly homesick when I am away from the West Coast (especially the bay area)—especially because so much of the rest of America is crazy. Yes, there is a sense of place. I was very strongly influenced by the male poets of the west: Gary Snyder, Robert Duncan, Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Hass. There was another poet in the SF Renaissance, less known, Richard O. Moore. He was quiet, he didn't self-promote but his work is very interesting. I hope when I die my place will be everywhere and if people read my work that it will have application for lots of people, not just Western writers.

*Since March 2016 when we started working on this interview, the world has experienced much turbulence. And just last week Americans chose Donald Trump as their new president. How do you think this choice is motivated? What are your greatest concerns at this moment?*

There has been so much written already about the global populism that is happening on the right and on the left. Since there was a lot of thought that Clinton would win, it appears the bourgeois left in the U.S. hadn't been listening—to the real class and cultural divide and the complaints over the decades from the white working class—complaints that led many to support a right wing candidate who is utterly unqualified to be a world leader. He doesn't even read. He has to have his children brief him on stuff because he's so ignorant and wants to remain so. But this has been going on a long time. Trump is the small mark on the surface of the skin that indicates great distress underneath. Economic lives of people are not getting better, if you don't belong to the upper 1%. Rather than choosing a candidate like Sanders who would address corporate and banking malfeasance, they have chose candidate who won with a combination of racist and misogynist bullying, as well with bravado, falsehoods and demagoguery. It's frightening. I am made hopeful when people care and have energy. I am very far to the left of most liberal agendas. I would like, of course, to see a non-violent economic revolution in my lifetime, where people aren't disenfranchised and brutalized and imprisoned by the corporate state. I'm most worried for our Muslim citizens, our black and brown citizens, for women's reproductive rights, for the 8 million species that are not human. As for what poets can do—the same thing we should always do: get our work done; organize; socially and politically involved. Unless we have young children or old parents or are sick, we need to resist this ignorance and selfishness, be on the lookout for vigilante brutality and resist oppression. The environment will suffer more under Trump, but the dire situation obtains as long as we're run by the corporations and the defense industry. We need to organize resistance; in the process, I think we can make a lot more connections with the non-human and the good forces through our art. At least I hope so!



Marek Wilczyński

## The Americanization of the Sublime: Washington Allston and Thomas Cole as Theorists of American Art

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**Abstract:** The idea of the sublime, borrowed by the painter Washington Allston from Joshua Reynolds and—through S. T. Coleridge—possibly also from Kant, at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the United States still had mostly European connotations. Both as a theorist of art and a poet, Allston explicitly pledged his cultural allegiance to Great Britain. It was paradoxically Thomas Cole, a British-born immigrant, who was the first to associate a much less strictly defined concept of the sublime with the American landscape of the Catskills, thus initiating the discourse of the US cultural nationalism both in his diary and essays related to painting, and poetry.

**Keywords:** sublime, aesthetics, culture, nationalism, nature, landscape

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In his canonical *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson has demonstrated that the proliferation of print-as-commodity has been the crucial factor which determined the rise of various “imagined communities,” particularly those of a postcolonial origin. It remains an open question whether the culture of the United States can be legitimately called postcolonial—after all, the first thirteen states did not much differ from the British colonies they used to be, at least in socioeconomic and broadly cultural terms—yet since the publication of Michael Warner’s seminal study *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* it has become obvious that without the print culture the American Revolution would have been quite different, if successful at all. In her now classic books on the nineteenth-century American painting Barbara Novak has shown that painting, and, for that matter, landscape painting more than historical representations related to the War of Independence, also significantly contributed to early US nationalism. Summing up her analysis of the ideological grip on nature in the age of Emerson, Novak writes:

With such a range of religious, moral, philosophic, and social ideas projected onto the American landscape, it is clear that the painters who took it upon themselves to deal with this ‘loaded’ subject were involved not only with art, but with the iconography of nationalism. In painting the face of God in the landscape so that the less gifted might recognize and share in that benevolent spirituality, they were among the spiritual leaders of America’s flock. Through this idea of *community* we can approach a firm understanding of the role of landscape not only in American art,

but in American life, especially before the Civil War. The idea of this community through nature runs clearly through all aspects of American social life in the first half of the nineteenth century[.] (*Nature and Culture* 15)

Now, after almost forty years that have passed since that statement was made, the interest in the connections among American thought, literature, and the plastic arts, as well as between the US and Britain in a transatlantic perspective, has resulted in a number of publications, perhaps most recently a collection of essays *Transatlantic Romanticism: British and American Art and Literature, 1790-1860*, edited by Andrew Hemingway and Alan Wallach. Novak's pioneering claims have been continued and supplemented by scholars working across the borderline traditionally separating literary and cultural studies and art history, while her emphasis on the role of Washington Allston and Thomas Cole, both very much aware of the aesthetic categories of the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque, inherited from Burke and the British painters and theorists of landscape gardening, has remained uncontested. Still, even though Allston's and Cole's achievements in art have been attracting academic interest for decades, somehow particularly the former's contribution to American reflection on painting has been quite surprisingly rather neglected.

A good starting point for a comparison of Allston and Cole as regards their conscious support of the US national identity in culture may be a brief reading of their poems: Allston's "America to Great Britain," included in the volume *Sylphs of the Season* of 1813, and Cole's "Niagara," written in May, 1829, but published only in 1972. "America to Great Britain," a tribute to the "Fathers' native soil," ends with the following stanza:

While the manners, while the arts,  
That mould a nation's soul,  
Still cling around our hearts, –  
Between let Ocean roll,  
Our joint communion breaking with the Sun:  
Yet still from either beach  
The voice of blood shall reach,  
More audible than speech,  
"We are One." (291-292)

In fact, having published such a poem in 1813, during a war between his country and Great Britain, the poet must have been a bit embarrassed since he decided to add to it the following apologetic footnote: "This alludes merely to the moral union of the two countries. The author would not have it supposed that the tribute of respect, offered in these stanzas to the land of his ancestors, would be paid by him, it at the expense of the independence of that which gave him birth" (Allston 292). Born on a South Carolina plantation, Allston could legally run for President,

but neither his Harvard education, nor marriage to Ann Channing, nor residence in Boston could affect his attitude of basic cultural loyalty to the Crown, characteristic of the former colonies south of the Mason-Dixon line long after the Revolution. On the other hand, Cole, a British-born immigrant, concluded his response to the view of Niagara Falls as follows:

Ages untold thy voice broke forth unheard;  
 But by the shrinking wolf, or the tim'rous deer  
 Or wandering savage of the echoing wild—  
 Until an enterprise sublime unbarred  
 The mighty portals of the golden west  
 And midst its teeming fullness thou wast found  
 Majestic in the wilderness enthroned— (Tymn 51)

The contrast with Allston's message appears quite striking: here the focus is on the emblematic "wilderness," populated by animals and Indians, while the term "enterprise sublime" most likely refers to the United States itself. Moreover, Niagara has become a natural counterpart of the royal majesty from the other side of the water, "enthroned" in the landscape to be discovered, "found" by impressed American settlers. Thus, Cole not only made a reference to the discourse of the sublime, but did it in an explicitly political manner, applying it simultaneously to nature and to the country he chose to call his own.

A few years later, in the early 1830s, Allston would deliver in Cambridgeport to a select audience of two close friends: Professor Cornelius Conway Felton of Harvard and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a series of "Lectures on Art" to be published posthumously in 1850. (Significantly, their belated publication attracted almost no attention of the American reading public and had virtually no influence on the development of philosophical aesthetics in the US.) There, he would also take into consideration the concept of the sublime, yet in a different and, above all, much elaborate way. Probably inspired by Reynolds' *Discourses on Art* and definitely by Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into Our Ideas of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, Allston proposed in the "Introductory Discourse" a whole intricate system of categories superimposed on "Beauty" related to the natural world once the spectator "ascend[s] thence into the moral" (Allston 67). A "continuous chain of creation" begins with "Elegance" and then, through "Majesty" and "Grandeur," eventually reaches a realm where the

physical... seems almost to vanish and a new form rises before us, so mysterious, so undefined and elusive to the senses, that we turn, as if for its more distinct image, within ourselves, and there, with wonder, amazement, awe, we see it filling, distending, stretching every faculty, till, like the Giant of Otranto, it seems almost to burst the imagination: under this strange confluence of opposite emotions, this terrible pleasure, we call this awful form Sublimity. (68)

First, in his account of the sublime, Allston actually goes far beyond both Reynolds' laconic formulations rooted in Pseudo-Longinus and Burke's empirical sensualism. His vocabulary, including such terms as "faculty" and "imagination," seems quite close to the Kantian diction of the *Critique of Judgment*, though he could not read Kant in German. (A long-time friend of Coleridge, he might have discussed with the English poet various problems of aesthetics, but their correspondence reveals no traces of such discussions.) Second, it is interesting that the painter used in his argument an example taken from literature—the gothic novel by Horace Walpole. On another occasion, just several pages earlier, he made a literary reference as well—to *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, once again unmistakably English. All in all, then, Allston's sublime had nothing to do with the United States or with space other than the inner space of the mind. In that inner space of the narrator's memory in *Monaldi*, Allston's gothic romance of 1822, he placed the only verbal landscape of the American Northeast that can be found in his written *oeuvre*:

There is sometimes so striking a resemblance between the autumnal sky of Italy and that of New England at the same season, that when the peculiar features of the scenery are obscured by twilight it needs but little aid of the imagination in an American traveller to fancy himself in his own country; the bright orange of the horizon, fading into a low yellow, and here and there broken by a slender bar of molten gold, with the broad mass pale apple-green blending above, and the sheet of deep azure over these, gradually darkening to the zenith—all carry him back to his dearer home. (*Monaldi* 9)

The connection, or perhaps tension, between the United States and Italy was characteristic of both Allston and Cole since both of them learned most from Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa in Roman Campagna—they visited Rome and its environs as often as their unstable financial situation allowed them to do so. As Novak writes with reference to Cole, "[u]sing and reusing Salvator's gnarled trees and Claude coulisses and glittering ponds, he deftly imposed details of American scenery upon formulae derived from earlier prototypes, or upon his own favorite compositional schema, which he would repeat whether the locale were the Catskills or the White Mountains" (*American Painting* 51). The two continents and two countries coalesced in the works of both artists, even though one was more willing, in part under the pressure of demanding patrons, to paint the "savage" landscapes of the United States than the other, long storing in his mind's eye the views of Italy and faces of young Italian women. In Allston's case, nostalgia worked both ways to make him an "incurable romantic": when in the Apennines, his homesick narrator dreams about New England, when back in Boston, he himself could not forget the picturesque details of his European sojourn.

Cole liked American nature much better than his elder colleague who preferred his Boston studio to strolling around in the White Mountains and never confronted the wild nature of his country with a brush in his hand. The published

fragments of Cole's journal include a few accounts of trips to the Catskills and the Hudson River valley—the first dated November 1834, the last August 1846. The lengthy entry of July 5, 1835 demonstrates that he could also, like Allston, make use of literature when thinking about the aesthetic qualities of the visible world, his literary associations, though, were quite different:

The first 7 miles by means of agreeable conversation & the blessed moon we passed over merrily, but then the moon sank behind the piny ridge of the North mountain, and we began to be thirsty & were disappointed by not finding a spring by Lawrence's; the inmates of the house appeared to be sound asleep & we deemed it better to pursue our way to Rip Van Winkle's hollow about three miles farther than to disturb the slumberers.... It was midnight when we sat down by the pure warbling stream that comes jumping down from the grand amphitheatre of wooded mountains called Rip Van Winkle's Cove. There was a tin vessel glittering by the stream [,] placed there for the use of travellers by some generous soul or perhaps some fairy who expected us at that silent hour; be that as it may we drank from it the cool pure water again & again & the drafts were more delicious even than those of Rip could possibly have been when he took the somniferous potion from the famous keg in or near this self same place. It was a solemn scene. Dark forests [,] rugged rocks [,] towering mountains encompassed us, & the night breeze brought the sound of waving trees, falling streams & the clear chaunt of the whippoorwill to our listening ears; it was grand, it was sublime to be thus by ourselves at midnight in the midst of the solitude of woods & mountains while all the world beside was slumbering. (Cole 129)

Contrary to Allston, a learned theorist, Cole mentions the sublime quite intuitively, outside any aesthetic system, but he does it in a testimony of a genuine experience of American scenery and with reference to Washington Irving's tale actually set in the area, a text already acknowledged at that time as culturally significant on both sides of the Atlantic. The result is a polysemiotic palimpsest: nature described through vernacular literature and—in the future—also painted. In the same journal entry the artist wrote:

Before us spread the virgin waters which the prow of the sketcher had never curl'd, green woods enfolding them whose venerable masses had never figured in trans-atlantic annuals, and far away the stern blue mountains whose forms were ne'er beheld by Claude or Salvator or been subjected to the canvass by the innumerable dabblers in paint for all time past. The painter of American scenery has indeed privileges superior to any other; all nature is new to Art (131)

It seems as if under the pressure of that radical, wild newness European aesthetic distinctions must blur and clear-cut concepts coalesce: "In the mountains of New Hampshire, there is a union of the picturesque, the sublime, and the magnificent"

(9). When in September 1847 Cole visits Niagara for the second time, he calls the falls within one and the same sentence “great [,] glorious [,] sublime & beautiful” (185). Like Margaret Fuller more than four years before, who was disappointed with her own inability to appreciate the view properly and had to make herself admire it almost by force (Steele 71-77), he has a problem with what he can see—“It is limited, in that, the human mind can conceive of a cataract much greater & more sublime” (Cole 185)—but eventually he retracts his reservations as a true patriot: “Great [,] glorious & sublime Niagara! Wonder of the world! I do not disparage thee! Thou has the power to move the deep soul!” (186). The nationalist obligation wins and eliminates trouble rooted in the painful Kantian discrepancy between the ideas of reason and actual sense data.

After Allston’s death in 1843, Cole paid his homage to the elder colleague: “He was truly a distinguished artist & has executed some works which will never cease to be highly prized & considered a great work of Art” (Cole 174). On the other hand, though, he admitted to himself in a note probably not intended for publication: “Fine as I consider many of Allston’s works & superior as I think he is to most of the Artists of his time [,] I have never thought that he was a man of very original genius. His pictures (beautiful as they are) always reminded me of some work or School of Art, something I have seen before, either in invention [,] composition or colour” (174). That was, of course, not what genuinely American art was supposed to be and Cole knew it as well as Emerson who in 1842 wrote in his journal with a haunting sense of regret: “We have our culture like Allston from Europe & are Europeans” (Emerson 276). Cole was a European himself, yet he decided to become an American. Allston was an American, but on the contrary, he did not mind being a European, at least as a painter.

As a theorist of the sublime, the author of “Lectures on Art” proved sophisticated and self-conscious enough to observe conceptual rigor and even managed, probably thanks to Coleridge’s inspiration, to comprehend the gist of Kant’s idea of *das Erhabene*. He understood what he was writing about and, perhaps like Poe in the same period, refused to take into consideration “Americanness” as a necessary value. The Americanization of the sublime, which, however, lost in the process its distinctive aesthetic meaning and turned into little more than an emphatic term of admiration, took place in the reflection of Cole, although in fact both artists followed the conventions of landscape painting developed by Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa. Still, Cole reluctantly catered for the US market’s demand for the recognizably “local” instead of the “universal” so that his “painting-as-commodity,” to adapt Anderson’s useful phrase to visual arts, contributed to the discourse of cultural nationalism just as much as his well-known “American Scenery” essay of 1836. In such a perspective, the Hudson River School emerges as the first symbolic national institution of American art. Allston contributed to it as an institution posthumously: when in 1870 the Boston Museum of Fine Arts was founded, its first acquisition turned out to be his gothic landscape painting *Elijah in the Desert*.

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Alicja Piechucka

## Possessed by Poe: Hart Crane's Tribute to *il Miglior Fabbro* in a Symbolist-Modernist Context

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**Abstract:** The article explores the ways in which Hart Crane, Stéphane Mallarmé and Mina Loy pay homage to Edgar Allan Poe in their respective poems. A comparative exegesis of the tributes in question reveals the connections as well as the differences between the ways the two American modernist poets and the French symbolist approach the legacy of their eminent American predecessor. A critical juxtaposition of Crane's, Mallarmé's and Loy's poetic texts seems particularly worthwhile in view of the fact that Poe is regarded as one of the fathers of both French symbolism and American modernist poetry, which, in turn, are strongly interconnected. Consequently, the analysis undertaken in the present article results in broader conclusions concerning what, in the context of American and French literature, may be referred to as the symbolist-modernist continuum.

**Keywords:** Hart Crane, Edgar Allan Poe, Stéphane Mallarmé, Mina Loy, American modernism, French symbolism, poetry

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In his biography of Hart Crane, Clive Fisher recounts Allen Tate and Malcolm Cowley's visit to the New York room of the future poet of *The Bridge*. What followed was "a discussion of poetry" (Fisher 227), during which Edgar Allan Poe's name was mentioned: "As Cowley noticed, 'Hart gestured, as always, with a dead five-cent cigar while he declaimed against the vulgarity of Edgar Poe.' His friends demurred, and chancing upon a volume of Poe Cowley read aloud 'The City in the Sea': 'While from a proud tower in the town / Death looks gigantically down'" (227). Fisher is also careful to note that Poe's legacy was crucial to the formation of American modernist literature:

Thus the excavations began—to continue throughout Crane's literary career—among the forgotten monuments of nineteenth-century American fiction and poetry. The idols of Gentility—Longfellow, James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving and others too Anglophile for their own good—were cast out and a new pantheon constructed: the achievements of Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, Thoreau and Emily Dickinson were reassessed and over a quarter-century interval American literature acquired an altogether darker lineage.... [T]his re-creation of the past was a significant literary enterprise, and one which had profound implications for Crane's later career[.] (42)

An examination of Crane's correspondence seems to prove the point made by Fisher *loco citato*, and to suggest that the "five-cent cigar" incident was an isolated one rather than a pattern, and that what Crane did was in fact probably done in jest. In a letter to Gorham Munson, written three years before the above-mentioned encounter took place, Crane states that he is in the process of translating Remy de Gourmont's essay "Marginalia sur Edgar Poe et sur Baudelaire." The same year, writing to William Wright, he lists his literary *bêtes-noires*, but is also quick to admit: "I do run joyfully towards Messrs. Poe, Whitman, Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Coleridge, John Donne!!!, John Webster!!!, Marlowe, Baudelaire, Laforgue, Dante, Cavalcanti, Li Po, and a host of others" (254-255). In his 1926 letter to Cowley, Crane expresses his enthusiasm for Isidor Schneider's *Doctor Transit*, saying that "[it] intrigued [him] more than any such tour de force since Poe" (430). Several months on, this time writing to Yvor Winters, the poet of *White Buildings* points out that "[o]ne goes back to Poe, and to Whitman—and always [his] beloved Melville—with renewed appreciation of what America really is, or could be" (491). Whatever Crane may have said about Poe's "vulgarity"—provided it was said seriously—in 1924, in 1927, having mentioned Marianne Moore, he shares with Allen Tate his thoughts on "old virgins (male and female)... Always in a flutter for fear bowels will be mentioned, forever carrying on a tradition that both Poe and Whitman spent half their lives railing against" (527). A year later, Crane's correspondence confirms his stance, as he draws Yvor Winters's attention to a text devoted to Poe and authored by Malcolm Cowley.

This article aims to look at the literary connection between Hart Crane and Edgar Allan Poe by placing the former's poetic tribute to the latter in the larger context of French symbolism and American modernism. In order to do so, I shall draw on a comparative analysis of poems by Crane, Stéphane Mallarmé and Mina Loy: "The Tunnel" section of *The Bridge*, "Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe," whose title is faithfully translated into English as "The Tomb of Edgar Allan Poe," and "Poe" respectively. The affiliation between Crane and the author of "The Raven" is indisputable; so is the one between Crane and the French symbolists, especially Rimbaud but also Mallarmé, as I have already demonstrated in earlier publications (Piechucka, "Dream" 99-114; Piechucka, "Images and Ideas" 5-16; Piechucka, "The Past" 25-40; Piechucka, "The Sound" 23-36). Less obvious, but no means less intriguing are the analogies between the American poet's *œuvre* and the work of his fellow modernist Mina Loy (Piechucka, "The Religion" 25-43). Among the common points between Crane, Mallarmé and Loy is the fact that all three wrote poems which, one way or another, paid homage to Poe. Such tributes—even if in Loy's case the word *tribute* is rather problematic—from a leading exponent of French symbolism and two Anglo-American modernists are more than fitting. It is so because it may be argued that the Father of the Detective Story was also one of the fathers of the French symbolist school and, as has already been signaled at the beginning of the present article, of what was to happen in American literature in the first decades of the twentieth century. Warner Berthoff, for instance, goes so far as to

chronologically place Poe "in the apprehensive dawn of literary modernism" (83).

Since we know from Crane's correspondence that he was profoundly familiar with Remy de Gourmont's "Marginalia sur Edgar Poe et sur Baudelaire," it seems particularly worthwhile in the context of the present article to provide a brief overview of some of the main points made about Poe by a French critic inextricably linked with symbolism (1-36). Gourmont begins his 1904 essay, which, as its title indicates, is essentially a collection of loose observations, by claiming that it is largely Poe's premature death that is to blame for his long-lasting marginalization on the western side of the Atlantic. He also debunks—or at least questions—another myth that has grown up around the American writer: that of a "sickly dreamer" (2; trans. A. P.) doomed to a dramatic and miserable if picturesque existence. That does not, however, prevent Poe from displaying an acute "sense of fatality, of tragic necessity" (11; trans. A. P.) in his *œuvre*, which the author of "Marginalia" views as largely "the expression of his [Poe's] pains and dreams" (4; trans. A. P.). Gourmont also claims that his parents' early deaths were, paradoxically, beneficial to Poe because the lack of parental role models made him unconventional and unique. Moreover, the French critic depicts the author of "The Fall of the House of Usher" as a woman's man and almost a feminist *avant l'heure* in both life and literature. The Poe of "Marginalia" is also someone who is supportive of members of his craft: he "is willing to defend poets" (8; trans. A. P.). Benign to his fellow craftsmen, he is authoritarian *vis-à-vis* his audience, reduced to submission by "the sovereign tone rendered in affirmative and absolute idiom" and "domination against which no defense can be found" (10; trans. A. P.). In addition, Gourmont argues that "[e]ven at its most passionate and desperate, Edgar Poe's poetry retains an ironic coldness" (14; trans. A. P.). Nevertheless, "Poe is the most subjective of all subjective poets. He does feel and suffer the terrors he claims to create coldly. Fear, the pain that fear breeds are the almost exclusive theme of his poems as well as of his most beautiful tales" (16; trans. A. P.). To Gourmont, "the true Edgar Poe" is by no means "the man of magnetism, of phantasmagoria, of perversity, of mystification" (17; trans. A.P.); he is also more truly himself as a poet than as a prose writer (16) but is, above all, a master of criticism and critical thinking. "Poe's pessimism is the most bitter and the haughtiest," the French critic states, before adding that the author of "The Raven" "caresses death" and reflecting on the poet's own passing away in "circumstances... which have never been very clear" (29-31; trans. A. P.). As he recounts the details of Poe's "horrible electoral adventure," Gourmont deplores the "debasement" and "degradation" which marked the American poet's end but also suspects that it was Poe's alcoholism that had sealed his fate. Gourmont reminds the reader that Poe "could only work in the hallucination of drunkenness" (31; trans. A. P.) and was a prime example of self-destruction. Towards the end of his essay, Gourmont also points out that the author of "William Wilson" "[went] further in morbid psychology than any other writer of his time" (31; trans. A. P.) and that "Poe is an American far more representative of America than Emerson or Walt Whitman" (35; trans. A. P.), because, in his work, there are "traces of the Americans' particular taste for

advertising, for the poster, for barbarous publicity, for extravagant journalism” (36; trans. A. P.). As we shall see, many of Gourmont’s notions about Poe recur not only in Crane’s portrayal of the latter but also in the poems by Mallarmé and Loy with which the present article is concerned.

As is common knowledge among American literature scholars, Poe was orphaned by his parents, widowed by his young wife at the age of thirty-eight and dead before his time; additionally, the last ten days of his life were veiled in mystery. It is therefore no wonder that death is crucial to his biography and, more importantly, to his *œuvre*, of which it is arguably the principal motif. It is also crucial to the three poems discussed in this article. The word *death* appears in all of them, and is something of a keyword in each of them. Poe’s decease and death *tout court* are evoked by Mallarmé, Crane and Loy. In “Marginalia sur Edgar Poe et sur Baudelaire,” Remy de Gourmont mentions that he is in possession of a photo of Poe’s Baltimore memorial. It is the same memorial which is evoked in Mallarmé’s “The Tomb of Edgar Allan Poe,” the earliest of the three poems in question and one whose title is the most explicit. While it is always risky to summarize a work by Mallarmé, Lagarde and Michard take up the challenge. They note that the French symbolist was inspired by Poe’s memorial, though they fail to actually specify that the memorial is also his grave. They go on to point out that “in the beginning, Mallarmé seems to *imagine the bas-relief* which could have decorated this monument,” the statement referring clearly to the poem’s first stanza, in which “the Poet becomes an *archangel*” (Lagarde and Michard 537; trans. A. P.):

Changed to Himself at last by eternity,  
with a bare sword the Poet has bestirred  
his age terrified that it failed to see  
how death was glorying in that strange word. (Mallarmé, *Collected Poems* 71)

In the quatrain which follows, the author “meditates upon the *incomprehension* to which Edgar Poe fell victim” (Lagarde and Michard 537; trans. A. P.):

The spell was drunk, so they proclaimed aloud  
(as vile freaks writhe when seraphim bestow  
purer sense on the phrases of the crowd),  
in some black brew’s dishonourable flow. (Mallarmé, *Collected Poems* 71)

The poem’s closing tercets are described as “a powerful *widening*, [in which] he [Mallarmé] shows the *symbolic* value of the simple block of stone devoid of sculptures” (Lagarde Michard 537; trans. A. P.):

If our idea can carve no bas-relief  
from hostile clod and cloud, O struggling grief,  
for the adornment of Poe’s dazzling tomb,  
  
at least this block dropped by an occult doom,

this calm granite, may limit all the glum  
 Blasphemy-flights dispersed in days to come. (Mallarmé, *Collected Poems* 71)

It is not until the penultimate stanza that the French symbolist mentions his distinguished predecessor's surname. In the homage Mallarmé pays to him, Poe is first referred to as "the Poet," which justifies Lagarde and Michard's remark that it deals with "Poe and more generally the Poet" (537; trans. A. P.). Similarly universalistic terms are employed to evoke Poe's *œuvre*, "that strange voice," which is that of a "seraphim bestow[ing] / purer sense on the phrases of the crowd." Both the word *tribu*, used in the French original, and the word *crowd* for which the English translators opted, are collective nouns whose presence in the poem opposes Poe to his ungrateful public, consisting of masses which are vulgar and as such they vulgarize and debase Poe's work: "The spell [which] was [supposedly] drunk... in some black brew's dishonourable flow" may be read as a reference to the simplistic conclusion that "Edgar Poe was said to draw inspiration from alcohol" (Lagarde and Michard 537; trans. A. P.). Consequently, it may be inferred that the purity for which Poe's *œuvre* stands is opposed to the filth which characterizes the masses.

In another pair of opposites, the past is set against the present in "The Tomb of Edgar Allan Poe" as "the last" of the first stanza and the "jadis"—French for *formerly*—of the second stanza, omitted in the English translation, indicate. Vilified in his lifetime, the poet of "Annabel Lee" finally—and posthumously—becomes who he has always been, after being misunderstood and underestimated for decades. As the way Poe is perceived alters, he is "[c]hanged to Himself at last by eternity," the agents of the change being death and timelessness. It is in temporal terms that Mallarmé refers to Poe's public of the first half of the nineteenth century: "his age terrified" is a *siècle*—French for *century*—in the original and the term is used to designate "his contemporaries" (Lagarde and Michard 537; trans. A. P.). The past is now "terrified" for being forced to admit its own mistakes. Aside from being an allusion to the fact that "*death* haunted Edgar Poe's imagination" (537; trans. A. P.), the statement "death was glorying in that strange word" announces the American author's postmortal triumph, the victory being made even more resounding in the phrase's French version, where the verb *triumph* is actually used. While death is paramount in Poe's works, it is also instrumental in changing the poet's status. Typically associated with immobility, death is dynamic in Mallarmé's poem.

Crucial to "The Tomb of Edgar Allan Poe" is the notion of verticality; in fact, as we shall see, the concepts of both horizontality and verticality prove useful in the analysis of all the poems with which the present article is concerned. In his discussion of the symbolism of the cross, William Stewart deals with the associations that each of the two elements of this sign evokes: "The horizontal arm was associated with the terrestrial, worldly, feminine, temporal, destructive, negative, passive, and death while the vertical arm connoted the celestial, spiritual, masculine, eternal, creative, positive, active, and life" (114). In short, the horizontal is tantamount to "the inferior" and the vertical to "the superior" (114).

In the Mallarmé poem in question, images of the high and the low play a significant role. The “vile freaks [that] writhe” correspond to “un vil sursaut d’hydre” (*Œuvres Complètes* 70) of the original. The figure of the hydra, derived from ancient Greek mythology, but interpreted in the context of the poem as “the crowd [which] becomes a monster with a thousand heads” (537; trans. A.P.), is absent from the English translation. The French word *sursaut* means *jump*, which, in this particular case, is likely to denote a vertical and upward movement. While “they proclaimed aloud” in the English translation, the members of the public “[p]roclamèrent très haut” (*Œuvres Complètes* 70) in the poem’s original version: Mallarmé may thus be playing with the double meaning of the French adverb *haut*, which means *aloud* but also *high*. This past reaction of the public can be seen as an attempt to, so to speak, usurp the positive connotations of verticality. In truth, this response to the poet’s life and work was clearly “vile” as the dark colors evoked in the poem demonstrate. The “brew” suggestive of Poe’s alcoholism is “black” and Poe’s monument is supposed to “limit all the glum / Blasphemy-flights dispersed in days to come.” In other words, it is to serve as a reminder warning future generations not to debase literary giants, the vertical “Blasphemy-flights” being another example of a usurpatory attempt made—or likely to be made—by the forces of evil. In fact, the history of Poe’s reception follows a vertical pattern. In his lifetime, the poet was mistreated by the “hostile clod and cloud,” by what is up and what is down: “Mallarmé deplores the wrongs of men (the *sol*) and of destiny (the *nue*) towards Edgar Poe” (537; trans. A.P.). In a final instance of a vertical movement, the poem’s closing stanza likens both Poe’s tomb and his *œuvre* to a falling star: “Considered to be an *aerolite*, the block of stone symbolically represents another *meteorite*: Edgar Poe’s poetry” (537; trans. A. P.).

In “The Tomb of Edgar Allan Poe,” the American author’s suffering is merely suggested. A true symbolist—and thus a Platonist—Mallarmé focuses on the “idea” of a “bas-relief”; analogically, he also gives the reader merely an idea of Poe’s pain and his demise in both senses of the word. The poem is a romantic tribute (Lagarde and Michard 537) in which the artist figure is elevated and sanctified, presented in angelic and thus ethereal terms. As such, it can be both compared and contrasted with Hart Crane’s portrayal of Poe in “The Tunnel,” Part VII of *The Bridge*, his *magnum opus*:

Whose head is swinging from the swollen strap?  
 Whose body smokes along the bitten rails,  
 Bursts from a smoldering bundle far behind  
 In back forks of the chasms of the brain,—  
 Puffs from a riven stump far out behind  
 In interborough fissures of the mind...?

The above stanza is followed by another, longer one:

And why do I often meet your visage here,

Your eyes like agate lanterns—on and on  
 Below the toothpaste and the dandruff ads?  
 —And did their riding eyes right through your side,  
 And did their eyes like unwashed platters ride?  
 And Death, aloft,—gigantically down  
 Probing through you—toward me, O evermore!  
 And when they dragged your retching flesh,  
 Your trembling hands that night through Baltimore—  
 That last night on the ballot rounds, did you,  
 Shaking, did you deny the ticket, Poe? (69)

The way Poe is evoked in Crane's poem strikes the reader as *par excellence* explicit and almost literal. While "The Tomb of Edgar Allan Poe" focuses largely on the lack of understanding and rejection America's *poète maudit* had to face, "The Tunnel" presents Poe's death and the ordeal which accompanied it in a naturalistic way. Nevertheless, some of the points made by Crane are not that distant from the ones made by Mallarmé.

Physicality underlies both the stanzas which constitute the tribute, and the figure of the poet is presented in corporeal terms. The "Poean" passage in "The Tunnel" is structured metonymically: the mentions of its protagonist's "head" and "body" are followed by those of his "visage," "eyes," "side," "retching flesh" and "trembling eyes." By piling up synecdoches, Crane emphasizes the notion of dismemberment central to the first stanza and continued into stanza two, similarly based on the *pars pro toto* principle. The list of body parts which constitutes the backbone of the poetic fragment comes complete with references to "the brain" and "the mind." The references in question may be said to have a double meaning as they convey not only the physical but also the cerebral and the emotional: first of all, they denote the speaker's mind, which recreates a great poet and his work; secondly, they may perhaps be read as allusions to Poe's intellect and talent, the sources of his art as well as—on a deeper level—to the significant psychological aspect of his *œuvre*. Moreover, "Crane exploits a part of that beautifully and complexly rendered metaphor—namely, the tormented mind as a subway system—in the hallucinatory vision he now entertains of Edgar Allan Poe" (Lewis 359). Despite the metaphorical dimension, however, Crane is precise enough to specify the anatomical details when he speaks of "the chasms of the brain" and the "fissures of the mind." Additionally, the "eyes" which recur in the second stanza are not only those belonging to Poe but also the eyes of the passengers, and—by extension—of other people, his enemies and his tormentors: the poet finds himself exposed to their gaze and their merciless judgment.

The mind and the setting, the underground by which the speaker travels and where he encounters Poe—or rather his spirit—for, as Warner Berthoff notes, in "The Tunnel," the speaker "summons up yet one more ghostly forebear from past history, the death-haunted visage of Poe" (Berthoff 107)—blend as lines four, five and six of the first stanza—and particularly the attributive noun *interborough*—

indicate. So do the past and the present: Poe's death is reenacted before the reader's very eyes, so that it almost seems to be happening in the present. The protagonist's decease acquires an immediacy, which is reinforced by the use of present tenses in the first stanza: his "head is swinging" and his "body smokes" and "[p]uffs." By contrast, in the second stanza Crane switches to the past simple tense. The first half of the nineteenth century, which encompassed Poe's life and literary career, and the interwar period of the twentieth century, which saw Crane's adulthood and his development as a poet, appear to merge.

The very setting of Part VII of *The Bridge*—a tunnel through which the underground train goes—is by definition inextricably linked with darkness and yet equipped with a lighting system. Light and darkness are analogically interspersed in the fragment of "The Tunnel" devoted to Poe. The passage contains explicit references to "that night through Baltimore" and "That last night on the ballot rounds" but also evokes the nineteenth-century poet's "eyes like agate lanterns," seen by Lewis as symbolic of "Poe's visionary genius," which "is contrasted with the blind, hate-filled destructiveness of his contemporaries" (360). Similarly juxtaposed are horizontality and verticality. The former appears to be given prominence: to begin with, the tunnel itself and the movement of the train through it are by definition horizontal. In consequence, the eyes of the passengers—standing for all those who opposed Poe—are "riding eyes" which "like unwashed platters ride." The position of Poe's body is not upright either: it "smokes along the bitten rails" and on the "last night" the half-dead poet is "dragged" "through Baltimore." Death, on the other hand, is presented—in words taken directly from Poe's work (360), which also happens to be the work around which the anecdote cited in the opening paragraph of this article revolves—in vertical terms as well as in oxymoronic ones; it is both "aloft" and "gigantically down." In addition, Poe's "visage" and "eyes" are positioned "[b]elow the toothpaste and the dandruff ads." This allusion to verticality may be read as an allusion to Poe's debasement, to his being "below," but also, paradoxically, to his timeless greatness: his "presence" among the modern-day advertisements may suggest his relevance to the present, which does not make him seem outdated. On a very literal level, it is also in accordance with Remy de Gourmont's aforementioned statement that Poe had a "taste for advertising, for the poster, for barbarous publicity," which the French critic sees as *par excellence* American, but which is also very modern.

It is an altogether different view of the author of "The Raven" and his literary heritage that Mina Loy takes. Her "Poe" is a minimalist poem, unrhymed, devoid of punctuation marks and including only one instance of capitalization. Its unconventional layout favors enjambment:

a lyric elixir of death

embalms

the spindle spirits of your hour glass loves  
on moon spun nights

sets

icicled canopy  
 for corpses of poesy  
 with roses and northern lights

Where frozen nightingales in ilix aisles  
 sing burial rites (76)

The “hour glass loves” may have “*spindle* spirits” (italics mine), the “nights” may be “moon *spun*” (italics mine) and the “elixir of death” may “embalm[ ]” and “set[ ],” the “nightingales” may be busy with their song, but the poem still strikes the reader as rather static. The notions of stillness and coldness are given prominence by Loy. The “canopy” evoked by the speaker is “icicled,” the “lights” are “northern,” the “nightingales” are “frozen,” and even the evergreen “ilix” brings to mind winter rather than any warmer season. Predictably, death is central to the poem: Poe’s poetry, “a lyric elixir of death,” is able to “embalm[ ] / the spindle spirits of [his] hour glass loves.” Horizontality dominates in Loy’s lyric, connoting both motionlessness and lifelessness. The phrase “corpses of poesy” conjures up the image of a dead body; so does the mention of “hour glass loves” whose “spirits” are “embalm[ed].” Even the “ilix aisles” are horizontal and suggestive of a church, in this case the site of a funeral mass rather than a wedding or a christening. The “ilix,” an evergreen plant, is evocative of eternity but also of death. The motif of an hourglass may be read as symbolic of the passage of time. The setting of the poem is, so to speak, enveloped in darkness, which parallels that of the tomb: the voices of the “frozen nightingales” are heard “on moon spun nights” lit by “northern lights.”

Cristanne Miller cites “Poe” as an example illustrating her point that “[d]uring 1920 and 1921, her [Loy’s] poetry increasingly focused on the ravaging beauties of modernist art” (166). The poem’s metaliterary dimension is, of course, unquestionable as the two phrases selected by Miller to support her claim, “a *lyric* elixir of death” (italics mine) and “corpses of *poesy*” (italics mine), demonstrate. However, if, as Miller argues, Loy celebrates modernist experimentation, she does so at Poe’s expense, her tribute to him being in fact a tribute *à rebours*. The underlying message of “Poe” sets it apart from the works by Mallarmé and Crane I have discussed earlier in this article. Poetry and stillness are combined in Loy’s lyric: it is the “frozen nightingales” that “sing burial rites.” For Loy, Poe is a poet of the past as Rachel Blau DuPlessis shows in her brief but perceptive discussion of the text in question. “Poe” is thus a work “which constructs a logopoetic critique of poetry’s foundational cluster via Edgar Allen [*sic*] Poe’s remarkable statement ‘...the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world’” (40). Blau DuPlessis reminds us that “this conclusion is a triumphant synthesis, with glue being Woman, of some of the emotional and thematic markers of poetry—death, melancholy, and beauty. Best poetry draws (with vampiric precision) on best death” (40). The Poean paraphernalia may be there, but the American scholar sees Loy’s “Poe” as a reaction against a certain concept of poetry as well as femininity, to which words such as “romantic” and “romance” may be applicable (40):

This poem is a parodic examination of the accouterments and props of conventional lyricism. Loy's poem is both imitative of a sentimentalized funeral scene and satiric of it, for the phrase 'corpses of poesy' means female figures traditional to poetry, but both killed and eulogized by it. The archaic 'poesy' is, of course, an especially loaded choice of diction. It is a poetical or literary term for poetry, and in Loy 'poesy' satirizes the inadequacy of the dual conventions of the library and sexual gender materials that fuel the lyric....

Mocking and rejecting 'corpses of poesy,' Mina Loy opens poetry to analytic and ironic considerations that unmask some gendered institutions on which 'poesy' is built. (40-41)

The three poetic tributes to Poe discussed in the present article are interesting for a number of reasons, which have to do with their individual authors and their poetics but also with American and French literature in the age of modernism as well as with the symbolist school which precedes it and simultaneously paves the way for it. Moreover, the modernist-symbolist continuum which the poems by Crane, Mallarmé and Loy exemplify inevitably takes into account the legacy of romanticism, which both symbolism and modernism opposed but also had to acknowledge, and at which all three poems look, though in different ways and to different degrees. As such, they signal the developments which occurred in the poetry of the Western world in the space of a hundred years.

The Poe-inspired fragment of "The Tunnel," "The Tomb of Edgar Allan Poe" and "Poe" all revolve around the figure of an American romantic poet, who was in many respects ahead of his time. Crane and Mallarmé clearly look up to him, seeing their predecessor as "*il miglior fabbro*," to use a term borrowed from T.S. Eliot (49), another "elder" Crane admired. As Robert Combs reminds us, "[i]t has been pointed out that Poe represented for Crane the Romantic poet destroyed by an unsympathetic public" (165). The view of the author of "The Raven" as *par excellence* romantic recurs in various readings of "The Tunnel," for instance in that of Lewis, who observes that "Poe always comes forcibly to mind 'here,' that is, when the world expresses itself to the poet as an inferno, because Poe is the major American example of the Romantic poet harried and destroyed by his own loveless society" (359). As has been noted earlier in the present article, such statements could largely be applied to Mallarmé's tribute to the American poet as well. Mallarmé's depiction of Poe is—for want of a better word—de-corporealized and focused on the protagonist's transcendent genius: not only is the French poet's vision of his American predecessor mythographic (Lagarde and Michard 537), but it also draws on religious imagery and gravitates towards the transcendental.

While Crane's monographers also read religious symbolism into the fragment of "The Tunnel" devoted to Poe, which "relates the martyred poet to the crucified Christ with a spear in his side" (Lewis 360), the author of *The Bridge* presents his eminent forerunner in a way which contrasts with the idealistic "The Tomb of Edgar Allan Poe" in that it is more life-like and down-to-earth. As Combs points out,

“Crane’s fascination with Poe at this point goes deeper than this [romanticism]. It is first of all the degrading way Poe died that Crane remembers. The psychological and physical violence which is characteristic of human life is exemplified in Crane’s vision of the mutilated [*sic*] Poe” (165). The scholar is right to note the importance of the “question of how he [Poe] faced the death he wrote so much about” and of the fact that “[t]he actual demands of his murderers together with the sickening details of his last hours constituted death for him, not an elegantly rhymed poem,” leading Combs to the conclusion that “in effect, Crane is asking Poe if he realized, as Crane himself realizes this moment on the subway, the ugly truth about death in real life” (165). While Combs’s remarks on the brutal reality of death are valid, the realism of the Poe-inspired passage in “The Tunnel” also brings us back to another important point: the notion of the lack of decorum, which distinguishes much of modernist literature from so much of what preceded it in the nineteenth century; in other words, the condition of no longer being “in a flutter for fear bowels will be mentioned,” to quote Crane’s letter to Tate again. Similarly, the “mutilation” Poe is subjected to may be none other than that which characterizes modernist poetry and modernist literature in its totality: a poetry and a literature marked by cracks or “fissures,” by wounds and breaches, a poetry and a literature of disjointedness, of “fragments I have shored against my ruins,” to use Eliot’s celebrated formula (67).

“What Crane sees is a kind of dramatic elaboration upon Poe’s alleged murder,” Combs states (165). This dramatism generates the dynamism which characterizes Crane’s homage to Poe and which constitutes one of the common points it shares with Mallarmé’s work, dynamic despite the seemingly inescapable “static” connotations that the motif of the grave, central to the poem, has. Additionally, both Crane’s and Mallarmé’s tributes to Poe strike the reader as not only admiring but also moving and—especially in Crane’s case—quite personal. The analogy between Poe’s ordeal and the Crucifixion has a universal dimension. The reason is that “it heightens the suggestion that the American world brutally destroys its only potential redeemer” as well as an individual one. “[T]he poet in ‘The Tunnel’ associates himself profoundly with the ruined figure of Poe... to the point of recognizing in that figure a phase or a dreadful potential of his own being” (Lewis 360-361), which may, however, include the potential to “find the internal resources to *deny* the false destructive values the world would force upon him in his own sometimes shattered condition” (361).

By contrast, Mina Loy is far from holding Poe in great reverence, though the fact that she chooses him as the topic of her poem and decides to engage in polemics with his poetics implies that she cannot ignore him altogether. Nevertheless, her “tribute” to the poet is in fact an anti-tribute, impersonal, distanced, static and “cold” in terms of both form and content. Not only is one of the most interesting female representatives of Anglo-American modernism unsentimental about the author of “Ligeia,” but she is, more importantly, critical of the way his poetry is shaped by what decades later came to be referred to as “the male gaze.” Contrary to Remy de Gourmont’s claim that Poe was pro-feminine, Loy, the author of “Feminist

Manifesto,” who dared to write about childbirth, orgasm and male paternalism from a woman’s point of view, distances herself from Poe’s “roses and northern lights” as a poet, a woman and a feminist. However, counterintuitive as this may seem, “Poe” is not out of place within the Crane-Mallarmé continuum analyzed in this article. In his monograph on the affinity between Crane and Allen Tate, Langdon Hammer writes: “In the preface to *White Buildings*, Tate faults Crane’s “masters”—Whitman, Melville, and Poe—for establishing only a discontinuous tradition of false starts, repeated beginnings” (148). However, “in ‘At Melville’s Tomb,’ Crane claims that discontinuity as a sign of generative power and a principle of historical connection” (148). As Hammer explains elsewhere in his book, “[t]he poetries of genius that Tate mentions... therefore constitute a sort of antitradition. The line they form is a discontinuous one of repeated beginnings, each of which provides—in its ultimate break with the poetry of the past—only an *impasse* to further extensions of the same order of imagination” (70-71). Seen in this light, Mina Loy’s dissent may actually inscribe itself into a concept of tradition dear to Crane’s heart.

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*Edyta Frelik*

## **She Did Know a Few Things: Georgia O’Keeffe as an Intellectual**

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**Abstract:** Despite the fact that Georgia O’Keeffe is one of the most biographized, analyzed and interpreted modern American artists, her writings, which include voluminous correspondence, numerous artist statements and an autobiographical narrative, remain underrated. Taking at face value the painter’s disclaimers about her intellectual interests and ambitions and her insistence that she was “quite illiterate,” art historians and critics all too often fail to note that even when, as the only prominent female member of the Stieglitz circle, she seemed to accept the role assigned to her by “the men,” she retained her intellectual integrity. Even though she sometimes seemed to confirm such a perception, a closer look at her texts reveals that, well-educated and well-informed, she possessed literary skills on par with her plastic sensibility and imagination. Her use of verbal language, even more than her paintings, testifies to her unique intuition, intelligence and aesthetic sensibility as a quintessential American modernist.

**Keywords:** Georgia O’Keeffe, American art, modernism, intellectualism, gender stereotyping, artists’ writings

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I have a million things to do  
Must paint too  
Must write too  
- Georgia O’Keeffe, letter to Paul Strand, 15 November 1917

The painter using the word often seems to me like a child trying to walk. I think I’d rather let the painting work for itself than help it with the word  
- Georgia O’Keeffe, letter to Fiske Kimball, 26 May 1945

In the opening pages of a 2016 catalogue accompanying Georgia O’Keeffe’s retrospective at Tate Modern in London, the largest O’Keeffe exhibition to date outside the United States, curator Tanya Barson writes: “There are few artists more clearly and resolutely associated with the United States, and with identifying and embodying what it means to be both ‘American’ and ‘Modern,’ than O’Keeffe” (9). In perhaps the most exhaustive study on the iconic artist so far, seven scholars attempt to shed new light on O’Keeffe’s place in American art history by surveying her relationship with Stieglitz not in time-worn terms of romance but with regard to their artistic dialogue, taking a fresh look at feminist approaches to the painter’s work and life, examining her connection to the American landscape, and situating her late abstractions within the context of other artists’ abstract works from the 1950s to the 1990s.

For a long time, however, O’Keeffe’s status as an emblematic American artist did not protect against incomplete or skewed readings of her work and thought. Not even the 1976 autobiographical *Georgia O’Keeffe* that she produced to set the record straight ten years before her death—a significant contribution given that it was the only disclosure of this kind from the otherwise taciturn artist—could help to rectify the situation and broaden the scope of interpretations offered by both her detractors and admirers. These remained either one-sided or simple-minded. Addressing the “poverty of the critical writing” about the painter and her art back in 1977, the art historian Barbara Rose complained that although O’Keeffe “is one of America’s most popular painters... very little of interest has been written about her” (Rose).

Today, forty years later, O’Keeffe’s significant contribution to the development of modernist American art and aesthetic thought seems to have finally been given due consideration by critics and scholars of stature. Most of the recent exhibitions around the world presenting the artist’s oeuvre have been meant to expose more thoroughly than ever the richness and complexity of her painting and ideas. Novel comprehensive studies undertaken by art historians, theorists and curators have sought to challenge pernicious gendered stereotypes about O’Keeffe as a woman painter and a muse and wife to Alfred Stieglitz and fill in the gaps in the fragmentary, and often biased, recognition of her flowers and desert landscapes.

Yet, what many of these undeniably insightful and original recent contributions to the discussion of O’Keeffe’s work seem to overlook is the fact that she was not only a prolific and accomplished artist but also a prolific and dexterous writer, mainly of letters, most of which she was reluctant to make public. But, as Rose persuasively argues in her review of O’Keeffe’s sole autobiographical essay, any serious analysis of the artist’s visual works must recognize the significance of her writings. That is why, unlike others, Rose focuses on the formal qualities of the artist’s writing style and its possible literary influences and affinities rather than on the text’s historical-biographical content. In doing so, she acknowledges O’Keeffe’s “unexpected” literary talent and her ability to spin “provocative” and “unornamented” passages; but the short review format does not allow her to elaborate on the discoveries she makes, although she does bring up a few poignant observations. For instance, as one of the first critics to do so, she points to Gertrude Stein’s and the transcendentalists’ influence on both O’Keeffe’s painting and writing. Unfortunately, only a handful of studies of the painter’s life and work published since Rose made her case take a closer look at her intellectual ambitions and accomplishments—this despite the fact that her extensive private correspondence has been available to scholars since 2006. The exceptions include Bonnie L. Grad’s essay on how O’Keeffe’s reading of D. H. Lawrence’s writings influenced her artistic vision and Sarah Greenough’s editions of O’Keeffe’s letters. Greenough’s commentaries and annotations, like Rose’s insights, signal that the way O’Keeffe worded her thoughts is at least as significant as their subject matter.

This essay considers O’Keeffe’s love affair with language and argues that, contrary to the widely held view of her as instinctive, anti-intellectual and ultimately

exclusively visual, her writing reveals a wordsmith, deliberate, articulate and as confident of her pen as she was of her brush. Or as critic Anna Chave notes, although O'Keeffe was perceived by many as “an intuitive creature who groped her way along,” in reality she “was no plant, no amoeba, and no dimwit” but “a self-possessed literate person” (116).

The widespread view that O'Keeffe “lays no claim to intellectualism,” as her fellow painter Marsden Hartley observed (*On Art* 106), stems from several assumptions, the most significant of which is that represented by Stieglitz, who from the beginning championed her art as a direct expression of her femininity. This notion, in turn, influenced how writers and critics, both within and outside of the Stieglitz circle, approached his protégé in their reviews of her work. Stieglitz's peculiar strategy of promoting O'Keeffe as innocent, guileless and unschooled in art history and theories was a consequence of his deep conviction that to be modern art should look for ways to counter the deadening forces of Victorianism by being more authentic and more expressive of one's inner nature. Embracing the natural physicalness of the body and unencumbered intuition as an antidote to the materialism of American society, Stieglitz staged a series of exhibitions of children's and African tribal art to draw attention to immediate, non-analytical and non-intellectualized artistic expression.<sup>1</sup> Women's art, which he saw as another facet of primitivism, similarly interested him as an unmediated record of emotion, devoid of rational premeditation and calculation. “Woman *feels* the world *differently* than Man feels it,” he noted in a 1919 essay, explaining that “the Woman receives the World through her Womb. That is the seat of her deepest feeling. Mind comes second” (qtd. in Wagner 37).

Stieglitz's decidedly sexist view had serious consequences for how O'Keeffe's artistic identity came to be perceived both by her fellow artists and by critics (with a few notable exceptions), and ultimately by O'Keeffe herself. Promoted by her mentor as the embodiment of the “Great Child” and the “Great Woman”—defined by him as the modern age's true intuitive “geniuses”—and as a consequence denied the status of a rational creator, a position reserved exclusively for men, O'Keeffe was forever branded as inherently, albeit naturally, inarticulate. Curiously, she reinforced that reputation herself not only in her written exchanges with Stieglitz, but also in less intimate expositions in letters to others and artist statements she was sometimes forced to create. Writing to Stieglitz, soon to be her lover and then husband, she willingly assumed the identity he forged for her, repeatedly referring to herself as “baby” or “child.” She equated freedom of expression with innocence and femininity, occasionally hesitating when she reflected on her own identity: “I don't know if it's woman or little girl—I am mostly both” (*Faraway* 167). Elsewhere, amused when Waldo Frank called her “intellectual” (*Art & Letters* 185), she announced to him: “I

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1 Between 1912 and 1916 Stieglitz mounted a sequence of exhibitions at 291 presenting *Unguided Children, Aged 2 to 11* (inaugurating three shows of child art) and *African Savage Art*, the first ever held in an art gallery in the United States, showing objects from the Congo, Nigeria, and the Ivory Coast.

am one of the intuitives,—or subjectives” (*Art & Letters* 184). She thus reaffirmed Frank’s claim that when among men she was “as quiet as a tree, and almost as instinctive.” He explained: “If a tree thinks, it thinks not with a brain but with every part of it. So O’Keeffe. If a tree speaks or smiles, it is with all its body” (qtd. in Lynes 255). She seemed to confirm, or even flaunt, her inarticulateness by resisting Stieglitz when he urged her to give her paintings elaborate meaningful titles and refusing to sign them with her name.

As a mature artist, she tried to free herself from Stieglitz’s overly controlling mentorship by reinventing her artistic persona and constructing an image of herself as a self-reliant desert hermit. But even then she only bolstered the perception of herself as an instinctive and sourceless creator who responds to her inner voice rather than an intellectual who, drawing from literature or art, consciously processes various influences. Tight-lipped about what she read and what might have inspired her thinking, she would surprise the critical world after her death when her rich Abiquiu library was opened to the public and made accessible to scholars. Undisclosed by O’Keeffe during her lifetime and conspicuously absent from the numerous photographs and descriptions of her home, her “book room,” as she preferred to call it, contained three thousand volumes, a testimony to, as Grad puts it, “a thinking artist keenly aware of art, books, and ideas” (“Book Room” 29).

Some of the authors included in her library were writers, poets, painters, photographers, architects, and critics whom she considered close friends—such as Waldo Frank, Sherwood Anderson, D. H. Lawrence, Ansel Adams, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Allen Ginsberg. Others were simply members or associates of the Stieglitz circle who, as colleagues, sent her their books with warmhearted and applauding inscriptions. Many volumes in O’Keeffe’s collection are first editions, which, as Grad notes, “suggests that she was *au courant* when it came to new and radical developments in the discourse of modernism” and had extensive “knowledge of modern literature and poetry, philosophy, religion, photography, architecture, art theory and aesthetics, and non-Western arts and monuments, especially Asian ones” (“Book Room” 29). Grad also points out that the artist continued to acquire books into the late 1970s, a “poignant” confirmation of her unfaltering devotion to reading and its deep significance in her life at a time when she was effectively half-blind.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, both publicly and privately O’Keeffe repeatedly declared that she was “quite illiterate” (*Art & Letters* 222), a puzzling assertion by somebody submerged in literature and a compulsive letter-writer. Indeed, with Stieglitz alone she exchanged more than twenty-five thousand pages. But what did she mean when she wrote: “Words and I are not good friends” (*Faraway* 4)? One thing seems clear: she was not indifferent or hostile to words but, rather, was thoughtfully reserved about the expressive capacity of language when compared with visual art. For instance, she writes: “The feeling that a person gives me that I can not [*sic*] say in words comes

2 As she gradually lost her sight, O’Keeffe purchased audiobooks or had books read to her, a return to an earlier ritual from those days she shared with Stieglitz.

in colors and shapes" (*Art & Letters* 218).<sup>3</sup> And this: "It is easier for me to paint it than to write about it and I would so much rather people would look at it than read about it. I see no reason for painting anything that can be put into any other form as well" (*Art & Letters* 202). Her conviction about the supremacy of images was so strong that it in fact became her artistic creed. She opens her autobiographical text with the following declaration: "The meaning of a word—to me—is not as exact as the meaning of a color. Colors and shapes make a more definite statement than words.... I am often amazed at the spoken and written word telling me what I have painted" (*O'Keeffe*).

For one thing, from early on in O'Keeffe's career she had good reason to feel distressed about the potential of words to distort and even ultimately misconstrue what she felt her work was about. More importantly, over time she grew indignant with those critics who persistently viewed her first as a woman and only secondarily as an artist, offering highly sexualized, Freudian readings of her art. In particular, her floral images were notoriously interpreted as shameless and provocative representations of genitals. She also resented the hyperbolic language infecting commentaries about her art, such as the following description by Marsden Hartley of her early abstractions:

With Georgia O'Keeffe one takes a far jump into volcanic crateral ethers, and sees the world of a woman turned inside out and gaping with deep open eyes and fixed mouth at the rather trivial world of living people.... O'Keeffe has had her feet scorched in the laval effusiveness of terrible experience; she has walked on fire and listened to the hissing vapors round her person. (*Adventures* 116)

While members of the Stieglitz circle were accustomed to Hartley's exalted prose, a similar lack of restraint was simply inappropriate when exercised by the group's chief champion among the critics, Paul Rosenfeld, who wrote about O'Keeffe and her work in these words: "It is female, this art, only as is the person of a woman when dense, quivering, endless life is felt through her body, when long tresses exhale the aromatic warmth of unknown primeval submarine forests, and the dawn and the planets glint in the spaces between cheeks and brow" (qtd. in Wagner 38). O'Keeffe did not mince words in responding to what she considered an unacceptable aggregate of overblown rhetoric and straightforward sexism. In the opening paragraph of her autobiography she explained: "I write this because such odd things have been done about me with words" (*O'Keeffe*). Earlier, in a letter to Mitchell Kennerley, who had sent her two reviews by Rosenfeld, she rebuked her exegetists:

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3 When citing O'Keeffe's correspondence I follow Sarah Greenough's editorial choice to retain O'Keeffe's idiosyncratic punctuation, spelling mistakes and erratic use of apostrophes. Therefore subsequent quotations from the artist's letters will not be riddled with the use of [*sic*].

Rosenfeld's articles have embarrassed me—I wanted to lose one for the Hartley book when I had the only copy of it to read—so it couldn't be in the book. The things they write sound so strange and far removed from what I feel of myself. They make me seem like some strange unearthly sort of a creature floating in the air—breathing in clouds for nourishment—when the truth is that I like beef steak—and like it rare at that. (*Art & Letters* 170-171)

In contrast to the affected verbosity of her male peers, O'Keeffe's simple and unadorned language comes across as unrefined and casually matter-of-fact. She appears to have made a point of not writing the way they did, crafting her own—unique, lucid and sparse—way of expressing herself. Even her desire to please Stieglitz with her art could not make her express herself in a more genteel and lofty manner. Her language stood in glaring contrast to his eloquent, though often intemperate, diction. Consider, for instance, this passage from one of his letters to O'Keeffe in which he describes his reaction to some paintings she sent him for viewing:

—Those paintings!—All three are remarkable—the Portrait uncanny... What a glorious world you carry within you—Glowing with purest light—

As I sat there looking—looking—I wondered what kind of a child you'd bear the world some day!—The Glory of Dawn & the Glory of the Night—& the Glory of the Noon Sun—all combined—within that Womb of Yours—

The Universe—A Woman's Soul! (*Faraway* 162-163)

In another letter from around the same time, he writes:

You see how much you are giving people—Just in daring to be yourself—I say 'daring'—It isn't 'daring' at all—You wouldn't be to me what you are if it were 'daring.'—The sun doesn't 'dare' to shine—nor rise—nor set—It simply does what is natural to it—So with you—You express *yourself*—all the time—every breath of a moment—That's why you mean so much to me—You live from *within*—way, way, way within—the without is an accident—passing—real & no theory—real because the within is so genuine. (*Faraway* 135-136)

Although less inflated than the purple prose of Hartley and Rosenfeld, the tone of Stieglitz's effusions is the polar opposite of O'Keeffe's plain, unvarnished response: "What you said about being free—Why of course I feel free—Never occurred to me to feel any other way—Why shouldn't I... Free—Yes I'll always have to be—I cannot help it—you cannot help it—No one can help it" (*Faraway* 160).

Unsurprisingly, compared to Stieglitz's epistolary production O'Keeffe's letters were remarkably shorter. His could run for pages—one of them reached

forty-two, which she found “astounding to say the least” (*Faraway* 199). She rarely needed more than a few words to make a statement. But the conciseness of her letters did not make them any less informative, precise or vibrant, nor did the apparent artlessness of her locution preclude the possibility of deeper meanings. Combined with the absence of superfluous detail, this (apparent) artlessness has a parallel in her paintings, in which she tried to get at and bring out the simple, unadorned essence of things and through minimal means achieve maximum expressive power. Although she was not unique in pursuing such a goal—Hartley, John Marin and Arthur Dove also called for simplifying artistic depictions of perceived reality to essential forms—unlike most of “the men,” as she referred to her colleagues, O’Keeffe seemed more determined and consistent in this pursuit, and did so both in painting and in writing. The case of Hartley is emblematic. The most prolific and compulsive writer among the painters of the Stieglitz circle, he was rarely able to accomplish verbally what he intended, typically pondering in one of his poems: “How wonderful it is to say / one word—knowing one means it / perfectly” (*Poems* 199).

It should be noted that O’Keeffe entered the Stieglitz circle at a very specific moment, which, as Anne Middleton Wagner observes, was “a rather breathless one,” characterized by “general writerly excess”—that is why she calls it “this writerly moment” (40). With her straight-out-of-Texas demeanor, she stood strong—for instance, when she daringly made polemical statements for the purpose of guarding her artistic and intellectual integrity and reputation. The sole woman in the group, she witnessed daily the power of the pen, which many of her colleagues, as Wanda M. Corn observes, “wielded with ferocity and with faith that words could change the world” (4). As O’Keeffe’s correspondence reveals, she often wondered what they were all talking about, even, and perhaps especially, when the subject happened to be what she knew very well—her own work: “I would listen to them talk and I thought, my they are dreamy. I felt much more prosaic, but I knew I could paint as well as some of them who were sitting around talking” (qtd. in Robinson 291). Referring to their discussions of the visual appeal of the Montagne Sainte-Victoire, a mountain in Provence that both Cézanne and Hartley painted obsessively, she concluded after visiting the famous site: “All those words piled on top of that little poor mountain seemed too much” (qtd. in Lisle 159).

Skeptical about the usefulness of then current French aesthetic theories, O’Keeffe simply rejected their jargon and said what she meant in no uncertain terms, succinctly and clearly. As in her paintings, she relied on what was familiar and recognizable. One can even say that, whether she worked with her brush or her pen, she flaunted the commonplace and the uncontrived without any fear of appearing banal or prosaic. Occasionally explaining the origin of some of her paintings, O’Keeffe often disappointed those critics who expected elaborate expositions that would support and thus give legitimacy to their own daedal interpretations of her images. For instance, she had this to say of the origins of one of her most renowned series, *Jack-in-the-Pulpit*, executed in 1930:

In the woods near two large spring houses, wild Jack-in-the-pulpits grew—both the large dark ones and the small green ones. The year I painted them I had gone to the lake early in March. Remembering the art lessons of my high school days, I looked at the Jacks with great interest. I did a set of six paintings of them. The first painting was very realistic. The last one had only the Jack from the flower. (*O’Keeffe* opposite pl. 41)

Many will find the blandness of this straightforward account frustrating, and perhaps even insincere or perfidious, given what they see when looking at O’Keeffe’s canvases—shapes that, as Elizabeth Hutton Turner observes, are “erect, bulbous, carnival,” a jack-in-the-pulpit which “struts like the rooster of all flowers” (16). In a series of six paintings, O’Keeffe gradually stripped her subject down to focus in the last one on the magnified flower’s pistil, its sexual organ. This, one could say, spawned readings of many of her other floral paintings which, like interpretations of her earlier abstractions, explore primal and erotic associations they trigger in viewers. The painter herself did not respond to such readings, emphasizing instead the discipline of exact observation. Stating facts in a deadpan manner, she declared that she simply approached her subject with methodical attentiveness—“I looked at the flowers with great interest”—and implemented the conclusions of her observations on the canvas. The irony is that with *Jack-in-the-Pulpit* and other flower paintings from the 1920s O’Keeffe inadvertently inspired, or provoked, erotically-tinged interpretations of her new work while her decision to turn to the figurative mode was motivated by something completely different—her dissatisfaction with the men’s responses to her radically abstract experiments. In a letter to Mabel Dodge, she appealed to a kindred spirit, another woman artist, asking her to “write something about [her] that the men cant.” “Men,” she explained, “have done all they can do about it” (*Art and Letters* 180).

Having trained under William Merritt Chase, a master of still-life, and Arthur Wesley Dow, one of the chief proponents in America of the Oriental notion of composition (which placed design over representation), O’Keeffe was well versed and technically proficient in painting objects. More importantly, both her teachers, each in his own way, instilled within her a deep conviction that, as she learnt from Chase, “style—color—paint as paint” (*O’Keeffe*) had to enliven realistic depictions and that, as Dow taught, “mere accuracy has no art value whatever” (qtd. in Balge-Crozier 42). These teachings were reinforced by O’Keeffe’s readings in modern art theories and by the art she saw at Stieglitz’s galleries. Thus, while working in the ostensibly conventional idiom of the still-life, she redefined the genre fully aware of what she was about. Marjorie P. Balge-Crozier rightly observes that “by comparing her work with that of her predecessors, we can clarify how far she transcended their approach to the genre as she adopted a modern, self-reflexive mode that often removed the objects from the culture in which they were embedded and repositioned them in her world as her things.” Simply put, “she took still life, called *nature morte* (‘dead nature’) by the French, and made it *nature vivante*—nature revived for an

audience that had stopped looking” (43). When O'Keeffe chose to paint a flower that she saw blooming in a field of desert flowers outside her home, she disregarded all contextual considerations (the look of the New Mexico desert, the time of day, other plants, botanical accuracy, and so on) and selected just one specimen to be the sole image in her picture. Guided by her uniquely concentrated attention, she “repositioned” the flower and thus abstracted it without rendering it abstract. She painted a recognizable object as seen by the artist's eye. The image is that of a tangible thing, but one that now exists outside of time, petrified in what Balge-Crozier elsewhere refers to as “iconic stasis” (58).

By carefully selecting things to include in and exclude from her art, O'Keeffe ostensibly seemed to be concentrated on the momentary and the circumstantial but, in making such selections, she simultaneously and paradoxically celebrated the eternal and the universal. Traces of the same approach can be identified in her writing, where omission and suppression of detail are as meaningful as what is verbalized. In her response to Cleveland Museum of Art director William A. Milliken's request to comment on the sources of inspiration for her *White Flower, New Mexico* of 1929, she states:

I was hoping that you would forget that you asked me to write you of the White Flower but I see that you do not....

At the time I made this painting—outside my door that opened on a wide stretch of desert these flowers bloomed all summer in the daytime—.

The large White Flower with the golden heart is something I have to say about White—quite different from what White has been meaning to me. Whether the flower or the color is the focus I do not know. I do know that the flower is painted large to convey to you my experience of the flower—and what is my experience of the flower if it is not color. (*Art & Letters* 202)

Painted a year before *Jack-in-the-Pulpit*, her *White Flower, New Mexico* is less forthright in its sexual implications, but it exudes a sensuous aura that is equally strong. Enlarged so it reaches far across the edges of the canvas and positioned so as to allow one to look inside it, the flower seems to envelop the viewer with its soft petals, adding intimacy to the aesthetic experience. What O'Keeffe accomplishes by reversing the usual relation between the looker and the thing looked at is quite astounding: for all its fragility, the flower—because of the extreme close-up and the painting's grand scale of thirty by thirty-six inches—overwhelms, an effect thus described by Kathleen Pyne: “Her treatment of the miniature in nature makes us feel as if we have been suddenly reduced to the scale of a Lilliputian world” (255-256). Leaving no space for a background that could somehow anchor the flower in a more concrete setting, O'Keeffe transforms the commonplace that one would either see from a distance or overlook altogether into something new, providing an unexpected vantage point and thus offering the viewer a more than casual glance.

Traits representative of the “modern, self-reflective mode” present in O’Keeffe’s still lifes can also be detected in her commentary on *White Flower, New Mexico*. For all its apparent plainness and austerity, this commentary is not an offhand observation—the artist took great pains to compose it so that each word was meaningful in just the right way. In her letter to Stieglitz from 1929, she writes: “I try to think some words to Mr. Milliken in Cleveland—and they don’t come readily” (*Faraway* 542). The text she finally produced opens rather inconspicuously, but among some basic, even trivial, facts regarding the painting’s origin, she inserts a brief but pointed exposition on an important aesthetic issue. Her “whether the flower or the color is the focus I do not know” reflects her stylistic affinity to both realism (the flower) and abstraction (the color), which is confirmed by these two statements: “Nothing is less real than realism. Details are confusing. It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get at the real meaning of things” (qtd. in Lynes 180), and

It is surprising to me to see how many people separate the objective from the abstract. Objective painting is not good painting unless it is good in the abstract sense. A hill or tree cannot make a good painting just because it is a hill or tree. It is lines or colors put together so that they say something. For me that is the very basis of painting. The abstraction is often the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself that I can only clarify in paint. (*O’Keeffe* opposite pl. 88)

Typically, in her statement for Milliken, O’Keeffe shifts from a factual account to formal concerns, bringing into focus the color white (the principal reason why she chose to paint that particular flower) and the large canvas’s overwhelming physicality (its sheer size), the two key elements that enable her to establish a unity between her own “experience of the flower” and the viewer’s experience of her rendition of it. Significantly, she was fully aware that creative expression—whether in painting or writing—is necessarily anchored in thought, and as such it is an intellectual act, a fact she was ambivalent about as her artistic intuition biased her toward sense perception and feeling. On the one hand she admits to Stieglitz: “You see—that painting was done with my head—before my heart and my body were ready.” At the same time, however, she seems to regret that that this is so: “—and what I do with my head may possibly be beautiful—but it hasn’t the breath in it that means life” (*Faraway* 524).

Acknowledging that painting and writing have a common substrate, O’Keeffe naturally placed one before the other—after all, painting was her principal means of artistic expression. But it is also a fact that she was skeptical about verbal language’s clarity and precision as compared to how clear and precise forms and colors could be. As she saw it, the communicative power of words was often depleted by careless and inflated rhetoric, the kind one finds so often in Hartley. Consistently refusing to explain her own paintings, she stated that words “sound just too stupid and stale—everyone can say similar things and it means nothing” (*Art &*

*Letters* 196). Yet, she acknowledged that to get at “the real meaning of things” one sometimes needs to find verbal analogues or equivalents of her visual perceptions. This explains why, when she resorted to words, she first of all suppressed what she considered inessential information. Thus, for instance, and rather unconventionally, she declares in her autobiographical essay: “Where I was born and where and how I have lived is unimportant” (*O’Keeffe*). The ingenuousness of this declaration brings to mind not only O’Keeffe’s ascetic and austere demeanor, but also the peculiar minimalism even of her exuberant still lifes and landscapes.

The studied carefulness and refined restraint with which O’Keeffe approached words stood in sharp contrast to how, in her view, others employed them. She not only refused to comment on the allegations that her magnified flowers were disguised portraits of male and female genitals, but openly castigated her colleagues, including Stieglitz himself, for resorting to hackneyed social stereotypes instead of proffering thoughtful insights when they talked about her art: “Words have been misused, so that the usual words don’t express my meaning and I can’t make up new ones for it” (*Art & Letters* 270). But despite her protestations to the contrary, she did so. Although she did not literally invent new words, by relaxing the stale conventions of writing as a medium of communication she gradually found a way to speak in her own voice and share that voice with her readers. While her early letters followed the rules of conventional syntax and punctuation, around 1915 she stopped strictly following the rules of spelling, rendering her writing more phonetic, and she discarded common punctuation marks, eliminating apostrophes in contractions and replacing commas and periods with dashes. Syntax-wise, short phrases began to dominate in preference to fully-developed sentences, frequently achieving the impressionistic effect of prose poetry, as in the following letter written in 1917:

Sunday morning—a little breeze—cool feeling air—very hot sun—such a nice quiet feeling morning—strips of green—blue green—pale hazy—almost unbelievable beautiful—out of my window—it startled me when I first saw it—it isnt often hazy here—Ive been to breakfast—brought it to my sister—went for the mail—had a ride—got your package—the little prints—its eleven oclock—I wish you could see the nice color out of my window (*Art & Letters* 163)

Stripping words to essentials, O’Keeffe’s writings abstracted from reality in a way analogous to how she proceeded when she painted—by isolation, reduction, and simplification, with no concern for established rules. She explained her painterly procedure in this way: “Sometimes I start in very realistic fashion and as I go on from one painting after another of the same thing it becomes simplified till it can be nothing but abstract—but for me it is my reason for painting it I suppose” (*Art & Letters* 267). The analogy notwithstanding, in writing she obviously also drew from literary sources. For instance, the appearance of the first instances of her freer approach to language coincided with her first reading of Gertrude Stein’s unorthodox

verbal portraits of Matisse and Picasso, published by Stieglitz in *Camera Work*. This particular connection has been acknowledged by few critics, one of whom is Barbara Rose. In her review of O’Keeffe’s autobiography, she observes that “the unornamented ‘American’ English of Gertrude Stein” must have influenced the painter, who, like Stein, “chooses to restrict herself to simple declarative sentences, avoiding simile, metaphor, and symbol, the staples of literary allusion”—for instance, Rose points out, O’Keeffe never uses the word “like” (Rose). A decade after Rose, Sarah Greenough remarked—in a footnote—that the artist’s “writing style after 1916 was frequently reminiscent of Stein, particularly her use of the present tense, her almost stream-of-consciousness approach, and her habit of repeating the same idea over and over again until she had clarified it in her mind” (*Art & Letters* 138-139).

But the similarities go deeper. It does not seem too farfetched to say that the following “no-nonsense” explanation Stein offered of her disavowal of the question mark could have been written by O’Keeffe: “A question is a question, anybody can know that a question is a question and so why add to it the question mark when it is already there when the question is already there in the writing” (317). Regarding punctuation, O’Keeffe, who often dropped the full stop altogether, seems to have gone even further than Stein, who was surprisingly conservative on that issue: “As long as human beings continue to exist and have a vocabulary, sentences and paragraphs will be with us and therefore inevitably and really periods will be with us” (321-322).

One significant difference between the two women is that O’Keeffe downplayed her involvement with matters linguistic—after all she was only a painter. But “scribbling along with not a thought in [her] head,” (*Art & Letters* 186) she made astute remarks on the nature of perception and meaning-making very similar to Stein’s reflections. Consider Stein’s 1935 essay “Portraits and Repetition,” where she wrote: “I began to wonder... just what one saw when one looked at anything really looked at anything. Did one see sound, and what was the relation between color and sound, did it make itself by description by a word that meant it or did it make itself by a word in itself” (303). O’Keeffe asks similar questions concerning representation, and although her focus is not language but image, she arrives at her concluding observation following a path not too distant from the one Stein took:

A flower is relatively small. Everyone has many associations with a flower—the idea of flowers. You put out your hand to touch the flower—lean forward to smell it—maybe touch it with your lips almost without thinking—or give it to someone to please them. Still—in a way—nobody sees a flower—really—it is so small—we haven’t time—and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time. If I could paint the flower exactly as I see it no one would see what I see because I would paint it small like the flower is small.

So I said to myself—I’ll paint what I see—what the flower is to me but I’ll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it—I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers.

Well—I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower and I don't. (*O'Keeffe* opposite pls. 23 and 24)

This type of repetition-based diction—"flower" and "see" occur seventeen and twelve times respectively in O'Keeffe's full statement—brings to mind the serial nature of the flower motif and serves to demonstrate that looking and seeing are processes, or procedures, that take place in time, and in the head. In other words, looking is thinking and thinking requires a medium, words, which serve as the substrate of perception. The nature of words is such that they allow us to verbalize perceptions and ideas, but there is no guarantee that even if two people use the same words to express the experience of looking at the same thing their perceptions and statements about them would be identical or even similar. In her autobiography O'Keeffe writes: "I long ago came to the conclusion that even if I could put down accurately the thing that I saw and enjoyed, it would not give the observer the kind of feeling it gave me" (*O'Keeffe* below pl. 62). Repetition serves to reiterate her observations and thus pin down "the unexplainable thing in nature" (*O'Keeffe* opposite pl. 100). Like Stein, O'Keeffe could be accused of making a questionable virtue of repetitiousness, but she insisted on doing so because she knew that it takes time and reflection to recognize what that virtue is.

Although O'Keeffe's writing is not self-conscious in the same way as Stein's, whose style, as Marjorie Perloff puts it, is characterized by "the mathematical neatness of the permutative process" (59), it is equally "modern" in that it foregrounds the constructedness of writing. This verbal dimension is visible in how her apparently ordinary, vernacular prose reveals her poetic sensibility. The "concreteness, directness, and lofty impersonality" for which, as Rose observes, O'Keeffe's work "came to be appreciated" stems from the fact that "she is also a poet transforming the reality she sees" (Rose). Many passages in her autobiography and letters show that this transformative process takes place not only in her paintings but also in her texts, particularly those that refer to nature. For instance, in this commentary on her 1946 painting *A Black Bird with Snow-Covered Red Hills*, she reveals: "One morning the world was covered with snow. As I walked past the V of the red hills, I was startled to see them white. It was a beautiful early morning—black crows flying over the white. It became another painting—the snow-covered hills holding up the sky, a black bird flying, always there, always going away" (*O'Keeffe* opposite pl. 86). Fascinated by the unexpected view—"her" red hills turned white—the artist invites the viewer/reader to experience "the world" through her eyes. The image and the text both offer and invite the same type of concentrated attention to visual detail, especially colors—red, white, black, and blue (the latter represented by the sky) and shapes—"the V of the red hills," which imparts a sense of visual symmetry, or spatial organization. The image of the black crows against the white snow blends with/into

the whiteness of the page covered with marks in black ink. Having established what triggered a perception which was then transformed into a vision, O’Keeffe simply describes how she translated/transferred that vision onto the canvas. She reduced the visual components of the scene (the seen): the red of the hills is engulfed by the white of the snow that covers them, the black crows merge into one black bird, and the hills are reduced to a support for the sky.

What this passage demonstrates is how painterly terms—composition, structure, shape, and color—reconstruct sensual perception as/in thought. Transforming direct perception into visual and verbal forms was to O’Keeffe a natural process, which, as she put it in a letter to Sherwood Anderson, was, simply, “a working that must be done” (*Art & Letters* 174). Artists, says O’Keeffe, often experience things that are not immediately comprehensible or graspable and “from that experience comes the desire to make the unknown—known.” She explains: “—By unknown—I mean the thing that means so much to the person that he wants to put it down—clarify something he feels but does not clearly understand—sometimes he partially knows why—sometimes he doesn’t—sometimes it is all working in the dark—but a working that must be done—making the unknown—known” (*Art & Letters* 174). What is crucial here is that for O’Keeffe verbal “clarification” is not only of the same nature as visual refinement of one’s observations, but that in fact one aids the other. She confessed this to Anderson: “I probably wouldn’t have found a starting point so readily if I hadn’t written this to you” (*Art & Letters* 176), the starting point for “catching crystallizing your simpler clearer vision of life” (*Art & Letters* 174).

While primarily concerned with transforming her perceptions and thoughts into visual and verbal condensations of her own experiences, O’Keeffe, as Bonnie L. Grad notes, also “intended her audience to derive some sort of contemplative experience from her images” (*Lawrencean* 3). Resentful about the various “sexual” interpretations of her work, she welcomed spiritual readings. Grad cites Waldo Frank’s description of her art as “Scripture,” Paul Strand’s discovery of a “spiritual reality” in her paintings and Edward Alden Jewell’s designation of O’Keeffe as a “mystic in paint” (*Lawrencean* 3). O’Keeffe’s spiritual affinity with the transcendentalists is highlighted by Rose, who observes: “There are so many correspondences between her subjects and specific texts by Emerson and especially by Thoreau that we are safe in assuming she was greatly influenced by their writings.” Her paintings, the critic goes on to say, “so clearly convey the spirit of their loosely defined nature religion that they may be seen, in a sense, as transcendentalist icons” (Rose). Contestable as this bold claim may seem, many of O’Keeffe’s statements reveal how close she was to Emerson, especially in defining her relation to nature. Inspired by his idea that “few adult persons can see nature.... At least they have a very superficial seeing” (1583), she described her feelings about being immersed in the landscape surrounding her New Mexico home in words reminiscent of Thoreau’s observations and meditations:

Today I walked into the sunset—to mail some letters—the whole sky—and there is so much of it out here—was just blazing—and grey blue clouds were rioting all through the hotness of it—and the ugly little buildings and windmills looked great against it.... and I kept on walking—

....

I walked out past the last house—past the last locust tree—and sat on the fence for a long time—looking—just looking at the lightning—you see there was nothing but sky and flat prairie land—land that seems more like the ocean than anything else I know—There was a wonderful moon—

Well I just sat there and had a great time by myself—Not even many night noises—just the wind— (*Art & Letters* 157)

O'Keefe's spiritual kinship with Thoreau, who asked "Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?" (*Walden* 153), comes through in her "I feel like a little plant" (*Art & Letters* 183). In numerous other passages in her letters, the artist speaks of her sense of unity with nature, and more specifically, as Anne Middleton Wagner points out, the unity "not so much with the natural world as a whole, as with its fragments and ephemera—bits and pieces one could capture, remove, and paint" (65).

Having departed for New Mexico, at least partly in response to Stieglitz's infidelities, O'Keefe found comfort in her sense of being at one with her new environment, a feeling she communicated in almost every letter from "the Faraway": "The thing you call holy—I do not feel any less holy—but I feel more like the rocks in the bottom of the stream outside my door—Much water runs over me—and I know it—Everyday there seem to be more things I am conscious of—and I can just let pass over me and be" (*Faraway* 472). She openly acknowledged her elation, which she compared to being intoxicated: "I don't know why this country gets me the way it does—but I just get a feeling of being drunk with it" (*Faraway* 509). Clearly with Emerson in mind, she announced: "And me is something that reaches very far out into the world and all around" (*Faraway* 471).

In keeping with Emerson's conviction that to experience "the whole of nature" one needs to disentangle oneself from society—"a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society" (1583)—O'Keefe, who had always been a loner, chose a life of seclusion and solitude and thus saw other people's company as a constraint. Self-sufficient and independent, she confided to Sherwood Anderson: "I am having my few great days of the year when there is no one around and I can really breathe—I dont know why people disturb me so much—They make me feel like a hobbled horse" (*Art & Letters* 178). Not surprisingly, then, she was drawn to places where "there is nothing," by which she meant the absence of people. Realizing that her predilection for solitude was not shared by her friends and fellow artists, she wondered: "Maybe there is something wrong with me that I am liking it so much" (*Art & Letters* 158). But then she wholeheartedly embraced the desolate wide-open

stretches of the Southwest, as if heeding Thoreau's call: "Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free" ("Walking" 1810). When, after Stieglitz's death in 1942, O'Keeffe settled for good in the remote village of Abiquiu, a long trek away from the main road and inaccessible at certain times of the year, she carved out a truly independent life. Its simplicity and austerity resounds in the language in which she described her solitary existence and her acceptance of what nature offered in the hard conditions:

—Colored earth—rattlesnakes and a Siamese Kitten for news is all I have—With all the earth being rearranged as it is these days I sometimes wonder if I am crazy to walk off and leave it and sit down in the far away country as I have—at least it is quiet here—I have no radio—and no newspaper—only *Time* that the girl gets when she goes to town—for food—I get vegetables and fruit from the ranch house two miles away—I've only been to town twice since I'm here—I'm having a lovely time—and I hope yours is passable—Too bad you dont like nothing the way I do. (*Art & Letters* 231)

O'Keeffe's serene outlook—which allowed her to savor the nothingness, emptiness and stillness in the barren landscapes of the prairie, desert and mountains of New Mexico—in no way impaired her emotional response to its visual opulence and outright beauty. Describing an Indian dance she once saw in a Pueblo village, she writes: "The monotony of it—the brilliancy of the color—the live eyes—It is terribly exciting—and at the same time quieting like the ocean—I had a great sense of quiet and peace—and at the same time a very—very living excitement" (*Faraway* 433). It is this type of exhilaration that prompts Greenough to describe some of O'Keeffe's letters as verging on giddiness, while others sustain a balance between vividness and lucidity (*Faraway* 408). And yet it is not just O'Keeffe's ability to combine passion, briskness and spontaneity with calmness, sparseness and precision that makes the painter such an engaging and original writer. Her aplomb and self-restraint, marks of emotional and intellectual integrity, were not merely traits of her character. At a time when many of her enlightened and progressive colleagues and fellow artists, almost all of them men, still had a hard time acknowledging that a woman can have a full personality, she was able to convince at least some of them that she was not, as Hartley put it, "modern by instinct" (*Adventures* 118) but was their peer intellectually, and knew it. In this letter to a friend in distress, she tries to raise her spirits but ends up boosting her own: "—the vision ahead may seem a bit bleak but my feeling about life is a curious kind of triumphant feeling about—seeing it black—knowing it is so and walking into it fearlessly because one has no choice—enjoying ones consciousness—I may seem very free—a cross between a petted baby and a well fed cow—but I know a few things—" (*Art & Letters* 201). One of the few male friends who acknowledged her intellect was the African-American writer Jean Toomer, who, observing in a letter to Stieglitz that O'Keeffe liked to pretend "she hasn't a mind," hinted at the nature of their rapport by adding: "I don't think she

thinks she fools me” (qtd. in *Art & Letters* 138-139)

She certainly did not fool Barbara Rose, one of the most perceptive historians of modern American art, who in a rare attempt to give full credit to O'Keeffe's intelligence and knowledgeableness posits that it was probably she who brought to the attention of Stieglitz the ideas of the Orientalist scholar Ernest Fenollosa, called by Rose “a missing link between the artists of the Stieglitz circle and the transcendentalist writers” (Rose). Even more interesting is the possibility that O'Keeffe's reading of Fenollosa's monumental *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art: An Outline History of East Asiatic Design* could have triggered in her certain reflections not just about art but also about language. Such was precisely the impact of Fenollosa on Ezra Pound, who, according to Elizabeth Hutton Turner, believed Fenollosa was responsible for a “renewed emphasis on perception, together with a renewed consciousness of the structure of words—indeed, a renewed consciousness of the root and structure of all language—with enabling modern poets, like modern painters, to break free from the romantic metaphor of mood or impression and to unfold a more objective system of expression (12). That O'Keeffe read Fenollosa for ideas about composition and design seems quite obvious, but she might have also discerned in his study traits that Pound saw as essential for the development of modern poetic expression. This is one more reason why her surprisingly broad and profound intellectual interests are worth examining. O'Keeffe felt no need to showcase her learnedness and, as Wagner observes, she “learned to mask her modernist ambitions” (288), but a closer look at what she had to say and how she said it confirms that she indeed did “know a few things” (*Art & Letters* 201).

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Ewa Ścibior

## The Representations of Drag Queen Characters in Pre-Stonewall Literature: John Rechy's *City of Night* and Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*

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**Abstract:** This paper is a comparative analysis of two novels—John Rechy's *City of Night* and Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*—in terms of their presentation of drag queen characters. The analysis focuses on the novels' revolutionary potential and argues that since the authors present their characters as sympathetic and genuine despite the hardships they have to endure, the two novels could be seen as examples of early forms of gay rights activism. Such an assumption questions the approach of many scholars who treat pre-Stonewall literature as purely an expression of homosexual people's trouble with accepting their sexual orientation.

**Keywords:** drag queen, pre-Stonewall literature, gay rights activism, John Rechy, Hubert Selby Jr.

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The riots which were sparked by the raid on the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, New York on June 28, 1969 are commonly referred to as the turning point in the history of gay rights movement. They have become a symbol of “gay resistance to oppression” and are often believed to have been “that moment in time when gays and lesbians recognized all at once their mistreatment and their solidarity” (Duberman xvii). Those events had an unquestionable effect on the development of the gay rights movement, leading to the emergence of such organizations as the Gay Liberation Front, starting the tradition of annual gay pride marches and greatly increasing the visibility of gay people in the American society. However, there is clearly a tendency to consider Stonewall to have been the starting point and disregarding any forms of activism that happened before. As Duberman remarks: “The decades preceding Stonewall... continue to be regarded by most gays and lesbians as some vast neolithic wasteland” (xvii). This clear division of gay history into pre- and post-Stonewall periods does not give justice to early activists who made Stonewall possible.

Larry Gross points to the post-WW2 period of the Cold War as the time when the topic of homosexuality first became a matter of public interest (21). Homosexuals, just like communists, were targeted by “witch hunts” whose purpose was to identify and persecute the enemies of America, and they were only mentioned in the media in the context of arrests and crimes, under such headlines as *Los Angeles Hearst's* “State Department Fires 531 Perverts, Security Risk” (Gross 21-22). It was during this time of “political and sexual repression” that the first examples of gay activism occurred (21). Gross refers to homosexual press as the first medium which had a

great influence on forming gay and lesbian identities before Stonewall; titles such as *Vice Versa*, *ONE*, *Mattachine Review*, or *Ladder*, all founded in the late 1940s and the 1950s, gave homosexual people a chance to start sharing their experiences and ideas and become a community (24-29). Furthermore, in 1951 Donald Webster Cory published *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach*, the first book in America arguing for equality, which “served as a stimulus to the emerging homosexual self-consciousness” (Gross 23). Its popularity encouraged Cory to publish another book, *The Homosexual and His Society: A View from Within* (1963), co-written with John LeRoy, which even more openly called for “a struggle for the rights guaranteed to all citizens of a free democratic society” (qtd. in Gross 23). These early forms of activism were aimed exclusively at homosexual people, which meant that their reach was limited. As Gross points out, in the 1950s the gay magazine with the largest circulation was *ONE* with 5,000 subscribers (27-28). Nevertheless, the role of pre-Stonewall advocates for gay rights should not be underestimated. Had they not worked towards raising awareness and creating a sense of community among homosexual people, the eruption of the Stonewall riots would not have been possible.

The beginning of campaigns for the rights of homosexual people in the 1940s was also the time when gay topics started appearing in American literature. This was when books such as Truman Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) or Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar* (1948) became best-sellers. Since then, the popularity of homosexual fiction began to grow, with “a flood of work” in the revolutionary 1960s (Cady 30). However, the increasing number of publications did not mean a growing acceptance of homosexual topics by the public. What is more, it did not seem to express the acceptance of their own sexuality by gay writers either. As Joseph Cady argues that:

The remarkable achievement of twentieth-century American gay male writing before Stonewall might at first appear to be offset by the fact that much of it seems concessive. For example, in their association of homosexuality with violence, suicide, murder, or other kinds of pathetic death or at best with lives of freakishness or isolation, many works in the post-World War II outpouring of published gay male writing seem to confirm Mart Crowley’s famous line in *The Boys in the Band*, ‘Show me a happy homosexual, and I’ll show you a gay corpse.’ Even some positive portrayals surround the subject with distracting reassurances, like the bisexuality in Baldwin’s and Goodman’s work. (38-39)

Such representations are not surprising, given the fact that at that time homosexuality was still considered a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association and was outlawed in the United States by the sodomy laws. Any more positive depictions would be banned from publishing or would not find a wide audience.

By the 1960s homosexuality became such a visible phenomenon in America that some mainstream media attempted to explain it to the heterosexual majority. In

1963 the *New York Times* published the first-in-history front-page article concerned with gay people (Gross 30). The headline left no doubt as to the article's approach: "Growth of Overt Homosexuality in City Provokes Wide Concern." The author quoted the opinions of such "experts" as psychiatrists, religious leaders, and the police, with very few comments by homosexual people. This became the standard format for discussing gay issues in the mainstream media, and it was adopted in the articles in such magazines as *Life*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, following the *New York Times*' story (Gross 31-32). Furthermore, in 1967 the CBS, as the first network television, aired a report on homosexuality. Even though it gave more time to homosexuals by inviting gay men to talk about their experiences, their stories were also "balanced" by the opinions of psychiatrists, the clergy and the police (Gross 38-39). The conclusion of the program said exactly what the audience should think about gay people: "The dilemma of the homosexual: Told by the medical profession he is sick, by the law that he's a criminal. Shunned by employers. Rejected by heterosexual society. Incapable of a fulfilling relationship with a woman or, for that matter, with a man. At the center of his life, he remains anonymous... a displaced person... an outsider" (qtd. in Gross 39).

This highly negative public view of homosexual people made the early advocates for gay rights focus on "normalizing" gay people's image. For example, Robert Duncan in his 1944 essay "The Homosexual in Society" argued that homosexuals should unite in their struggle for equal rights, though their primary focus should be "human freedom" (210). This meant that they should fight for universal rights rather than create a culture of their own, which he described as "a cult of homosexual superiority to the human race; the cultivation of a secret language, the *camp*, a tone and a vocabulary that is loaded with contempt for the human" (210). Duncan further expressed his disapproval of identifying oneself as a member of the homosexual community by arguing that it only offered its members "self-ridicule" (211). Despite his claim that homosexuals were one of the most oppressed social groups, he believed that they, in fact, partly shared the responsibility for such a state of things because of their tendency to exclude themselves from society (209-210).

Duncan's stance was not uncommon. As Betty Luther Hillman argues, "as homosexuals first began to form organizations to fight for their rights, combating stereotypes about homosexuality and separating their sexual identities from gender deviance became two of their primary goals" (156). One of the consequences of this was that crossdressing became a highly controversial issue among gay people. It was viewed as a very harmful phenomenon which upheld the popular opinion that "all homosexuals [were] nelly drag queens" (Hillman 153). This was not a rare statement. When scientists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebig first started studying the phenomenon of crossdressing at the end of the nineteenth century, they arrived at a conclusion that it "was simply a *visualization* of homosexuality" and drag has since then become "a potent symbol of male homosexuality" (Silberman 180). For this reason, many early gay rights movements refused to advocate for the rights of people whose gender identity or gender presentation was non-normative (Hillman

158-159). As a result, there was little effort to change the public perception of such figures and they remained largely misunderstood.

According to Seth Clark Silberman, this tendency to misrepresent drag queens and other cross-dressing individuals found its clear realization in pre-Stonewall literature. In an entry on crossdressing in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, he classifies the typical representations of male and female crossdressing in literature and establishes some recurring motifs in such stories. According to the critic, typical drag queen characters are “crazy (naturally or drug-induced) and superficial”; they are misogynistic but they are “dedicated to passing as [women] in order to ensnare a ‘real’ man”; finally, they can never be truly happy and are doomed to a tragic end (180). As examples of such representations he quotes, among others, two characters from 1960s novels: Miss Destiny from John Rechy’s *City of Night* (1963) and Georgette from Hubert Selby Jr.’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1964). The two characters undoubtedly have most of the negative characteristics listed by Silberman. However, the fact that the two novels were published before Stonewall riots might have influenced the critic’s analysis. The common misconception that it was only after Stonewall that the struggle for gay rights began might have clouded the revolutionary potential of pre-Stonewall novels. This article sets out to compare the two representations of drag queen characters in Rechy’s and Selby’s novels and argue that despite their dependence on stereotypes, the authors’ approaches make them quite unconventional, even subversive. Their unprecedented presentation of drag queens as sympathetic characters may be seen as an example of early activism since it worked towards raising awareness among homosexual people.

The two novels address the phenomenon of cross-dressing from different perspectives and in varying degrees. Rechy’s novel is entirely devoted to the description of the homosexual world; it is told from the perspective of an insider, as it is based on Rechy’s own experiences as a hustler on the streets of New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles and New Orleans. On the other hand, Selby’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is not a gay novel. Written by a heterosexual author, its main focus is on the lives of the lowest classes inhabiting Brooklyn, New York, drag queens and homosexuals being only a part of them. However, both novels seem to have a similar goal; they both address controversial issues, showing the reality of the lives of the people whom society wants to keep invisible. The fact that authors from two different backgrounds discussed the situation of homosexual people so openly before it became a major issue with the outbreak of the Stonewall riots proves that the attempts of early gay rights activists at raising awareness of their cause were largely successful.

The first impression one has when introduced to Miss Destiny and Georgette is their strangeness. This is how Georgette is first described in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*:

Georgette was a hip queer. She (he) didnt try to disguise or conceal it with marriage and mans talk,... but, took a pride in being a homosexual by feeling intellectually and esthetically superior to those (especially women) who werent gay...; and with the wearing of womens panties, lipstick, eye

makeup..., long marcelled hair, manicured and polished fingernails, the wearing of womens clothes complete with padded bra, high heels and wig (one of her biggest thrills was going to BOP CITY dressed as a tall stately blond (she was 6'4" in heels) in the company of a negro...); and the occasional wearing of a menstrual napkin. (39-40)

What is apparent in the description of Georgette is that Selby seems to repeat the common misconception that crossdressing is a projection of homosexuality—she is presented as a “fully-fledged” “queer,” as opposed to many gay men who are too afraid to admit their orientation. Selby’s characters also express this belief—Georgette’s lover, Vinnie enjoys her affection for him “even if it is a fag” (44), and her brother yells at their mother that “hes nothing but a filthy homosexual [and she] should throw him out in the street” (54). No one seems to accept Georgette for who she really is except for her “girlfriends” who are, like her, “hip queers.” Despite the overwhelming hostility, she is proud of who she is, which may be understood as a fault. In his analysis of “the American literature of homosexuality,” Stanton Hoffman argues that the “gay world” is presented in novels as a punishment, it is “the result of [a homosexual’s] guilt over his choice of a way of life” (196). The world presented in Selby’s novel is definitely a hellish place full of violence and drugs and void of hope. The fact that Georgette does not accept the surrounding grim reality could be understood as a sign of her obliviousness, though it seems more likely that it is a coping mechanism. As James Giles argues, “she has bravely chosen to create from within an identity that denies those aspects of external reality that are unbearable to her” (*Understanding* 21). This ability to create alternative realities in one’s mind is a fascinating phenomenon for Selby and this is what may have made it so easy for him to write from a drag queen’s perspective (Vorda 293, 301).

Rechy’s first description of Miss Destiny introduces her as an even more outlandish figure:

Indeed, indeed! here comes Miss Destiny! fluttering out of the shadows into the dimlights along the ledges like a giant firefly—flirting, calling out to everyone: ‘Hello, darling, I love you—I love you too, dear—so very much—ummmm!’ Kisses flung recklessly into the wind.... ‘What oh what did Chuck say to you, darling?’ to me, coming on breathlessly rushing words. ‘You must understand right here and now that Chuck still loves me, like all my exhusbands (youre new in town, dear, or I would certainly have seen you before, and do you have a place to stay?—I live on Spring Street and there is a ‘Welcome!’ mat at the door)—oh, they *nevu*h! can forget me ... Oh I am, as everyone will tell you, ‘A Very Restless Woman.’ (102-103)

This description clearly presents Miss Destiny as a colorful figure whose presence is impossible to ignore. While Georgette, on a few occasions, struggles to draw everyone’s attention to herself, for Destiny it comes naturally, and she clearly enjoys it. What is more, similarly to Georgette’s portrayal, the issue of gender is brought

up very quickly, though not immediately, allowing the reader to first imagine her as a woman. First, she calls herself a “Very Restless Woman,” but then the narrator refers to her as “She-he” and states that “Miss Destiny is a man” (103). However, this happens only during their first meeting. Later on, Destiny does not experience hostility or lack of acceptance. On the contrary, she is very respected in her environment because she once was arrested for masquerading when she “went to this straight party in High Drag” and danced with a police officer from the vice squad (103-104).

Marjorie Garber, while analyzing the representations of cross-dressing in detective fiction, notices that it is mostly expressed through language (188). She points out that the way characters speak often gives them away in their attempts to hide their identity by pretending to be a member of the opposite sex (188-190). This linguistic distinctness is not specific to detective stories and it is also employed in Rechy’s and Selby’s novels to emphasize the difference between the drag queens and other characters. In *Last Exit*, the narrator’s voice and the dialogues are blended together, with no quotation marks to distinguish the latter. This is why Selby had to devise a unique way of speaking for every character. In the afterword to the novel, he writes: “when Vinnie is the subject the language and rhythms reflect him with their harshness; and with Georgette the sounds and rhythms are sibilant, soft, feminine, a lot of alliteration, the images romantic.” This aspect is even more pronounced in *City of Night*. Miss Destiny’s dialogues are full of exclamations and exaggerations. Here is how she describes her biggest dream:

A real wedding... like every young girl should have at least once.... And when it happens oh it will be the most simpuhlee Fabulous wedding the Westcoast has evuh seen! with oh the most beautiful queens as bridesmaids! and the handsomest studs as ushers!... and *Me!*... *Me...* in virginwhite... coming down a winding staircase... carrying a white bouquet!... and my family will be crying for joy... And there will be champagne! cake! a real priest to puhfawn the Ceremony! (106-107)

This description makes it apparent that Destiny’s over-the-top manner of speaking is expressed not only through her colorful language, but also graphically, by capitalizing the most important words, marking numerous pauses in the utterances and using a peculiar form of transcription in words such as “simpuhlee,” “evuh,” or “puhfawn.”

It is significant that the queens’ way of speaking is considered by other characters as a sign of their intelligence. Vinnie is proud of Georgette because she “[is] smart and [can] snow [his friends] under with words (at the same time hating anyone else who might use polysyllabic words and thinking anyone who went to school was a creep)” (44). Moreover, Georgette is interested in the opera and literature, which sets her apart from all of her friends. During a party, when everyone seems to have lost their spirits, she believes it is a good time to do “something that would make it her moment and night... something that would once more make her

the nucleus of the night” (78). She picks up Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” and starts reading it out loud. Everyone else is startled but they are all listening to her in awe, this being probably one of the very rare moments they have ever had contact with poetry.

Similarly, Miss Destiny is considered to be the best educated person in her environment. This is because she has a habit of explaining the meaning of the more “complicated” words she uses: “But, baby, it was a turbulent marriage (that means very stormy, dear)” (104-105). She also enjoys misquoting Shakespeare: “The quality of muhcee is mighty strained indeed—as the dear Portia said (from Shakespeare, my dears—a very Great writer who wrote ladies’ roles for dragqueens in his time)” (106). The narrator, who is a hustler but has college education, immediately notices her inaccuracy. At first he does not comment on it, since he prefers to keep his background a secret. However, he later admits to Miss Destiny that he also knows Shakespeare, which she finds unbelievable. She decides to test him by asking him who Desdemona is. He answers in a way which he believes she will understand best: “Desdemona was a swinging queen in the French Quarter who married a spadestud who dug her until a jealous pusher turned him on that his queen was making it with a studsailor, and the spade smothered the queen Desdemona and the heat came for him and he killed himself” (124). At first Miss Destiny does not respond but later she exclaims: “You *do* know who Desdemona is!” (124). It is clear that the narrator sees through her lack of education but decides not to use it against her. Even though he has a much more down-to-earth, not to say grim, view of the world, he never does anything that would disrupt her fantasies. This shows his great fondness of her.

Silberman insists that one of the features which accounts for the oddity of the drag queens described in the two novels is their addiction to drugs and alcohol (180). Georgette is “high most of the time on benzedrine and marihuana” and her life “[doesn’t] revolve, but [spins] centrifugally, around stimulants, opiates” (40). After she has been wounded in the leg by Vinnie’s friends and he insists on taking her home, her main worry is not the inevitable confrontation with her aggressive brother, but the lack of narcotics: “In the house a week or more with nothing. I’d crack. I cant stay down that long. Theyll bug me. Bug me. O jesus jesus jesus...” (50). She soon starts experiencing withdrawal symptoms and, despite her bad injury, runs away from home to one of her friends who she knows has some drugs: “Goldie handed her half a dozen bennie and she swallowed them, gulped hot coffee and sat silent... trying to think the bennie into her mind (and the room and the past few days out); not wanting to wait for it to dissolve and be absorbed by the blood and pumped through her body; wanting her heart to pound *now*; wanting the chills *now*; wanting the lie *now*; Now!!” (57). What is more, drugs are not only an addiction to Georgette and her friends, but they are perceived as a symbol of status, a way of life. During a party at Goldie’s place, to which Georgette has invited Vinnie and his friends, one of the queens is disappointed with their behavior: “Cant even take a few bennie and a little pot without simply drifting off. How ridiculous. I must say Georgette that I dont think much of these *men* friends of yours. I thought they were hip” (64-65).

However, for Miss Destiny and her friends drugs are much less significant. Queens and hustlers meet in bars where they get drunk, but alcohol and drugs are not considered to represent any higher value, unlike in Selby's novel—one of the queens chooses not to drink alcohol and nobody finds it shocking (111-112). During a party at Miss Destiny's place, they drink alcohol and take drugs (joints and pills), but it is not presented as the main event. Finally, even though the reader knows that Miss Destiny is not an abstainer, as she mentions getting high in her conversation with the narrator (125), there is not a single description of her taking drugs.

Silberman argues that drag queens' substance abuse is a way of coping with their constant depression, which is a result of their desire to become "real" women (179-181). He claims that in fiction crossdressing is mostly explained by characters' transsexualism, which serves as a way of normalizing such behavior by upholding the binary nature of gender: "To 'explain' drag queens by saying that they want to be women solidifies our gender binaries—everyone is, or wants to be, either a *man* or a *woman*" (180-181). It is interesting that in American literature of the 1960s there seem to be no descriptions of "recreational drag," i.e. donning women's apparel only for the purpose of entertainment. Such a phenomenon existed long before the Stonewall riots and even gay rights organizations that opposed crossdressing in public organized "drag balls," during which gay cis men (biological males identifying as men) dressed up as women for entertainment (Hillman 160, 166). The portrayals of crossdressing in novels, however, invariably suggest the characters' desire to be identified as women and *City of Night* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* seem to be no exceptions.<sup>1</sup>

The first description of Georgette reveals that not only does she dress like a woman, but also wears sanitary napkins from time to time (39). This is something that no one else can notice, therefore it is likely caused by her need to feel like a woman, not only resemble one. When she flirts with Vinnie, she feels like "a young girl on her first date" (40). She clearly considers herself a woman, as she wears makeup and women's clothing in her everyday life, though she never explicitly talks about her gender identity. It is very different with Miss Destiny, who mentions it on virtually every occasion. When she talks about getting arrested for masquerading, she comments: "I can see them bustin me for Impersonating a man – but a woman! – really!" (104). She also worries that her "exhusband" Sandy, who was sent to jail, "might turn queer" from spending so much time away from women (106). However, she is not always so confident. One time, she asks the narrator "dont you think I look *real*?" (114) and when she tells him about the first time she came to Los Angeles, she says:

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1 The relationship between transvestitism, transsexuality and drag is a complex one and its analysis lies outside the scope of this article. Here, the term "drag queen" is used to refer to the way it was understood by the particular authors in the 1960s and the analysis does not account for its wider meaning.

And I know it sounds crazy but I came here believing—no, not really Believing—but *hoping* maybe, maybe somehow crazily hoping!—that some producer would see me, think I was Real—Discover me!—make me a Big Star! and I would go to the dazzling premieres and Louella Hopper would interview me and we would stand in the spotlights and no one would ever know I wasnt Real. (125-126)

Her dream to be a “real” woman is something that does not allow her to be truly happy. Despite often coming across as “all gayety, all happiness, all laughter” (108), she really feels “trapped”: “but I want to fly out of my skin! jump out! be someone else! so I can leave Miss Destiny far, far behind” (126).

According to Silberman, one of the key motifs in stories featuring drag queens or transsexual characters connected to their gender identity is “finding, or finding what happened to the penis” (181). For drag queens in pre-Stonewall literature, their male sexual organs are a source of shame and repulsion. When one of Vinnie’s friends approaches Georgette with a knife in his hand, he says, “Stand still and I’ll makeya a real woman without goin ta Denmark.” He then continues, “You dont want that big sazeech gettin in yaway Georgie boy. Let me cut it off,” and Georgette protests that “it is *not* big” (46). Miss Destiny is even more outspoken about her disgust with her penis. She calls it “That Thing between her legs which should belong there only when it’s somebody else’s” (104) and when she talks about the moment when she realized her true identity, she says that Miss Thing (a voice in her head, “a fairy perched on [her] back like some people have a monkey or a conscience” (106)) told her: “Why, how ridiculous!—that petuh between your legs simpuhlee does not belong, dear” (115). She has also been hurt by people who discovered her biological sex. When she tells the story of one of her first relationships, she says that her lover’s parents “Idolized her” but only “until they Found Out.” After this discovery, they disinherited their son, who soon after died, which was the end of Miss Destiny’s perfect romance (117). She also mentions a situation when a group of sailors attacked her and started undressing her to check if she was a real woman: “If youre a girl wow the world is yours honey, but if youre a goddam queer start praying” (118). She managed to escape, but it was only the beginning of a series of numerous abuses she had to endure.

The fact that both Georgette and Miss Destiny have experienced abuse but nevertheless remain true to their conceptions of themselves against the society’s expectations is something that both authors present as admirable. James Giles notes that “the narrative voice in [*Last Exit to Brooklyn*] makes it clear that Georgette is to be admired... for the sheer honesty of her life” (*Understanding* 20). Similarly, Jennifer Moon points out Miss Destiny’s “[strife] for personal authenticity,” which makes it possible for her to establish a real connection with the narrator (53). Even though it may seem contradictory, what other characters see as a costume, is what actually allows Georgette and Destiny to be the most genuine characters in both novels.

One of the most common accusations leveled at drag queens to this day is that their representations of femininity reinforce gender stereotypes (Schacht 166-

167). In his book on the history of drag and transvestitism, Peter Ackroyd argues that drag queens are misogynistic because drag “parodies and mocks women” and it is “a vehicle for satire at women’s expense” (14). Interestingly, he does not view transvestites as similarly dangerous, since, according to him, they try to “create at least the illusion of femininity—‘to pass’ as a woman” (14). Moreover, as Hillman notices, early gay rights organizations opposed the inclusion of drag queens not only due to the fear of reinforcing the stereotype of the “effeminate” homosexual, but also to show their support for feminists who opposed drag (158). Literary depictions of crossdressing in the 1960s also contributed to this association of drag queens with misogyny. Drag queen characters are usually presented as envious of “real” women and, therefore, unable to establish any relationships with them. Georgette is repulsed by the idea that one of her friends, Goldie, lives with a woman, even if she is treated like a servant: “Rosie had always been more than taken for granted—she had never been thought of. Not even as a demented human, but as a scooper: someone to scoop up the empties; to buy the bennie; to meet the connection” (66). Another example of the queens’ misogyny is when a pregnant sister of one of Georgette’s girlfriends arrives at their party and her waters break—the queens are disgusted, calling the woman a “dirty slut” and a “filthy whore,” yelling to “get her out,” no one wanting to help her (76-78). They are only worried that the incident might ruin their chance of having sex with Vinnie and his friends.

Similarly, Miss Destiny and her friends see women as rivals and, therefore, despise them. When Destiny had a relationship with Chuck, she was extremely jealous of a neighbor who used to walk around her apartment in her underwear: “But I fixed that!... I nailed the damn windowshades so no one can look at that cunt anymore” (105). Furthermore, Destiny gets furious when the narrator and two other hustlers pick up three girls to “prove their masculinity” (120). When they get back, she starts yelling at them: “You know whats the crazy matter with you, all of you? Youre so dam gone on your own damselves you have to hang around queens to prove youre such fine dam studs, and the first dam cunt that shows, you go lapping over her like hot dam dawgs!” (120). However, this is not the only portrayal of relationships between queens and biological women to be found in Rechy’s novel. In the final part he introduces Sylvia, a bar owner who repents for her sin of throwing her queer son out of her home by acting as a mother figure to the local queens and hustlers. Her bar is a safe space where everyone in need can get help—be it food, medical help, a place to sleep or simply a good word. When she firsts introduces herself to the narrator, one of the queens says that “she’s a real darling” (319). She has unwavering authority and the queens depend on her whenever they get into trouble. When one of the queens loses consciousness, her friend goes straight to Sylvia: “I Just Didn’t Know What To Do!—except to run to you as fast as I could!” (330). This portrayal definitely shows the issue of queens’ relationships with women from a whole new perspective, making room for meaningful connections and questioning the misconception that drag queens are necessarily misogynistic.

In both novels, the environment plays a major role in the formation of the characters. In *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Selby sets out to provoke traditional, middle-class readers by addressing issues which previously were “ignored or, perhaps worse, distorted or even glamorized”—the lives of the members of such “repressed” subcultures like prostitutes, street gangs, homosexuals, or drug addicts (Giles, *Understanding* 11). His novel is filled with descriptions of gruesome violence and there is no sign of hope for any of his characters. However, as some critics have suggested, Selby’s characters cannot be entirely blamed for their condition. Giles states that “the people of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* are victimized by the cruel environment in which they are trapped” (*Understanding* 13). Similarly, Lane argues that “Selby’s characters [are] dumped into an ashcan environment which perverted their drives towards love and pride and achievement” (303). Selby’s deeply flawed portrayals, therefore, do not serve as a critique of the lower classes who engage in despicable actions, but rather of the society that allows this to happen.

In *City of Night*, the influence of the environment on the characters is not as manifest but equally important. John Rechy has been a dedicated advocate for gay rights from the beginning of his career. *City of Night* may seem to represent the author’s ambivalence about his orientation; after all, the narrator never admits that he is homosexual and claims to engage in gay sex only for money. However, the openness with which Rechy describes the homosexual world, unprecedented at the time the book was published, clearly offsets the narrator’s struggle with his sexuality (Goshert 12; Moon 48; Giles, “Religious Alienation” 379). What is more, Rechy studies the limits to homosexual identities and emphasizes their performativity. His narrator feels like an outsider both in the heterosexual mainstream and in the homosexual communities because he does not fit into any of the “accepted” roles. As John Goshert points out, “gay culture often reinforced and legitimated the injurious roles into which it was cast by dominant prejudices, and did so at the expense of its revolutionary potential” (12). The source of the oppression, which greatly limits Rechy’s characters’ ability to find fulfillment, is, therefore, identified in the mainstream’s animosity towards homosexual people.

Finally, according to Silberman, drag queens’ transgressions entail punishment at the end of their stories (184). The very title of the chapter about Georgette, “The Queen is Dead,” foreshadows her tragic fate. Her story is thoroughly sad with no hope, at any point, for a happy ending. Her biggest dream is to finally be loved by Vinnie and it is clear from the beginning that it is never going to happen, as he is only playing with her, enjoying her unlimited devotion. At the end of the story, Vinnie has sex with one of the queens and then lets Georgette “do him” but without any sign of affection (86). Georgette struggles to rationalize it, but it proves to be too difficult. She shoots herself up twice with morphine and leaves the party. Her last moments are described by her stream of consciousness which shows how desperately she craves love:

O yes my darling, I do I do. I love you. Love you O d'Amore. O see how the stars soften the sky. Yes, like jewels. O Vinnie, im so cold. Come, let us walk. *Sone Andati*. Yes my love, I hear him. Yes. He is blowing love. Love Vinnie... blowing love... no NO! O God no!!! Vinnie loves me. He loves me. It. Wasn't. Shit. (93)

Georgette's thirst for love is the most important feature that makes her a sympathetic character and her death so moving. As Giles notes, Selby presents "the deadening... consequences of living in the world that denies God and rejects love," and a character who "rejects a consuming hatred to pursue her quest for love" stands out as someone positive, even despite her serious flaws such as misogyny or drug addiction (*Understanding* 19). When Alan Vorda asked Selby in an interview whether "most readers should be sympathetic when Georgette is a weak-willed, speed freak-transvestite," the author replied: "It depends upon how well the reader communicates with themselves. If they insist upon denying that there is a bit of Georgette in them, then I guess they would have to attack Georgette just as Vinnie and Harry do. They weren't willing to accept that Georgette exists within you and me" (293).

Rechy spares Miss Destiny a tragic end by simply making her disappear. The narrator leaves Los Angeles for some time and when he returns, she is gone. He walks around asking old friends what happened to her, but everyone tells him a different story. Some people say that her dream of a "Fabulous Wedding" came true and she lives happily with a rich husband; others claim that she did get married but it all went wrong and she got arrested again. Finally, there are rumors that she was "cured": "she ain a queen no more, she has honest-to-jesus-gone-Christ turned *stud*, man!... she is getting married, man!—to a *real woman!*" (129). The narrator never learns what really happened to Miss Destiny, though the final words of the chapter express his hope and true affection for the larger-than-life queen: "I imagine Miss Destiny sitting lonesomely in Somewhere, Big City, America—carefully applying her makeup—and I think: *Oh Destiny, Miss Destiny! I don't know what's become of you, nor where you are—but that story Chuck just told me, as you yourself should be the first one to admit, is oh Too Much to believe!*" (129, original italics).

John Rechy's *City of Night* and Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* discuss the situation of gay people in a transitional moment. Even though homosexuals were more visible in the 1960s than ever before, this visibility was turned against them with the rise of homophobic media coverage. The Stonewall riots were still a few years away, but early activists were already working toward developing a sense of community among homosexual people. Both novels discussed in this article could be seen as examples of such early activism due to their sympathetic representations of drag queen characters. Some critics claim that Miss Destiny and Georgette are so flawed that it must be a sign of the authors' prejudice (Hoffman 201, Schaw 188, Silberman 180). It is true that both characters have a lot of shortcomings, but, as it has been argued in this article, these should be understood as a result of the influence

of the hostile environments the queens inhabit. They are surrounded by hostility and violence and still they choose to express themselves freely, which makes them appear more authentic than other characters in the respective novels. Despite all their flaws, they elicit the reader's sympathy, making him or her feel mournful after Georgette's death and hope that Miss Destiny's dream of a "Fabulous Wedding" comes true. I wish to argue that by creating such vibrant characters who not only stand out among others, but do so in a positive way, both Rechy and Selby wanted to show drag queens from a perspective that was new to the public. By doing that, they took risks, since it was still considered inappropriate to bring up the topics of homosexuality and gender identity in fiction. Both authors faced the consequences—Selby's novel was put on trial in England for obscenity (Giles, *Understanding* 3) and Rechy got the reputation of a "hustler-novelist" which made it difficult for him to be treated seriously in the literary world (Castillo and Rechy 113). These two examples of a revolutionary approach to the topic of gender identity from the pre-Stonewall period call for a re-appraisal of other literary works from that time whose subversive tone might have been overlooked. This could greatly improve our understanding of early homosexual activists by showing a greater variety of voices.

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Justyna Wierzchowska

## Imaging, Desiring, Remembering Home: Home as a Locus of Meaning in the Works of Mary Kelly

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**Abstract:** This article examines selected works by American visual artist Mary Kelly (b. 1941) through the category of the home. Home is theorized both as a physical structure, which shapes female subjects' identity and their life practice, and a profoundly conflicted symbolic site of struggle that allows for a renegotiation of the social contract. The article reads Kelly's early works, *Antepartum* (1973) and *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79), understanding home as a mytho-physical dwelling place, the mother's body, which the artist presents as ideologically interpellated and, at the same time, problematized by her own experience. Kelly's later work, *Interim* (1984-89), is discussed as juxtaposing received ideas concerning femininity with the voices of women who fail to fulfill them, and thus are rendered symbolically homeless. Symbolic homelessness seems also pivotal to the 1992 *Gloria Patri*, in which the artist exposes the cultural alienation of women who enter the military. The 1991 *Mea Culpa* and the 2001 *Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi* also take up the subject of cultural homelessness. Here, the artist addresses traumatic dimensions of military conflicts, which she understands as tightly connected to the victims' tattered or lost ethnic and national identity. In the 2005-07 *Love Songs*, Kelly changes her focus to envision home as a physical and semantic vessel for the 1970s women's movement voices, which, in her installation, are united by a transparent home-like structure. Finally, in the 2010-12 *Habitus*, co-authored by Ray Barrie, the artist returns to the subject of home, which, in this case, is profoundly disturbed by the lingering context of the Cold War. This article discusses Kelly's diverse uses of the home along the lines of art theory and feminist criticism (Nancy K. Miller, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva) in order to present their social and political implications. It understands home as evoking (utopian?) associations of eternal return or a desired horizon, towards which the spectators are encouraged to travel both through their memory-work and life-activism.

**Keywords:** Mary Kelly, feminist art, home, cultural homelessness, *Post-Partum Document*, *Interim*, *Gloria Patri*, *Mea Culpa*, *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi*, *Habitus*

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The American artist Mary Kelly is most recognized for her 1973-79 *Post-Partum Document*, a project-based installation that documents the first six years of her son's life. It has become a classic of second-wave feminist art, along with Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* and Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. The artist, however, has produced a vast body of work which revolves around several themes. Most notably, in her artistic practice, Kelly addresses war trauma, historical memory and the mother-child relationship, with a particular focus on the symbolic alienation of the

female/child subject and the complex, processual character of the subject formation. The artist creates large-scale installations that allow her to take up and transgress received narrative and aesthetic frameworks by employing experimental means of expression.<sup>1</sup> In accord with Audre Lorde's claim that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (112), Kelly takes advantage of the inconsistencies, contradictions and silent areas of the dominant discourse and undermines them on various planes: the narrative, the visual, and in the mode of execution. All these are her agents in an attempt to create a representational space that problematizes and fashions women's and children's "negative entry into the symbolic" (Kelly in Tickner 464).

In her works, Kelly often clashes institutional discourse with personal stories of people who have been affected by political or cultural forces that are beyond their control. Kelly's exploration of the ways in which the "personal and the institutional interpenetrate one another" (Castonguay 157) is a multilayered process that produces a palpable sense of her subjects' symbolic alienation. In some cases, it is an effect of the very condition of a gendered and aged human condition, in others—a result of concrete political events that are responsible for their both physical and symbolic homelessness. In a strife for recognition, in Kelly's works, a personal experience is translated into the political, as "the voice of the individual bystander" becomes "a mirror to the broader forces of history" (Kelly in Myers). In this article, I focus on the ways in which Kelly's installations can be read with the category of symbolic homelessness<sup>2</sup> in mind and, at the same time, as an attempt to signal the possibility of a home, albeit ephemeral or even illusory. I want to suggest that, even though home may not be overtly present in every work, homeliness/homelessness are overarching reference points in Kelly's artistic practice. As I will demonstrate, Kelly's installations aim to affectively and cognitively engage the viewers, beckoning them into a critical enquiry of the existing social contract which produces and reproduces cultural exclusion.

An excellent case in point is the 2001 installation *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi*, which traces the links between language and national or ethnic identity. Its narrative is based on a 1999 report published in *Los Angeles Times* (Glover) about the separation of an infant boy from his Kosovo-Albanian family during the

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1 For a more detailed description of Kelly's artistic practice, go to: <http://www.marykellyartist.com/biography.html>.

2 In my use of the term "symbolic homelessness," I both underscore the alienating character of culture for women and make reference to Veronica Vivero and Sharon Jenkins' concept of "cultural homelessness." Vivero and Jenkins define cultural homelessness as "an individual's feelings of not belonging to any particular ethno-cultural group" and "not knowing where home is or how it feels," typical for individuals having early-life immersion in more than one culture (13). However, while Vivero and Jenkins refer to the difficulties in one's switching between the codes of culture by not being securely attached to any in particular, in my analysis of Kelly's work, I mean specifically women's alienation within the symbolic order.

Balkan war in the 1990s. First, Kastriot was found and renamed by the Serbian army, then, under NATO's occupation, he was renamed once more, to be finally reunited with his family and regain his original name. In Kelly's installation, the narrative telling the boy's story is printed on worn-out, compressed lint that runs in rhythmical waves around the gallery walls, two-hundred-feet long, forming a horizontal band.<sup>3</sup> As noted by Carmen Winant, "Kelly's use of lint—the residue of private, domestic and feminized chores" is a fitting vehicle that employs "her gendered experience" to "navigate and interpret the relationship between historical and linguistic memory." By superimposing a straight line of printed text on a delicate, fluctuating, weary material, Kelly clashes the singularity of the individual with the automatism of the institutional. What is more, the very choice of an ephemeral material signals the way in which large-scale military conflicts invade and tragically affect the lives of individual civilians, pushing them not only out of their homes, but literally—out of their identity. This powerful clash of the institutional and the individual makes *The Ballad* both intimate and epic, as the lost home is but indexed in the rhythmical waves of worn-out lint. This way, the lint becomes a powerful metaphor for the home's fragile yet basic sustainability.

Earlier on, in 1999, Kelly had employed a similar strategy in another installation titled *Mea Culpa*. The work consists of five parts: *Phnom Pehn 1975*, *Buenos Aires 1976*, *Beirut 1982*, *Sarajevo 1992*, and *Johannesburg 1997*, each telling a story of women and children's abuse that was reported to the War Crimes Tribunal. As in *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi*, the domestic is overtly present in the typescripts of the stories, which are printed on lint stretched wide around the gallery walls in framed glass-cases. Here again, the lint can be read as an allegory of a lost home, represented as a semitransparent background, distant and suppressed, yet constituting the very foundation that makes the stories possible. Since the victims' stories both involve an institutionalized procedure of testifying and at the same time present personal stories of mourning, the worn-out lint implies the victims' awareness of the irreversibility of their losses. As pointedly noted by Holland Cotter, the use of "compressed lint produced by drying laundered black clothing—thousands of pounds of it—in a domestic dryer" suggests the figure of a "woman repeatedly washing and rewashing mourning clothes without being able to cleanse them of histories woven indelibly into their fabric" ("Art in Review") and thus explicitly indexes mourning. Viewed this way, the wave-shaped lint, printed over with a perfect lined-up font, visually indexes the clash between the victims' private yet institutionalized testimonies and their singular reminiscence of what has been lost.

However, lint is also connected with healing. It is what is put over a wound to cleanse it and absorb blood, to insulate it from the outside and keep it sterile from retraumatization. Writing on lint, then, can be understood as a therapeutic process, wherein the narrative is inscribed on a material which is woven. The process of

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3 In an interview by Maria Walsh, Kelly explains the monumentality of the lint-washing procedure. The artist recounts: "The lint casting process for this work took over six months and 10,000 pounds of weight of washing to finish" ("Corpus").

weaving brings to mind Nancy K. Miller's idea of arachnology where the act of writing is "a signature of a gendered subjectivity" (Beizer 14). Thus, the victims' narratives, disciplined by the regimented order of the printed text, welcome a search for "the embodiment in writing" and a recovery "within representation the emblem of [their] construction" (Miller 272). The lint points to the speakers' home-related psychic resources that make their story telling possible. At the same time, since lint is among the most basic medical aids, it also implies provisional treatment in makeshift conditions (open field hospital? military conflict?), with a very limited access to medical resources: a situation in which one is doing their best, yet they cannot do much. The choice of lint as "the embodiment in writing" may be indicative then of the limited agency of women and children (as well as their physical homelessness) during wartime from which they come to testify.

On a more general plane, lint welcomes other domestic metaphors. On the one hand, Kelly's employment of a permanently stained material suggests a Biblical reading of a stain of guilt that can never be washed out. On the other, Kelly's use of lint engages with the metaphor of life cycle, as, no matter what happens, "there is always washing to be done" (Walsh). This metaphor, on the most down-to-earth level, is informed by lint's connotative attachment with deromanticized domesticity: the daily routine and the tedious, repetitive manual work involved in home-making. These largely undervalued activities, made possible by the infallible womanly presence, are very often taken for granted to such extent that they are unacknowledged. Yet, in fact, they sustain life in the most basic dimension.

*The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi* and *Mea Culpa* are but two installations in which Kelly clashes the private and the institutional in order to interrogate the politics of the domestic and the public. In her early works, *Antepartum* (1973) and *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79), the artist focuses on another area of women's symbolic homelessness: the vastly invalidated mothering experience (cf. Rich; Kristeva; Irigaray, "Women-Mothers"; Bueskens 5-27).<sup>4</sup> In these two works, the primal home of the child—the mother's body—is understood as an affectively and semantically complex entity that until recently was one of the most severely repressed in Western culture (Kristeva; Walker). While *Antepartum*, which records a looped close-up shot of the artist's hands stroking her pregnant abdomen while the baby is kicking underneath, may seem structurally humble, *Post-Partum Document* is overtly robust in the thematic scope and the mixed-media execution. Employing elements of Lacanian psychoanalysis and other ideological interpellations of the maternal subject, the installation problematizes the gradual loosening up of the

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4 It needs to be noted that, especially in Kelly's early works, there is also a strong presence of the economic dimension of domesticity. For example, in *Nightcleaners* of 1975, the artist makes overt references to "domestic labor," "sexual division of labor" and its effects on "the so-called services sector" (in Mulvey 33). When she discusses the injustice of women's condition, she notes that this injustice is "subtly sustained in the home through the naturalization of the woman's role in child care" ("Introduction" xviii).

mother-child's dyad in the context of domesticity. Here, the culturally established "motherhood as institution" (cf. Rich) is juxtaposed with the much inarticulate expression of the mother's lived experience, which is vastly reduced to the private area of the home. In one of the captions, Kelly merges the idea of the home with the idea of the maternal subject, as the mother asks: "What will I do?... when [my son] starts school... when he grows up... when he leaves *home*... when he leaves *me*..." ("Preface" 57, emphasis mine). The artist notes that this existential motherly lamentation over the gradual break-up of the mother-child dyad "continually transgresses the system of representation in which it is founded" (57). By expressing the mother's anxiety over the necessity to restructure herself once the child leaves home, the artist points to a universal yet singular experience of every mother who is challenged to remake her own sense of the self *vis-à-vis* the evolving relationship with her child. On a more general plane, *Post-Partum Document* highlights the temporal character of any home, which, under any circumstances, will eventually be lost. Thus, what Simon Schama has called "the womb and tomb" quality of the non-representational art of Mark Rothko (*Simon Schama's Power of Art*), finds an embodied, yet universal, expression in Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*.

Interestingly for this article, *Post-Partum Document*, an installation which documents a profoundly embodied interaction between the mother and the child, forecloses any image of the body.<sup>5</sup> By the complete removal of the mother's image, Kelly seems to point to two interrelated dilemmas that can also be approached through the lens of the domestic. First of all, the artist underscores the difficulty of the mother to feel "at home" in a culture which reduces her to an idealized institution and an impossible body (cf. Rich; Kristeva; Thurer; Douglas and Michaels). This coupling has a profound bearing on the cultural functioning of the maternal body, both on the physical and the symbolic plane. As *Post-Partum Document* makes clear, the representational fraud concerning the maternal body poses a significant problem for the mother's own sense of her body. Simply put, the maternal body, which is everybody's primal home, is itself not at home in culture. To highlight this profound difficulty, Kelly makes *Post-Partum Document* thoroughly kaleidoscopic: full of twinkling, multi-discursive exhibits that elude a unifying interpretation and point to the problematics generated by the cultural renditions of the maternal body. The artist states:

I am less concerned with prescribing the absence of the woman's body as image than with problematizing its presence.... [T]he process of disturbing that presence is displaced onto modes of spectatorship: the fragmentation of the visual field, the imposition of a temporal sequence, the intrusion of peripheral vision, the ephemeral effect of light, and... the physical presence of the viewer in the installation. ("Introduction" xxiv)

5 I analyze the absence of the maternal body in *Post-Partum Document* in more detail in "Narrating Motherhood as Experience and Institution: Experimental Life-Writing in Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79)," *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 50.2-3 (2015).

Kelly's strategy of slivering the maternal body into multiple incongruous interruptions quick-sands the viewer into the mother's symbolic homelessness of her lived experience. At the same time, this strategy effectively signals the existence of a domestic sphere that disturbs the cultural renditions of the maternal body, presenting the mother's interaction with her child. By displaying in the gallery space visual-narrative images of the mother-child early engagement, which is aimed to affect the viewers, the artist beacons them into a bodily participation in the culturally underrecognized area of early mothering.

In her later works, Kelly further ponders at the problem of women's homelessness within culture. Broadening her scope, in *Interim* (1984-89), the artist focuses on other areas of women's cultural alienation, connected with their age, limited agency and the performative character of "womanhood." The installation consists of four parts: *Corpus* (Body), *Pecunia* (Money), *Historia* (History), and *Potestas* (Powers). Each of them deals with a particular discourse on womanhood that produces and alienates women. For example, in *Corpus*, women's first person narratives address the question of ageing, as represented in various cultural domains. Each narrative is presented on a set of six panels, each titled after late-nineteenth century's Jean-Martin Charcot's categorization of hysterical women. The sets include: *Extase* (Ecstasy), *Menacé* (Threat), *Supplication* (Supplication), *Érotisme* (Eroticism) and *Appel* (Appeal). The way in which the women address the question of ageing clearly reflects the cultural renderings of womanhood: "[W]ell preserved... what to wear... like a man... surprised to catch a glimpse of myself as others see me... preoccupied with looking... being older... so hysterical... feel silly... everyone here so Goddam young... reduced to a voyeur... hate them..." (in Isaak 485). The narratives betray the speakers' anxiety over their failure to meet cultural expectations concerning womanhood and highlight their awareness of the objectifying gaze of others who may perceive them as misfits.

Other strategies employed by Kelly in *Interim* support the argument of ageing women's cultural homelessness. For example, the artist's employment of the nineteenth-century categorization of female hysterics underscores the durational character of the women's alienation in culture. What is more, the French and Latin terms she employs additionally enhance the impression that ageing women do not belong to the culture of here and now. Unlike Freud's hysterical patients, who produced their symptoms as a result of traumatic past events, Kelly's women focus on their age as the key reason for such symptoms, produced in a culture that worships young age. In their fifties or sixties, the women cease to be perceived as "women."<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, like in the already discussed *Antepartum* and *Post-Partum Document*, *Interim* also engages with the women's failure to successfully perform the culturally desired womanhood. Jo Anna Isaak notes:

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6 There is a wonderfully humorous comment by Kelly on the feminine displacement. She notes that "being a woman is only a brief period in one's life" (in Walsh).

If the mother who knows sexual pleasure... is the most severely repressed 'feminine' figure in Western culture, then the middle-aged woman runs a close second.... [The] middle age marks... the loss of the assumed [feminine] image, of not being the object of man's desire, of being out of sync with how one looks, of alienation from one's image. (485)

Alienated from their bodies that have been alienated in culture, middle-aged women produce hysterical symptoms. *Interim*' focus on hysteria is informed by Luce Irigaray's observations on the link between the hysteric and the institutional (1985). Kelly recalls the French scholar, noting that "the hysteric exposes the institution's fundamental misogyny... [and] signifies the exclusion of women from discourse" ("Re-presenting Body" 136). Excluded from discourse, hysterical women strive to communicate from an impossible site. Their agitation and inarticulate talk index, as Irigaray notes, "a hole in [the culture's] signifying economy" (in Isaak 485). Thus, *Interim*'s anxious statements by ageing women, who have thoroughly internalized the controlling gaze of others, express their deprivation of subjectivity and difficulty in establishing their own sense of agency.

What is more, home as a theme runs through other parts of *Interim* in more overt ways. In *Corpus*, the numerous female speakers evoke images of domesticity. One of them imagines herself as a Cinderella "rushing from the ball in a chauffeur-driven limousine," only to "walk home" wearing "rags and wooden shoes," once the clock strikes midnight (in Iversen, "Visualizing" 68). The speaker clashes Cinderella's courtly image with its domestic reverse, as the limo is exchanged for her own legs and the gown for tattered rags. Another woman, surveying a "prospective home that does not quite match her fantasized ideal," dreams of costly improvements that include a kitchen filled with "clean and shiny metallic surfaces" and equipped with "a granite counter, a porcelain sink, refrigerator, [and a] freezer" (71). This image of sterile perfection gives off an aura of "perverse pleasure" (71), evoking associations with the coolness and coldness of a hospital or, possibly, a morgue. Another image of domesticity is that of a woman who, in the absence of her husband, "cleans the Augean stables of their house," focusing in particular on "the toilet bowl and surrounds" (76). It is yet another image that deromanticizes domesticity, as the guardian of the hearth, instead of composing herself in a serene wait for her husband, is engaged in a compulsive yet futile cleaning process.

Clearly, all three home-related fantasies offer fundamentally flawed images of the home: it is either a home devoid of the culturally desired perfect housewife (the rugged Cinderella), or a home that stands as a deadly projection of the perfect housewife's dream (the expensive metallic surfaces of the kitchen), or a home that reveals the flip side of the perfect housewife's strife (the Augean stables of dirty toilets). Hardly reconciled, all three images render home a hostile place that bars women's agency, creativity and, eventually, their sense of being alive. These three debilitating images are radicalized by another, which overly detaches domesticity and creativity, going beyond the perfect-housewife imagery. The voice rhetorically asks "What counts?" and answers: "I'm afraid to say, [it] is not the book written

bravely in the midst of domestic chaos, but the one written in spite of it” (81). Clearly, in all four cases home is not only devoid of homeliness, but is thematized as oppressive, debilitating and utterly alienating.

*Gloria Patri* of 1992 focuses on another area where the woman is symbolically homeless. The installation “considers the consequences, for women, of adopting the masculine ideal, for instance, demanding the right to go to the front line and kill the enemy” (*Mary Kelly Artist*). Thus, in this case, the woman’s alienation is not connected to her age, but is experienced as a result of transgressing gender roles. The installation features shiny metallic shields, engraved with media reports on the war in Iraq. The shields both replicate and parody trophy-objects that are typically awarded for military acts of masculine bravery. In this project, Kelly specifically focuses on “the role of the state apparatus in forming subjectivity” (Castonguay 157) in women’s performing traditionally masculine military tasks. One of the shields reads:

First she made sure the thigh pads were in the right position, then she went into a funk.... [W]hy was she sweating even before she’d started? She despised it. Despised the woman-thing, the soft thing that severed her will before a hard thing, hard to do, hard to touch, hard to understand like the machine in front of her.... Yes, fast and hardheaded, she’d think in tough metaphors and eject tight sentences in stringent tones, change her hair, her clothes and her name. (Mary Kelly Artist)

The “masquerade of masculinity” structured through “the insignia of battle” (Bhabha 99, 90) requires women to embrace the ideal of hard-bodied physicality and emotional restraint.<sup>7</sup> The body becomes part of a totality, “the troop machine made up of soldiers” (Iversen, “Mary Kelly” 190), or a fractal-like structure restricted by geometric shapes and straight lines of synchronized units (190-192).<sup>8</sup> Since femininity has traditionally functioned as the reverse of masculinity, women’s conforming to the masculine ideal is always problematic. As *Gloria Patri* makes clear, in the case of women soldiers, the necessary masculinization of the body translates, at least partially, into their alienation and displacement.

Finally, two more recent works, the 2005-07 *Love Songs* and the 2010-12 *Habitus*, make a more literal use of the home, as both feature home-like structures, employed in symbolic and material senses. In *Love Songs*, Kelly envisions home as a physical, semantic and affective vessel for the 1970s women’s movement voices,

7 Two books that discuss such masculinity are Susan Jeffords’ *Hard Bodies* and Yvonne Tasker’s *Spectacular Bodies*, both underscoring the bodily excess and grotesqueness of hard masculinity in the 1980s American visual culture.

8 Mary Kelly refers to Klaus Theweleit’s *Male Fantasies*, where Theweleit describes the aesthetics of protofascist organizations through the categories of totality, the machine, and a formation of a collective exoskeleton. While today’s combat does not involve such specular excess of multiple-bodied spatial formations, the infallibility of an individual working in synchro with others is still absolutely crucial.

which in her installation are united by a semitransparent home-like structure. In the words of the artist, similar to parts of *Interim*, *Love Songs* celebrates the “moment of political misrecognition that constructed the unquestioned unity of feminism” (“Introduction” xxv). This celebration is, however, tinted with nostalgia for a more stable sense of belonging and a more permanent collective home. Importantly, this longing for a communal home is present both in the statements of the second-wave makers and in the voices of younger women, who know the movement only by proxy. The façades of the home-like read, for example:

Everyone had a voice.... The most transformative moment of my life.... What I liked about the women’s group was being able to form my own ideas, and be with friends.... I finally felt connected to something that made personal as well as political sense.... It just seemed right.... We pushed on because we were full of passion.... The high point for me was being with other women and knowing we were part of something bigger than ourselves.... I remember thinking, WOW, a women’s group, a women’s anything! (Mary Kelly Artist)

Significantly, the illuminated from within, green-house-like structure—light and semitransparent—suggests associations with growth (growth of ideas, of transgenerational connectedness), coziness, warmth and being welcome. It emanates a sense of nostalgic, or even melancholic optimism, as the homeliness it promises is still largely declarative and elusive.

The inclusiveness of *Love Songs* stands in stark contrast to *Habitus*. Made in collaboration with Ray Barrie, this installation holds less promise, as it recounts memories of the generation born during, or just after, World War II. *Habitus* is comprised of two structures, titled *Type I* and *Type II*. The first one is based on the Anderson Shelter, the second—on the Morrison Shelter. Both shelters were mass-produced for home use during air raids in Britain, and later their popularity persisted during the Cold War. Since they were obvious and indispensable elements of people’s dwelling places, Kelly has described them as “an extension of domestic space” (in Walsh).

Both *Type I* and *Type II* offer a profoundly unsettling idea of the home, as they merge conventional domesticity with a pre-emptive materialization of a possible nuclear annihilation. In *Type I*, the roof is perforated with texts that are legible only by looking from below, as “the mirror’s effect forcibly maneuvers its viewers underground” (Myers). In *Type II*, the table is covered with conversations that hover over the sleeping space. Holly Myers notes: “Between the visual reverberation of the sometimes wrenching text and the anthropomorphic scale of the structures, which are just big enough to contain a family, the works leave one with a palpable sense of the personal dimension (physical as well as emotional) of geopolitical anxiety” (“Review”). Modeled on actual British shelters, *Habitus* mocks the “my house is my castle” maxim, as it features a perforated shelter—an ultimate oxymoron. What is more, by forcing the viewers to go inside, it welcomes an up-to-date reflection on

the ambivalence of the home. As Dora Apel notes, home, understood “as a protective sanctuary,” in some areas of the world, “has shrunk considerably, narrowing down private space to absurd proportions in portable and nomadic technologies, such as the gas masks” (39). What is more, both *Love Songs* and *Habitus* point to the ultimate ambivalence of the wall that separates the inside from the outside. Either semitransparent or perforated, in both installations, the walls are screens for a two-way traffic that index constant negotiation and a possible threat, welcoming readings through Derrida’s notion of hostipitality (3-18).

In my overview of Mary Kelly’s art, I have aimed to demonstrate the ways in which homeliness/homelessness are operative in her works. In her installations, home can be read as a powerful driving force that promotes a social change, either by exposing the alienating character of domesticity within contemporary culture, or by phantasmatically representing symbolic plenitude and existential comfort associated with the idea of the home, or by exposing the ambivalence surrounding domesticity. Even if only fantasized, such representations may be instrumental in making the unrecognized visible. They allow one to imagine a new reality, made up of more equal subjects, once the present areas of alienation have been socially and politically renegotiated. The many installations that Kelly has produced make this home imaginable, even if not concretely defined. These new possibilities are what the spectators are prompted to engage with, both through their memory work and through their recognition of the areas of cultural homeliness in the contemporary world.

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Jacek Partyka

## Between Nostalgia and Self-Hatred: The Problem of Identity in Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*

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**Abstract:** Drawing on theoretical works by Stuart E. Rosenberg, Sander L. Gilman and Svetlana Boym, the article reconsiders Cynthia Ozick's diptych *The Shawl* as an instance of narrative that problematizes the notion of Jewishness in the twentieth century in the USA and pre-WW II Poland. It is argued that the key concepts of nostalgia and self-hatred offer a new perspective on the interpretation of a text that for almost forty years has been treated as a staple work in the canon of American Holocaust fiction.

**Keywords:** American Jewish identity, assimilation, the Holocaust, nostalgia, Jewish self-hatred

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In the present article I argue that the concepts of nostalgia and self-hatred offer so-far-poorly explored interpretive keys to Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*, the diptych about Rosa Lublin, "a madwoman and a scavenger" (13), that since its publication has attracted huge interest from commentators and literary critics, and whose secure status as a staple work in the canon of American Holocaust fiction is not questioned today. Particularly, it is my intention to demonstrate that the workings of nostalgia and self-hatred (the former sentiment being at the same time re-invigorating and deleterious, soothing and infuriating) are represented in Ozick's short narrative as originating from three distinct, yet not always unrelated sources: from the yearning for the time before the trauma of the Holocaust, the incident of rape and the death of Rosa's child, and—notably—from the confusion concerning her ethnic identity. As the last element on this list has been, in my opinion, notoriously misread and unnecessarily turned into a didactic/moralizing agenda by Jewish-American literary critics, it is given due prominence in my analysis so as to suggest yet another interpretation of *The Shawl* and, perhaps, to slightly weaken the book's rigid classification as a Holocaust text *per se*. Although prompted and inspired both by Svetlana Boym's reconsideration of nostalgia and Sander L. Gilman's seminal study of the notion of Jewish self-hatred, my interpretive strategy is not dogmatically restricted to any specific theoretical perspective—instead, it entails taking issue with the arguments advanced in selected criticism on Ozick's prose, and, more importantly, it encompasses a brief sketch of the situation of Jews in the USA in the twentieth century and Polish Jews in pre-WW II Poland as necessary contextual prerequisites to understanding the predicament of the exiled Holocaust survivor depicted in *The Shawl*, in particular her conflicted identity.

Throughout history, the bonds or even elected affinities between Jews and America have sometimes assumed truly curious forms. They have entailed, as Michael P. Kramer has it, “the various ways Jews in America tried to make sense of America’s place in Jewish history and the place of the Jews in America” (16). If we regard both cultural traditions together, we may note that to a certain extent they are informed by exactly opposite tendencies. Namely, while the history of the United States, especially from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, reveals at its core consistent efforts to estrange the fledgling nation and its culture from the enslaving bonds with the Old World, Jewish tradition—a portable homeland—equally strongly revolves around the issue of continuity, and advocates the preservation of links with the past. Apparently then, the mindset prevailing in America in the period under consideration did not provide conducive circumstances for the development of Jewish communities in so rigid a form as was possible, say, in pre-WW II Poland. The point of the alleged convergence between the history of America and the history of diasporic Jews is symbolically encapsulated and arbitrarily interpreted in Emma Lazarus’ sonnet “1492”:

Thou two-faced year, Mother of Change and Fate,  
 Didst weep when Spain cast forth with flaming sword,  
 The children of the prophets of the Lord,  
 Prince, priest, and people, spurned by zealot hate.  
 Hounded from sea to sea, from state to state,  
 The West refused them, and the East abhorred.  
 No anchorage the known world could afford,  
 Close-locked was every port, barred every gate.  
 Then smiling, thou unveil’dst, O two-faced year,  
 A virgin world where doors of sunset part,  
 Saying, “Ho, all who weary, enter here!  
 There falls each ancient barrier that the art  
 Of race or creed or rank devised, to rear  
 Grim bulwarked hatred between heart and heart! (Lazarus)

In 1492, after the long-awaited re-conquest of Muslim Iberia by Christian kingdoms, the Alhambra Decree ultimately sanctioned hostility against Jews who had been living in enclaves in Muslim Iberian cities, ordering them to leave the territories of the Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. Emma Lazarus, herself a descendant of Sephardic Jews, elaborates on this coincidence between the expulsion of her ancestors and the discovery of America. In a powerful rhetorical gesture, the plight of perennial outcasts and the emergence of what was soon to become a desired haven for immigrants are locked in a seemingly necessary correlation ordained by Fate. Thus, the poet re-makes American mythology as being marked by the Jewish spirit—the tale of American origins begins with Jews. Lazarus’ thinking is by no means unique. Displaying an analogical mindset, Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785–1865), a diplomat, journalist, playwright, and a significant figure in nineteenth-century

Jewish American history, who is remembered as of one the first Jewish dramatists in America (authoring *She Would Be a Soldier* in 1819), became famous for his utopian, visionary project that anticipated modern Zionism. Deeply convinced that America was not a place of exile like any other but one destined as a milestone on the way to reaching the promised land, he attempted to purchase Grand Island in the Niagara River, near Buffalo, as an autonomous territory for Jews who wished to be later relocated to Palestine. Making use of the associations his surname evoked, he called the planned colony “Ararat.” Even his “ambitious” research into the origins of the American Indians—a truly outstanding instance of utterly misdirected efforts, flamboyantly entitled *Discourse on the Evidences of the American Indians Being the Descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel* (1837)—stemmed from his “best” intentions to highlight links between American and Jewish history.

The doubleness inscribed in the fact of being an American Jew finds illustrative expression in the architectural design of Touro Synagogue, the oldest synagogue building still standing in the United States, and the oldest surviving Jewish synagogue building in North America. It neatly conveys the Jewish sense of vulnerability. Namely, it looks like a simple colonial building, not displaying any religious symbols, and a passer-by would not presume it a sacred space. You are a Jew inside the premises, an American when you leave it. But sometimes the sense of the vulnerability of Jews in America would give way to the desire of newcomers (or of descendants of newcomers) to appropriate (and even discursively conquer) the host culture. One of the most profound (and radical) formulations of the “sense of America’s place in Jewish history and the place of the Jews in America” came in 1916 from Louis Brandeis, an Associate Justice on the US Supreme Court, who—himself a Zionist—propagated the idea of perceiving Palestine as the *extension* of the American Dream.

The question of whether, after several generations on the American soil, American Jews have retained any fixed identity and ethnic/cultural distinctiveness may appear unacceptably reductive in its implied attempt to squeeze a natural “richness” into a clear-cut, all-encompassing formula. The problem’s complexity stems from the fact that Jews, being proverbial “wanderers,” were historically fated to operate (in a significant part) in a diasporic context, as well as from the very nature of America itself—a melting pot of nations, where, for the Ashkenazi and the Sephardic, cultural patterns of adaptability were understood differently than in Europe, and where practically every newcomer was confronted with the monolithic cultural hegemony hidden in the federalist motto “E Pluribus Unum.” Nevertheless, if we take into consideration, for example, the historical and contemporary notions of American Jewishness within American society, as well as the fields of Jewish American Studies, or Jewish American Culture and Literature within the world of academia, it turns out that they are still spaces of definable processes and phenomena, of exploration, and of constantly updated critical reflection.

In 1985, Stuart E. Rosenberg made a fundamental distinction between two variants of American Jewish identity, or better: the two most prevalent ways of

defining the term, which were noticeable throughout the twentieth century (ix-xiv). The “classical” definition, which was inspired by the observations of the sociologist Seymour M. Lipset, and which—allegedly—remained valid until the 1960s, assumes that while in America Jews were driven by the conscious or unconscious wish to be accommodated within the host society and culture; therefore, in most individual and group cases, their behavior was subordinated to the principle “the less Jewish, the more American.” Particularly, the “classical” view recognizes the strength of institutional pressure—most palpable at the dawn of the previous century—to turn the USA into an undifferentiated culture, i.e. *without* subgroup loyalty and *with* a universal educational system). In 1894, Theodore Roosevelt had no doubts whatsoever that

the man who does not become Americanized nevertheless fails to remain a European, and becomes nothing at all. The immigrant cannot possibly remain what he was, or continue to be a member of the Old-World society. If he tries to retain his old language, in a few generations it becomes a barbarous jargon; if he tries to retain his old customs and ways of life, in a few generations he becomes an uncouth boor. (“True Americanism”)

Consequently, the notion of “Americanization” was prevalent in the media and public, political, and social discourse at the turn of the nineteenth century and during the following decades, when immigration was a serious social issue in the USA. The contention that emerged as a result was one between the “eugenics” argument and the “ethical obligation” to welcome immigrants. Later, and not without significance, was the impact of the radical left in the 1930s, which would take it for granted that all language, ethnic and religious barriers within American society were of lesser importance than the differentiations of social and economic class. Rosenberg sees the aforementioned “survivalist” attitude as no longer applicable.

The beginnings of the second, “new,” formulation of Jewish American identity date back to the 1970s, i.e. to the time after the Vietnam war, and, perhaps more importantly, after the trailblazing rise of “Black Power,” which liberated the notion of *any* ethnicity from the apparently unavoidable associations with ghettoization and self-enclaving subgroups. At a time when America’s political greatness was seriously undermined, the model of centralized national patriotism (or citizenry) was gradually giving way to a new organizing pattern for a nation that had finally recognized itself as comprising numerous self-interested minorities. This “new” understanding of American Jewish identity sees the process of adaptation as dynamic and diverse, taking into account those elements of the host culture that over the years were accepted at face value, ignored, rebelled against, or transformed in the process. Particularly, the strategies of resistance and transvaluation may be instrumental in understanding the integrity of those Jews in America, who developed an ability to assimilate partly and, in consequence, to operate in two cultural spaces simultaneously.

The above, out of necessity sketchy, treatment of the way the notion of Jewishness developed (or, perhaps, the way it was looked at) in America in the twentieth century can be extrapolated as a springboard for a much more general reflection on the problem at hand. As I argue below, in the context of diaspora, Jewishness can often be seen as a rather cloudy identity label, defying as it does the rigid pigeonholes of ethnicity, religion, or culture. To exemplify the constructed nature of the term, I choose a piece of fiction (rather than a theoretical purview), which, in my opinion, synecdochically merges American and Eastern-European perspectives considered historically.

Published in book form in 1989 (the two stories comprising the slim volume appeared originally in *The New Yorker* in 1980 and 1983, respectively), Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* is a notable text in the history of American Holocaust fiction for at least two reasons: it introduces a female narrative perspective and, more importantly, brings up the issue of rape as part of the Holocaust tribulations. As Helene Sinnreich notes, forced prostitution and other forms of sexual abuse against Jewish women in the 1940s still constitute at most a marginal part of historical reflection (1). The official Nazi policy and propaganda codified a series of legal barriers that rendered close bonds between Jews and subjects of the Reich prohibited on penalty of hard labor. Introduced in 1935, the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor excluded the mixing of races through marriage, cohabitation, sexual relations and procreation. Theoretically then, Jewish women, considered as sub-humans, could not have been perceived as targets of sexual assault. There exists, however, a substantial body of evidence that wartime rape was a common occurrence, often committed in a planned way and on a large scale. Sexual exploitation was carried out in the Łódź ghetto; Jewish councils were asked to supply Jewish girls for German brothels in Warsaw and Vilnius; sexual orgies were almost a routine in a labor camp in Skarzysko-Kamienna and even in some concentration camps (Sinnreich 8-15). The problem had remained seriously under-explored for decades due to a certain gender prejudice in the field of Holocaust studies: it was assumed that letting "gendered histories" into a much broader historical narrative of the genocide would unnecessarily belittle the fact that the Nazi persecutions were directed at all the people of Jewish descent. Instances of rape had long been perceived as personal (and casual) experiences rather than part of the collective ordeal caused by a methodically applied plan of extermination. Not without significance was also the fact that an act of sexual aggression often plunges the victim into a state of overwhelming disgrace and leads to self-censorship. The raped women were often killed immediately after the assault, and those who survived often found themselves either unable to talk about the experience or stigmatized by family members. As a consequence, until the late 1990s Holocaust historiography and literature was marked by a predominantly male perspective, and sex crimes committed against Jewish women were often left out of the "standard" repertoire of victimization: mass murder in death camps, enforced labor and physical abuse in concentration camps, starvation in ghettos (Sinnreich 3-4). In the early 1980s, by deciding to focalize her narrative by a female Holocaust

survivor, Ozick contributed to the then-modest genre of women's Holocaust fiction, of which the most important and representative instances were Norma Rosen's *Touching Evil* (1969) and Susan Schaeffer's *Anya* (1974).

*The Shawl* unfolds in the settings of four different locations on both sides of the Atlantic—in Warsaw, in an unidentified Nazi concentration camp, in New York City, and in Miami, and assumes at least three time perspectives: the 1930s, the 1940s and the 1970s. And the choice of this narrative geography tellingly, succinctly and symbolically encapsulates the fate and predicament of the Jewry in the twentieth century. The doubleness of the protagonist, i.e. her (apparently) dual identity, is commensurate with the structure of the narrative, which ostensibly draws on number *two* as its fundamental building unit, doubling and pairing as it does places, situations, images and emotions. The settings are meant to be as representative as possible—one of the old centers of Yiddish culture (Warsaw), two major cores of the Jewish population living outside Israel (Miami and New York), and a place synecdochically standing for the disappearance of millions (the Nazi camp). The meaningful Jewish geography is also inscribed into the surname of the protagonist, “Lublin,” a Polish town with a long tradition of Jewish presence (over 60% of the population in the middle of the nineteenth century), often called “the Jewish Oxford,” as its once-famous yeshiva center attracted students from all over Europe, but also the site of *Wohngebiet der Juden*, the infamous ghetto, from which in 1942 30,000 people were deported to the Belzec extermination camp.

Rosa Lublin comes from a fully assimilated Jewish family, and the high social status of her parents, who consider themselves Poles “by right,” is consistently and strongly emphasized in the narrative—her father is the General Director of the Bank of Warsaw, and her mother is a poetry lover, “almost Japanese in her... refinement” (66). They are the owners of a four-floor house, the rooms of which are virtually crammed with thousands of books in various languages. “Cultivation, old civilization, beauty, history!” (66) permeate the place. Years after the war, the depiction of pre-war Poland that emerges from Rosa's nostalgic letters written in America in the 1970s makes it clear that she perceives her present life as a fiasco, a poor shadow of the one that had been “stolen” by the Nazis. The picture of Warsaw, for instance, is invariably saturated with a quasi-Edenic ambience, and seen through the lenses of nostalgia assumes, especially in the eyes of the Polish reader, the quality of an unreal city fused with an idyllic countryside: “Surprising turnings of the streets, shapes of venerable cottages, lovely aged eaves, unexpected and gossamer turrets, steeples, the gloss, the antiquity! Whoever speaks of Paris has never seen Warsaw” (21).

This devoted veneration of Polish culture is accompanied by a virtual cult of the Polish language—the only one Rosa feels at home in, both before the war and during her disgraceful (as she herself sees it) stay in America. Accordingly, switching into Polish is always the moment of being subject to a curative treatment in times of utmost despair, “An immersion into the living language: all at once this cleanliness, this capacity, this power to make a history, to tell, to explain. To retrieve,

to reprieve! To lie" (44). It is, however, interesting to note that while this fragment is evidently part of the protagonist's interior monologue, the narrative status of the last verb is not certain. We are not sure who adds the last problematic and contradictory verb ("to lie"), whether it is Rosa, or, perhaps, the omniscient narrator. Undoubtedly, however, the use of the Polish language seems to temporarily liberate Rosa from the oppressive context of her American exile, removing a "lock... from the tongue" (44) and triggering the working of nostalgia that, so is the implication, pushes the woman's thoughts into the regions of fabrication and mendacity.

In Ozick's narrative, the apparently marginal, almost accidental and insignificant mention of Julian Tuwim as an exemplary Polish man of letters and the embodiment of stylistic refinement in the Polish language—although absolutely agreeable in terms of the proposed valuation—produces a subtle overtone and ironically undercuts Rosa's nostalgic euphoria. The woman identifies herself as an able, fluent and competent user of Polish—indeed, the model reader of the admired poet's words: "In school she read Tuwim: such delicacy, such loftiness, such *Polishness*" (20). But the ironic seasoning that tinges this sentence hides in the fact that Tuwim, the allegedly quintessentially Polish writer, was an assimilated Jew with Polish citizenship. In the interwar period, he—an ardent supporter of Jewish assimilation—had to cope with anti-Semitic attacks, and as a dual individual who struggled with his problematic identity, was doomed to remain in the sphere of cultural "betweenness." Still, as a leading figure of "Skamander," a group of experimental poets, he managed to make it to the top, becoming a celebrity, and all his poems, songs, librettos and sketches were written in flawless, highly innovative Polish. (Admittedly, writers of Jewish origin significantly contributed to the radical modernization of the Polish literary idiom in the first decades of the twentieth century, e.g. Bolesław Leśmian's and Bruno Schulz's verbal dexterities have remained virtually unrivalled to date.) Similarly to the fictional Rosa, Tuwim experienced exile and became incurably nostalgic. In 1939, soon after the German invasion, he left Poland to live in Rio de Janeiro and New York City, where he composed his *Kwiaty polskie* (*Polish Flowers*), a long poem with a strong iambic rhythm (quite a feat in the poet's adopted mother tongue), which brims over with yearnings for the native land of long-gone childhood. Thus, Rosa's exalted yearnings for quintessential "Polishness" and her admiration of Tuwim keep her still—whether she is conscious of it or not—in the orbit of (hidden but still accompanying) Jewishness. The devotion to Polish is sharply contrasted with a manifest contempt toward Yiddish, which she soaks up in her childhood: "[h]er father, like her mother, mocked at Yiddish" (21). Accordingly, one of the streets of pre-war Warsaw emerges from her memories as a place of off-putting otherness: "bitter ancient alley, dense with stalls, cheap clothes strung on outdoor racks, signs in jargoned Yiddish" (20). That certainly is *not* the Warsaw of those who, like the family of Lublin, strive for "aristocratic sensibility" (21). Rosa and her parents manifest their fears of marginalization, probably shared by other assimilated Jews of pre-war Poland, and of being considered outsiders among the "rightful" inheritors of Polish culture.

What is conspicuous by its absence in *The Shawl*, particularly from the point of view of the Polish reader, is the fact that there is no mention of the waves of anti-Semitic feelings and attitudes that swept through Poland in the interwar period. The whole complexity of Polish-Jewish relations within the borders of one shared state is locked in the irony of the laconic conviction that “[i]n Poland there used to be justice” (43). Yet, as is commonly known, the “Jewish question” was an important and galvanizing issue at the time Poland regained its political independence. The citizens of Jewish origin “were still the main Other... but this otherness was no longer primarily religious or caste-based or even cultural. Instead, it had become political and ideological” (Hoffman 169). The 1921 national census recorded almost 3 million Jews, which was approximately 10.5% of the whole population (Zamojski 85). But although they were, like all other non-Polish minority groups, officially guaranteed protection by the “Little Treaty of Versailles,” the law was not efficient and later, after the death of Piłsudski, became purely superficial. Various forms of discrimination included those related to language matters:

A 1927 law requiring artisans to pass a formal examination of technical competence laid down that their proficiency in the Polish language be tested as well. The law confronted them with an obstacle that relatively few among them were in a position to overcome and did nothing in practice to accelerate the spread of the Polish language in the Jewish population, a natural process that needed no formal machinery to promote it. (Vital 769)

An overtly anti-Semitic agenda was espoused by the right-wing National Democracy, according to whom Jewishness was not merely foreign but intrinsically inimical to the so-called Polish spirit, and the separation of Jews in the domain of Polish culture was further strengthened by the policy of *numerous clausus*, by means of which the number of Jewish students at Polish universities was kept at the desired, i.e. low level.

Shown in the book as an unlikable character, Rosa is a self-hating Jew and an anti-Zionist, whose obsessive dedication to becoming an integral part of Polish society is brutally thwarted by the Nazi occupation, confinement in the ghetto and, later, in a concentration camp. In October 1940, all the Jews in Warsaw and its suburbs are ordered to relocate into a walled area. Soon, the Warsaw Ghetto, initially covering 3.5 square km, has to accommodate about 400,000 inhabitants. For the Lublin family that is the end of their long-cherished social and class status they were so proud of. The necessity of wearing brassards with the yellow Star of David, a visible sign—a brand—of belonging to the despised ethnic group, and life in a shared squalid room lead to outrage and disgust:

[I]magine confining *us* with teeming Mockowicz and Rabinowicz and Persky and Finkelstein, with all their bed-smelling grandfathers and their hordes of feeble children!... We thought they didn't know how to organize themselves in adversity, and besides that, we were furious:

because the same sort of adversity was happening to *us*... we were furious because we had to be billeted with such a class, with all these Jew peasants worn out from their rituals and superstitions, phylacteries on their foreheads sticking up so stupidly, like unicorn horns, every morning. And in the most repulsive slum, deep in slops and vermin and a toilet not fit for the lowest criminal. (66-67)

However, even within the confines of the walls there regularly appears a visible reminder of their former life—a streetcar meant for Poles commuting through the ghetto. The exceptional character of this transit line lies in the fact that it trespasses the forbidden area within which a special permit is required. A means of public transport arrives from *beyond*, from the other world, highlights the situation of “separateness,” and underlines an important spatial context for the story: “The most astounding thing was that the most ordinary streetcar, bumping along on the most ordinary trolley tracks, and carrying the ordinary citizens going from one section to another, ran straight into the place of our misery. Every day, and several times a day, we had these witnesses” (68). The repetition of “ordinary” is obsessive. Rosa, a by-stander, a hopeless observer, a vicarious Pole, is cut off from the sphere of the “ordinary” by the force of the Nazi decree. Significantly, one figure behind the window flitting by catches her attention for a while: it is a woman holding a shopping bag with a head of lettuce sticking out of the top. For a brief moment, Rosa becomes “the woman with the lettuce” (69). The sentiment is fueled not only by—understandable in such a situation—physical hunger, but also by a painful nostalgia for her stolen identity. It can be argued, as Gilman (1) does, that considered historically, Jewish self-hatred, i.e. reluctance to openly manifest one’s Jewishness, was an effect of anti-Semitism—the most flabbergasting and extreme reaction of some of the members of Jewish diasporic communities to the hostility surrounding them. This paradoxical phenomenon can be explained in psychological and social terms as occurring between any minority (outsiders) living within a dominating group (insiders). “Self-hatred results from outsiders’ acceptance of the mirage of themselves generated by their reference group—that group in society which they see as defining them—as reality” (Gilman 2). In a situation of sanctioned persecution, members of the downtrodden community can develop a somewhat *schizophrenic* strategy that consists in recognizing exclusionary practices and offensive labels as justified, but only if applied to a certain group *within* the oppressed. This, in turn, establishes the degrees of being stigmatized; there were, for instance, different kinds of Jews in pre-war Poland: more or less orthodox, more or less assimilated, and more or less alienated from Polish culture. Apparently, in Ozick’s prose, the stigmatization of Polish Jews leads to Rosa’s re-writing of the family history by hiding all possible Semitic traces in the customs and tastes of the family members, and by the cultivated habit of frowning upon everything that is associated with Jewishness. At the same time, however, the Lublin family’s hatred of Jews (or, in fact, their self-hatred) is not fully explored in the novella, and it remains unclear whether the sentiment is a psychological defense mechanism developed in a hostile surrounding, or whether

it results from the family having naturally merged into the fabric of Polish society, culture and language.

Before deportation to a concentration camp, Rosa is raped (apparently in a brothel for Nazi officers) and conceives a child, Magda. Wrapped in the eponymous “shawl,” the baby accompanies her mother behind the barbed wire, where as a substitute for nourishment, desperately trying to placate the baby’s hunger, Rosa gives her the linen shawl to chew on. In what Lawrence L. Langer refers to as the “Ur-moment” of the narrative (142), a concentration camp guard kills Magda by forcefully hitting her against the electrified fence. The witnessing of the killing is rendered against a backdrop of silence: “so she took Magda’s shawl and filled her own mouth with it, stuffed it in and stuffed it in, until she was swallowing up the wolf’s screech and tasting the cinnamon and almond depth of Magda’s saliva; and Rosa drank Magda’s shawl until it dried” (10). The mother’s reaction is reduced to silence, which from now on is inextricably woven into Rosa’s trauma. Thus, trauma and silence begin to dominate the woman’s ability to articulate anguish. What remains is the shawl, which is kept for years to come, sacrilegiously worshipped like a relic, and functioning in the second part of the story like the Proustian madeleine that summons up the past. Significantly, while the fact of the rape is never subject to a *total* conscious suppression (“I was forced by a German, it’s true, and more than once, but I was too sick to conceive”; 43), the identity of the supposed father is consistently altered. (Years later, in a letter written to her dead child, whom she obsessively imagines to be still alive, Rosa claims that the man’s name was Andrzej.) The eponymous object in Ozick’s narrative generates an additional (presumably intended) set of significances in the context of the protagonist’s ethnicity. Providing warmth and faking a mother’s teat do not exhaust the scope of its functions. Neither is it a mere physical reminder of the lost child. Beyond practicality there lurks a strong cultural value. The book is, after all, also a reflection on the confused Jewish identity. Apart from being a visible sign that the person wearing it enters the sphere of a ritual, the tallit, a shawl traditionally worn while attending Jewish morning or evening prayer, connotes the fact of belonging to a particular ethnic and religious tradition (irrespective of the fact that tallits are worn by men). The piece of material that envelopes Magda is in all probability not a tallit, but if considered in purely figurative terms, and if the association between these two is assumed as meaningful in the context of the narrative (as it may be by an interpreter), the shawl—which as the title word controls and unifies all the elements of the narrative—can also be seen as a metaphor of the suppressed (i.e. as a tallit desacralized, with the tradition *truncated* from it).

Putting aside Svetlana Boym’s detailed taxonomy of nostalgia (notably, her fundamental distinction between so-called “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia) as reaching far beyond the confines of my consideration of Ozick’s narrative, I reference more general parameters of the key concept, which point to the sentiments of “loss and displacement,” “a romance with one’s own fantasy” as well as the “cinematic image of nostalgia” as a “superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, of

past and present, of dream and everyday life” (Boym 7). Yet this morphological mapping of nostalgia transferred and applied to the analysis of *The Shawl*, I argue, is incomplete when considered separately from the deliberate or semi-conscious confusion concerning one’s identity (notably self-hatred) and trauma seen as the trigger that keeps “reloading” the triple engine of “nostalgic” nightmares, lies and fantasies that the story of the Holocaust survivor exemplifies. Much as Boym’s notion of nostalgia, perceived by her as the symptom of the twentieth century, is correlated with a “new understanding of time” (8), *The Shawl*’s protagonist’s nostalgia is, at least to a certain extent, the outcome of the suppression of her ethnic roots and a manifestation of her rebellion against the workings of irreversible history. The sentiment develops alongside trauma, is kept alive, and feeds on “the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory” (Boym 9). Still, its unique character grows mainly on Rosa’s inability to come to terms with her ethnic origin.

Strangely, Rosa’s nostalgia for pre-war Poland and her life as a fully assimilated Jew in Polish society is often interpreted by American critics as misdirected. Victor Strandberg, for instance, has no doubts whatsoever that the woman “has no cultural strength to draw upon in the face of her two Holocaust-caused obsessions: her death consciousness and her propensity to live in fantasy rather in reality” (149). The assertion takes it for granted that the experience of the concentration camp can be overcome. In *The Shawl* nostalgia is a defense mechanism against the working of trauma; its target, however, remains beyond control. And this is done in order to demonstrate that a consciously controlled variation of this disposition does not exist. Somehow paradoxically, Ozick’s story of re-locations and dis-locations, of enforced and self-imposed labels, of being “unconnected” (47), seems to defy its rigid and common classification as *merely* Holocaust fiction. While it is justified to claim, as Strandberg does, that the book’s central preoccupation is “the annihilation of... [the] protagonist’s Jewishness under the pressures of... urgent claims of identity” (139), the fact that before the war she consciously chose to define herself as a Pole cannot be neglected, or, as some American critics tend to do, deemphasized. The story may apparently be read as a statement of disapproval of the idea of assimilation (which, nevertheless, *was* the fact of life among some of the Polish Jews), even to the point of implying that Rosa’s *real* tragedy took place before the Holocaust, namely when she turned her back on her ethnic origins. Nevertheless, as Ozick has her protagonist stubbornly assert, “you can be a Jew if you like, or a Gentile, it’s up to you. You have a legacy of choice, and they say choice is the only true freedom” (43). Therefore, any strong suggestion that only a return to one’s Jewish roots brings health appears somewhat risky and unconvincing.

For reasons that are understandable (and obvious), it is tempting to locate Rosa’s case in the “conventional therapeutic paradigm of illness and recovery” (Langer 142). The experience of the death camp and the murder of her daughter, Magda, cage the survivor mother in a forever haunting, traumatic memory; what the second part of the diptych unfolds may, theoretically, be read as a painful process

of her coming to terms with the fact that the past loss is irredeemable. Such a trivial recognition, however, does not, in any satisfactory way, render the subtlety of Ozick's narrative. In his critical evaluation of *The Shawl* (in a manner typical of him), Langer points to the insufficiency of the fiction mode to adequately render Holocaust experience, reminding us that "[w]hen ardor of art trespasses on the misery of mere experience, it prods consciousness to enter the richer domain of imagination" (143). This is certainly a relevant and obvious point when it comes to a story which has an almost fairy-tale-like quality in the language and atrocious imagery it features (especially in its first part, "The Shawl"). And, therefore, instead of pursuing the all-too-well recognized dilemmas of representation of Holocaust experience, Langer proposes to read Ozick's prose as a very informative investigation into an intricate set of language traps, which all the main characters of *The Shawl* are implicated in. It can, therefore, be argued that at its most rudimentary level, Ozick's two-part novella illustrates different processes of narrativizing trauma, in which language constantly oscillates between the "myth" of experience (understood as a mental and discursive strategy that makes it possible for us to bear the unbearable, or to understand the incomprehensible) and the "truth" of experience (treated as an ideal notion—hardly attainable, but discursively useful). One of the instances of the "outside" narrative at its most severe is the very beginning of the second part of the book ("Rosa"), which emulates the language of tabloids, with their characteristically strong, arbitrary vocabulary: "Rosa Lublin, a madwoman and scavenger, gave up her store—she smashed it up herself—and moved to Miami" (13). Further on, the tragedy of the protagonist is synecdochically, and literally, reduced to a newspaper headline: "WOMAN AXES HER OWN BIZ" (18). Besides, and even more importantly, Rosa is constantly subject to analogical "outside" narrativization in her intimate relations. This can be best exemplified by her exchange with Persky, a Polish Jew who was not affected by the Holocaust as he managed to make it to America before the war even started:

'For everything there's a bad way of describing, also a good way. You pick the good way, you get along better.'

'I don't like to give myself lies,' Rosa said.

'Life is short, we all got to lie[.]' (56)

The attempt to reach a level of empathy that would enable at least *some* understanding of the scale of the survivor's tragedy consists here in juggling catchy clichés, which certainly sustains a difficult dialogue but misses the core of Rosa's problem. The language of cheap consolation, even when used with good intentions, is demonstrated by Ozick as a mere overlay, which does not contribute to the healing of a still-fresh psychological wound. But the irony of the whole situation is further complicated by the simultaneous workings of what can be referred to as "inside" narrativization, whereby a compulsive liar—whether fully consciously or not—tries to pass as a person hating lies.

Rosenberg's two theoretical proposals (or theses, as he calls them), the "accommodationist" and the "compartmentalist" (x, xi), which I recall at the beginning of my discussion, seem insufficient to define either American Jewish or Polish Jewish identity in the twentieth century. They do not give appropriate weight to the significance of the occasional ebbs and flows of American and Polish anti-Semitism; do not recognize the importance of Holocaust experience in the process of identity formation; and finally, do not take into serious consideration the phenomenon of Jewish self-hatred. Having said this, I do not intend to place an equals sign between the manifestations of Jewish diasporic identity on both sides of the Atlantic—to claim so would be a gross simplification. Nevertheless, the two identities can be investigated with the use of the same (or analogical) variables. Ozick's *The Shawl*—the literary text analyzed here as an apt illustration of the problem—brings together all the above-mentioned factors, thus providing an interesting, albeit unobvious, perspective. In general, the identity of Jews both in America and in pre-war Poland is unavoidably related to their identification, but the two terms do not overlap. While the latter conveys the act of naming, labeling, and pigeonholing others so as to dispel the mist of their strangeness (referring to appearances and arising from the way one is perceived by others, which assumes the form of "outsider" narrativization), identity is an inner experience of self, more elusive, opaque and therefore not easily definable/describable in unequivocal terms.

As it seems, apart from being both a canonical literary reflection on Holocaust trauma and an example of the relatively poorly represented female perspective on Holocaust experience, *The Shawl* strengthens Hana Wirth-Nesher's strong conviction about "the impossibility of arriving at a universally acceptable definition of who is a Jew" (3) in the context of diaspora. In Ozick's narrative it is history, not one's sense of true belonging, that arbitrary (re)classifies one's ethnicity and identification. Understood paradigmatically, the case of Rosa demonstrates how in the twentieth century Jewishness (or perhaps it would be better to coin the term "post-Jewishness") was formed in specific cultural and historical circumstances, comprising various (often conflicting) allegiances and ambivalences, and thus making the very notion far from stable or coherent.

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## Apocalyptic Vistas in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*

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**Abstract:** This essay proposes to read Don DeLillo's 2003 novel *Cosmopolis* as an allegorical treatment of turn-of-the-century concerns about the crisis of representation of capitalism. *Cosmopolis* read in this way becomes a tale of capitalist and narrative apocalypse which stages the confrontation of opposing forces of "the future" and "the past," or the utopian desire inscribed in the capitalist vision of time and the carnivalesque practice of subjects under capitalism. The use of allegorical form and the mocking framework of Bakhtinian carnival allows for *Cosmopolis* to be read not as high satire but popular comedy. I argue that by implicating the writer as a character in this apocalyptic allegory, DeLillo prevents the glorification of the writer to the position of an authoritative voice in history, leaving the final judgment of the capitalist myths to the reader.

**Keywords:** Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, allegory, apocalypse, carnival, Bakhtin, capitalism, plague

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When in 2003 Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* saw the light of the publishing day, it did not meet with much appreciation. Reviewers were disheartened by the novel's failure to address the situation following the attacks of September 11, 2001, and annoyed at its supposed repetitiveness. Michiko Kakutani's *New York Times* review, for instance, pronounced the novel's "portrait of a millennial Manhattan [to be] hopelessly clichéd, quite devoid of the satiric black humor [of] *White Noise*" and "thoroughly predictable" ("Books of the Times"). John Updike sounded a similar note when he remarked that "somehow nothing happens" in *Cosmopolis* and recommended reading Tom Wolfe to those who would like to know "what it's like to be a young Master of the Universe" ("One-Way Street"). Such reviewers did not appreciate the allegorical quality of the novel, nor did they value the novel's attunement to popular apocalyptic imagination or its use of plague imagery. The present essay seeks to fill this gap by proposing to view the novel as an allegorical treatment of turn-of-the-century concerns about the crisis of representation of capitalism. *Cosmopolis* read in this way becomes a tale of capitalist and narrative apocalypse which by staging the confrontation of opposing forces of "the future" and "the past" that ends in an accumulation of corpses and ruins reveals the limits of modern mythology of cyber-capitalism. Despite the familiarity of the formula used in the novel, such a reading of *Cosmopolis* as allegory-apocalypse brings to the fore the marginalized but popular response to cyber-capitalist myths that follows the mocking rhetoric of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival, making room for the critical assessment of the shift in representations of capitalism at the dawn of the era of economic crisis. What emerges in the wake of such apocalyptic assessment is a peculiar record of the ravages of modern myths that showcases the novelist's humble place in history.

## Apocalyptic Vision

The biblical origins of apocalypse show it to be a narrative of revelation propelled by a two-fold dynamic of destruction and promise of renewal of humanity (*Postmodern* 121). What binds the two together is a system of symbols that allows the events of the end of days to be interpreted as prophecy of what is to come. Refusing to see apocalypse as politically neutral, Elana Gomel notes the seductiveness of a scenario that thus “enables one to wallow in violence and to worship purity; to believe in predestination and to engage in feats of derring-do; to act in history and aspire to utopia” (*Postmodern* 123). The desire for utopia, or escape from time and history, becomes then instrumental in justifying and by extension effacing the brutality of the catastrophic end of history. This dual logic of apocalypse lies at the core of *Cosmopolis*.

Set on a day in April in the year 2000, *Cosmopolis* invites apocalyptic interpretation already in its opening scene when the lot of its protagonist, twenty-eight-year-old billionaire asset manager Eric Packer, is said to have cosmic implications, since “[w]hen he died he would not end. The world would end” (6). In this short aside, DeLillo at once teases the narrative’s end and ascribes the apocalyptic impulse to Packer’s sleep-deprived and capitalist mind. When read within the framework of apocalyptic impulse, Packer’s trivial plan to cross Manhattan to get a haircut becomes an act of derring-do hastening the consummation of the end of the world that Packer imagines as the moment of millenarian transformation. The singlemindedness with which he begins his journey is here significant: he does not care that the city has been brought to a standstill by the visit of the president, since the promise of a haircut is rich in lofty implications. This is implied in the way he explains his trip to Shiner, his chief of technology, as they begin the cruise through the city in Packer’s limousine. When Shiner suggests that, instead of inching his way through the gridlock, Packer could simply have the barber come to the office, or to the limousine, his boss answers: “A haircut has what. Associations. Calendar on the wall. Mirrors everywhere. There’s no barber chair here. Nothing swivels but the spycam” (15). With the calendar signifying the passage of time, mirrors reflecting the self, and the barber’s chair swiveling to welcome the customer and then release them already changed, even something as prosaic as a haircut becomes a symbol for the end of the old and the birth of the new.

More than that, for an asset manager such as Packer the word “haircut” also signifies appropriation of transformative imagery by the market logic, since in the financial world it denotes “a sudden loss of equity or drop in income” (Safire). By extension, the only transformation that Packer can imagine entails a cataclysmic financial miscalculation, which is why as his journey begins, Packer continues to bet against the Japanese yen, staking his fortune on the hint of economic recession in Japan. Although the decision invites comparisons with George Soros’s 1992 breaking of the Bank of England, it is rather the inverse of Soros’s move as Packer is intent on vaporizing his fortune on the market, in this way effectuating a world

market apocalypse that opens the way for utopian future. Despite seemingly going against capitalist logic of profit generation, this move is very much in line with what Packer sees as the actual transgressive potential of capitalism. Jean-François Lyotard's remarks on the relation between capital and time help us understand why it is so: "What is important for capital is not the time already invested in goods and services, but the time still stored in stocks of 'free' or 'fresh' money, given that this represents the only time which can be used with a view to organizing the future and neutralizing the event" (66). In this light, by disturbing the market through his speculation, Packer is looking to realize the promise of the future stored in capital.

Such unleashing of the future requires that Packer "[t]hink outside the limits," which he interprets as charting what is to come (21). As a result, Packer's entire journey from his high-rise apartment westward through the city effectively unravels as apocalyptic revelation. Eschewed of its narrowly scriptural understanding, this revelation shows the space of the city, the time of the journey and the accompanying spectacle of cyber-capital to be prefiguring a utopia that Packer envisions awaiting at the end of history. The rhymed structure of Packer's apocalyptic narrative creates a kind of secular typology, where events, spaces and people function as types of post-transformation antitypes. All such types can only be read as revelation due to their immersion in technology and capital, or as DeLillo calls it—cyber-capital.

One such type are monumental bank centers, which Packer appreciates as extensions of capitalism, reveling in their apocalyptic symbolism:

The bank towers loomed just beyond the avenue. They were covert structures for all their size, hard to see, so common and monotonic, tall, sheer, abstract, with standard setbacks, and block-long, and interchangeable, and he had to concentrate to see them.... They were made to be the last tall things, made empty, designed to hasten the future. They were the end of the outside world. They weren't here exactly. They were in the future, a time beyond geography and touchable money and the people who stack and count it. (36)

The abstract symbolism of the buildings not only masks their historical materiality with visions of utopia—"a time beyond geography," but also "hastens the future." Himself a resident of a forty-eight-room apartment in "the tallest residential tower in the world" (8), Packer not only appreciates but also functions within—to borrow Henri Lefebvre's term—abstract space. Such abstract space produced in capitalism occludes the fact that space is a product of urban practice by burying such practice under an abstract phallic fantasy (Lefebvre 287). The bank centers illustrate this point vividly, showing abstract space to be one of apocalyptic types in Packer's typology.

Characteristically, not only city buildings but also Packer's customized white limousine is seen by him as abstract space typifying utopia. Sound-proof and fitted with an array of displays, a microwave and a spycam, among other things,

the limousine doubles as a mobile office and reflects Packer's need to overcome reality and time: the different displays in his car stream news broadcast and financial information from currency markets 24/7, helping him predict market fluctuations, while the spycam makes it redundant to even look outside the car's window. In the limousine, Packer is working in real time, which, as Jean Baudrillard reminds us: "has a secret millenarianism about it: cancelling the flow of time, cancelling delay, suppressing the sense that the event is happening elsewhere, anticipating its end by freeing ourselves from linear time, laying hold of things almost before they have taken place" (9). Baudrillard's theory seems to answer the call of Vija Kinski, Packer's chief of theory, for "a new theory of time" that would account for the disappearance of the past and harnessing of the future characteristic for the present historical moment (DeLillo 86). Real time is then apocalyptic: it glosses over the paroxysms of history and geography and colonizes the future.

The pressure of abstract space and real time inside Packer's limousine is in fact so great that it leaves its mark on Packer's interactions with other people. Not only does Packer appreciate the alienated, abstracted genitility of phallic towers and limousines, but he also tends to see people as removed from such glorious fantasy and reduced to their foul corporeality. Inside the limousine, Packer's chief of technology sits "in his masturbatory crouch" (12), his currency analysts gnaws on his fingers in a scene "awful and atavistic... [turning him into an] unborn, curled in a membranous sac" (36), and his chief of finance Jane Melman enters the limousine sweating profusely after a jog with "the kind of grim deliverance that marks a deadweight drop to the toilet" (39).

The overbearing sense that biology can only survive under cyber-capitalism as emblematic of what needs to be overcome and purified through apocalypse is strengthened in the scene that follows Melman's entry to the limousine and in which a prostate exam is given to Packer by Dr. Ingram in Melman's presence. Fittingly, it ends with Packer and Melman experiencing an orgasm without touching seconds after Packer witnessed the scene projected onto the screens of his limousine by the spycam's eye. In this way, Packer and Melman reenact alienation imposed on them by the abstract and real-time-based environment structured by cyber-capital. Even the reality of bodily orifices—such as Melman's crotch, her open mouth "showing large gapped teeth" (47), Packer's rectum—is hijacked to symbolize openness to penetration by alienating forces both human (Dr. Ingram's probing finger) and mechanical (spycam, echocardiogram). For Packer, the experience prefigures utopian postcorporeality to be realized upon the fulfilment of cyber-capital-driven transformation of the "redundant and transferable" body into life as "a consciousness saved from the void" (DeLillo 48, 206).<sup>1</sup>

Crucially, all the types of cyber-capitalist utopia have a distinctly spectacular and seductive character. This seductive power is emphasized whenever we see

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1 This vision of postcorporeality puts Packer in opposition to the tradition of posthumanism that seeks to identify such transcendence with liberation from the regime of capitalism and confines of the subject-object matrix (Hayles).

characters in *Cosmopolis* entranced by “the glow of cyber-capital” emanating from screens or street tickers (78). One such character is Kinski, whom Packer imagines to be a fellow believer in cyber-capitalist apocalyptic vision as they stand before the three-tier street ticker north of Times Square, observing “[t]he hellbent sprint of numbers and symbols” (80). In that moment, Packer feels that he knows what Kinski is thinking:

Never mind the speed that makes it hard to follow what passes before the eye. The speed is the point. Never mind the urgent and endless replenishment, the way data dissolves at one end of the series just as it takes shape at the other. This is the point, the thrust, the future. We are not witnessing the flow of information so much as a pure spectacle, or information made sacred, ritually unreadable. The small monitors of the office, home and car become a kind of idolatry here, where crowds might gather in astonishment. (80)

Alison Shonkwiler argues that the above fragment illustrates the workings of the financial sublime, an aesthetics of unrepresentability that structures our understanding of capitalism (273). But it has to be added that in line with such sublime aesthetic, the spectacle imparts a decipherable if mystical message of destruction, as becomes evident when Packer reads from it the news of the death of Nikolai Kaganovich, a Russian oligarch whom Packer knew and respected. Packer welcomes the news and his theorist Kinski provides an instructive interpretation of his employer's contentment when she says that Kaganovich died so Packer could live (82). Kaganovich's death comes to typify the passage from a body trapped in time to transcendence in cyber-capitalist utopia as he actually becomes one with the spectacle-as-revelation when his death is broadcasted around the world.

To Packer, the violence of death upon which such transformation is predicated is not something to be wary of, but rather accepted. Packer is thus not an idolater, nor a man of the crowd, but a prophet of cyber-capitalist apocalypse willing to become a martyr. The mystical quality of his position and vision is evident whenever he refers to data as “soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process” (24). He is driven to study “the roll and flip of data on a screen” and is convinced that he understands this revelation, which renders the world “knowable and whole” (24). Packer's wife, Elise Shifrin, fittingly summarizes her husband's position: “I think you're dedicated to knowing. I think you acquire information and turn it into something stupendous and awful. You're a dangerous person. Do you agree? A visionary” (19). In this light, Packer's attempt to chart the movements of the Japanese yen in time and thus find “a pattern latent in nature itself” (63) becomes an arcane and apocalyptic mission of uncovering the hidden promise contained in circulating information.

Describing Packer's mission in apocalyptic terms helps show how DeLillo effectively exposes in *Cosmopolis* the working of modern cyber-capitalist myth. Packer's utopian desire for transcending the confines of the world is shown to rely,

on the one hand, on an elaborate construction of his own capitalist typology and, on the other, on perpetuating the discourse of unrepresentability, or the sublime spectacle, with regard to cyber-capital's elusive but pervasive structuring presence. Because of indirect narration used in the novel, it is easy to mistake Packer's stance for the governing idea of the novel itself. Yet once we consider the apocalyptic framework into which this idea is written and its ostensibly allegorical character, we open such mystifying discourse to a critique coming from the side of that which apocalyptic vision aims to overcome, namely history. As we will see, the tedium of abstract dialogues and glowy images is broken by the actuality of events and practices opposed to the tyranny of visions. Things do happen in *Cosmopolis*; the problem is that when they do, it is all a show.

### Carnavalesque Practice

What DeLillo paints as the main counter-force to the apocalyptic vision is irreverent practice that bears all the marks of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival. To recall, according to Bakhtin:

carnival [in medieval times] celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (10)

Instead of advocating hope for utopia at the end of days, accessible only to the chosen few, carnival staged a jolly celebration of material history, stripped of abstract and eternal authority and grounded in the crudest reality of the population—biological life (Bakhtin 19). Carnival festivities reveled in materiality at its most grotesque and celebrated parts of the body such as the rectum or the genital organs, instrumental in conveying the themes of fertility, regeneration and rebirth (Bakhtin 19). By means of degradation into the flesh, the grotesque open body, forever dying and being reborn, the populace not only celebrated the biological links of social cohesion but also asserted its right to the future (Bakhtin 99). We can then say that transformation, which in the apocalyptic vision is only possible at the break of times, was in carnival translated into the very material nature of historical time. For that reason, carnival worked as a mock-apocalypse; it ridiculed pretensions to utopia erected on the fundament of apocalyptic typology of signs; it was not a revelation but a play in time. At its horizon, medieval carnival erected not utopia, but the stage of history—the marketplace.

The modern-day tradition of carnival differs from its medieval predecessor in that it cannot celebrate rebirth into history in innocently biological terms. This is due to the fact that the biological basis of social collectivity, once the locus of revolutionary resonance of carnival festivities, is now a resource exploited by the combined forces of cyber-capitalism and biopolitical state. For this reason, both the

imagery and the language of modern carnival has changed: since phallic imagery has been appropriated by cyber-capitalism, genitals are no longer the main focus for the new grotesque body used in carnival. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the Hippocratic face, the face marked by the signs of impending death, and it is the state of undeadness in history, the state of being never fully dead or alive, that is celebrated.

In DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, carnival is introduced by a score of anti-prophets or jesters that ridicule Packer's revelation. One of these is none other than Packer's chief of theory, Vija Kinski. In contrast to her employer's mythologizing discourse of discovery and promise, Kinski's theories of cyber-capital do not seem to claim to uncover anything. Despite satisfying Packer's hunger for systematicity and abstraction that effaces reality, these theories are curiously full of self-avowed gaps and interlaced with Kinski's admissions that she does not and does not want to understand the actual mechanisms governing the financial market of which she theorizes (78-79). Even the most coherent of her theories, the comments she offers when Packer and she encounter violent anti-globalist protests, are offered in a tone vacillating between dismissal and idolatry. At the same time, when she begins to talk of the protesters as "a fantasy generated by the market" that invigorates the system (90-91), she articulates for the readers the idea that the protest is a make-believe practice produced under the conditions of cyber-capitalist apocalypse and ridiculing cyber-capitalist mythology. Such theories show Kinski to be undermining Packer's vision by denying capitalist promise of transcendence and utopia and asserting that there is nothing outside the historical market.<sup>2</sup> Kinski's session with Packer is then a kind of comical carnivalesque debate in which praise is interlaced with abuse (Bakhtin 435). Clownish in her business shirt, "old embroidered vest and a long pleated skirt of a thousand launderings" (DeLillo 77), Kinski can flatter Packer's genius, only to smile cryptically, look slyly, or laugh a dirty laugh, "scornful and coarse" (85). From Packer's own central seat in the limousine, she even teases—"evilly, eyes alight"—Packer's demise and is delighted when she learns he may be in danger (DeLillo 92, 79). To Packer, she remains "unrevealing," and he finds himself wondering what she truly believes (104). That her paradoxical status is not entirely lost on him becomes evident when by the end of their session of theorizing Packer imagines her "asquat his chest in the middle of the night... not sexually or demonically driven but there to speak into his fitful sleep, *to trouble his dreams with her theories*" (104, my italics).

Packer's apocalyptic vision is undermined not only by Kinski's theories, but especially by the reality of the cityscape and urban practice that in a truly carnivalesque fashion offends his meticulously constructed typology. Initially, the offensive signs that deny the pull of the future and remind Packer of the continual

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2 If Kinski is silent when faced with the spectacle of the self-immolating man, it is not because she cannot theorize it away, but rather because in him performance of undeadness crosses into death and becomes the proper subject for the chronicler, not the jester. The concept of the chronicler is explained in the last part of the present essay.

sway of the past over the present seem innocuous enough and can be glimpsed in the persistence of obsolete technologies, such as a hand-held organizer “whose original culture [has] just disappeared” (DeLillo 9), or words such as “skyscraper” or “computer.” As Packer’s journey progresses, however, he is forced to withstand more and more pressure. When Packer witnesses commercial history incarnated in the shops and life of the Diamond District, he struggles to accept this historical sphere’s retrograde character. Peopled with Hasidim and foreign-speaking beggars, the district is an obsolete but still operating site of city commerce. Of jewelry sold and bought there Packer remarks: “Hundreds of millions of dollars a day moved back and forth behind walls, a form of money so obsolete Eric didn’t know how to think about it. It was hard, shiny, faceted. It was everything he’d left behind or never encountered, cut and polished, intensely three-dimensional” (64). Crowded by an amalgamation of immigrants and evoking visions of “the 1920s and the diamond centers of Europe before the second war” (64-65), the district potently conveys that it is a product of centuries of multi-cultural urban practice shaping the city architecture as well as its life. As a prosperous historical space, the Diamond District becomes a deconstructive alternative to Packer’s abstract space as a type of utopia. For this reason, it is for Packer “an offense to the truth of the future” (65)—an accusation revealing the dogmatic and elitist nature of cyber-capitalist vision of apocalypse in which he believes.

If the palimpsestic character of the Diamond District proves a disturbing view for Packer, all the more troubling are the moments when despite Packer’s supposed real-time-based control of the future, his limousine is simply stuck in traffic and time. In fact, the car’s progress is obstructed by three major occurrences: the anti-capitalist protests on Times Square, the spectral presence of President Midwood’s motorcade, and the funerary procession of Sufi rapper Brutha Fez. All three show different aspects of carnivalesque play, creating new carnivalesque temporality of meetings and missed encounters.

The performance of street protesters is perhaps the most characteristic carnivalesque moment in the novel. Even before Packer’s limousine reaches Times Square, the protests are foreshadowed in street performances that parody apocalyptic typology. At one point, Packer passes a single woman in grey spandex wielding a dead rat in front of bronze-and-gold facades of financial centers, only to find a pair of similarly clad men hurling living rats around a luncheonette in which he stops when trying to convince his young wife to have sex with him (74-75). Once Packer’s limousine nears Times Square, it becomes clear that the rat is a grotesque banner for the protests. The earlier dead and living rats serve as mock-types of the final antitype—the large Styrofoam rat wielded by the rampaging crowd. But the mock-rat typology is only the first element of the carnivalesque protests.

Another is the language that protesters use. Despite being referred to as protesters, they do not voice any actual demands. Instead, they chant a motto, which turns out to be a bastardized line taken from *The Communist Manifesto*: “A specter is haunting the world—the specter of capitalism” (DeLillo 96). By reformulating

the basic quote, the protesters at once parody Marxist discourse that claims to account for their condition and show their familiarity with cyber-capitalist rhetoric. In their treatment, the spectacle becomes the specter, and that which was supposed to anticipate the future morphs into a harping menace from the past. The ingenuity of the first motto is met by the elegance of the second one, which is not chanted but instead displayed on the hijacked NASDAQ tickers. This second motto, taken from Zbigniew Herbert's anti-establishment poem, which Packer has read and quoted early in the novel, proclaims the rat to be "the [new] unit of currency" (DeLillo 96). What is intimated in the second motto is at once the global reach of carnivalesque protests that can find points of convergence between the United States and Poland, subversion of the apocalyptic vision, and a crude degradation of the elusive and soulful cyber-capital into an animal that is a vector for the plague. There is no place for prophecies in carnival; the language of the revelation is twisted by the amalgamation of the high and the low, and the result is grotesque.

Thus, carnival in the age of cyber-capital turns from the celebration of renewal to its mockery, not only grotesque but also ruthless. The protests become a staging of apocalypse performed, significantly, at the very heart of abstract space—Times Square. Packer watches the protests unravel from a TV broadcast on his limousine screen, but despite his attempts to isolate himself from them, the violence outside penetrates inside. Images of "faces scorched by pepper gas," visions of cars burning, "battalions of rats in restaurants and hotel lobbies," policemen "genuflected, outside a fast food shop" and protesters storming the NASDAQ tickers alternate with Packer and Kinski's relentlessly abstract commentary and descriptions of mutilation that Packer's car suffers as it is swayed, urinated on, and spray-painted by the protesters (89-91). Both Times Square and Packer's limousine are then degraded into the material reality of excrements used as weapons and brutalized bodies, while Kinski's jester theories pick holes in Packer's mind.

In the light of the violence of these assaults, Packer is no longer able to ignore the influence of urban practice. Not only is his apocalyptic journey halted, but all the types of utopia he has deciphered are ridiculed by powers rising from the city. Real time controlling the future is refracted into the time of carnivalesque play—a historical practice revived at the end of the twentieth century—that turns into performance of mass death. Accumulation of bodies and rats, real and imaginary, ultimately constructs a visual allegory in which apocalypse becomes the plague. In this allegory, there is no place for dreams of utopia beyond the material world; instead, all emphasis is placed on the horrors of dying. Cyber-capital becomes a disease, a plague that ravages the world, and everything that it touches either dies or enters the state of undeadness, becoming the carrier for the plague. In this sense, the

rat<sup>3</sup> that becomes “the unit of currency” symbolizes human life reduced to collateral for the future of genocide. In the carnivalesque mirror, Packer himself is a rat and plague-carrier.

But the influence of the carnivalesque does not stop at the level of images and narratives; as a practice it actually penetrates Packer’s body. Packer’s sexual encounters, initially taken to reflect his power in phallic terms, become points when the city can begin to strip him of insignia of power. Not only does each lover require that Packer step outside of his limousine, but they also leave him missing successive parts of his attire and reeking more and more of sex, degrading him into his own flesh. In effect, Packer becomes obsessed by the flawed reality of this flesh, as symbolized by his inability to understand what having an asymmetrical prostrate means. Asymmetry becomes then instrumental in emphasizing unbalanced and unrhymed relation of meaning and event, distorting Packer’s apocalyptic typology. Always “[l]ooking for balance, beautiful balance, equal parts, equal sides” (200), Packer feels therefore “pale and spooked” by the inelegance of asymmetry, which opens his body to some potential disease (52). Symbolizing another aspect of carnivalesque opposition to Packer’s utopian designs, asymmetry as disease illustrates the beginnings of the new grotesque body in cyber-capitalism. Just as the original model of the grotesque body, its new version is still “not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (Bakhtin 26), which is why the promise of transgression inscribed in it so easily seduces Packer. But the openness of the cyber-capitalist grotesque body invites the menace of biological horrors and the hilarity of false fears that Packer is apparently unable to transform into utopian types. He then opens himself to the marks of the mock-plague.

Once we realize Packer’s complex transformation, it becomes easier to understand why President Midwood’s motorcade and Brutha Fez’s funerary procession become significant obstacles on his journey. Even though Packer’s limousine never clashes with the President’s motorcade, its progression is still affected by the ripples in traffic and the broadcasts of President’s appearances. The President’s ability to penetrate both the city and Packer’s limousine (through videostreams) exemplifies a mode of circulation as pervasive as the plague but not as immediately felt. If Packer is a plague-carrier, President Midwood is the undead: “his eyes [carry] no sign of immanence, of vital occupancy” and he waits “in a state of occult repose... to be reanimated” (77). Packer’s hatred of the President is then two-fold. On the one hand, he feels the aversion of a true-blue capitalist toward this archaic, antiquated-in-life figure of nation-state power. On the other hand, he envies

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3 The image of the rat itself is DeLillo’s nod to the actual rodent problem of New York City, where the relentlessly growing population of rats continues to trouble the authorities and provide surprising moments of entertainment to NYC inhabitants. Cf. “Rat Information Portal,” NYC.gov, 2016, <http://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/data/health-tools/rats-information-portal.page>. Accessed 31 Jan. 2017; “#Pizzarat becomes internet sensation.” *Youtube*, uploaded by CNN, 22 Sep. 2015, <https://youtu.be/4pitaHPXRuc>.

Midwood's omnipresence, his ability to subdue the urban landscape as Packer himself used to be able to do (77). Since on another plane, the Japanese economy also resists Packer's plans, Packer is forced to realize the continuing viability of state politics and state economy within cyber-capitalism. His hostility toward the President indicates Packer's increasing sense of slipping command of reality and the world.

While the President's at once spectral and zombified presence annoys Packer, his encounter with another fluid obstacle evokes a very different reaction. When the funerary procession that has been impeding Packer's movements turns out to be linked to the death of his favorite Sufi rapper Brutha Fez, whom Packer knew admired, he is shocked and assumes that Fez died a rap star's death "humming in a spatter of gunshots" (132). Kozmo Thomas, Fez's manager and a one-time associate of Packer, explains however that Fez's "[h]eart just wore out" and mocks Packer's ideas about rap stars (132). Significantly, this is one of the few scenes where Packer is directly confronted with the ridiculousness of his ideas about death. A fellow capitalist that somehow manages not to allow cyber-capitalist mythology to overtake his hold on reality, Kozmo shows Packer that in the glow of cyber-capital it is possible to assume a sort of hybrid position and not yearn for apocalyptic consummation or be undermined by carnivalesque practice. A testimony to the viability of such hybridity is the funeral itself—a procession of bodyguards, breakdancers, weeping women, nuns, dervishes and other mourners moving to the sound of Brutha Fez's music, which is at once traditional and modern, at once a practice in which the city pays respects to its star, and a way for the record label to exploit Brutha Fez's death (131). Fez himself is not simply a victim of the plague of cyber-capitalism, as evidenced by the ordinary cause of his death and the fact that a funeral is held for him, whereas there are no public funerals in times of plague. Although Fez's corpse lying in an open coffin for the world to see is another dead body and undead presence in the novel, he is also a performer even in death and his music repudiates Packer's preference for utopian transformation and apocalyptic typology through the words "Let me be who I was / Unrhymed fool / That's lost but living" (140). Fez's death, as Packer notes, is "a spectacle he [can] clearly not command" (136). In this way, next to Vija Kinski, Brutha Fez, dead but performing, is another jester troubling Packer's dreams and forcing him to reconfigure his thinking.

In fact, the cityspace as a whole repudiates Packer's apocalyptic vision. Unravelling before him is not a void to be charted by his typology but rather a palimpsest of history and social practice, the inverse of eternal utopia. At the horizon of this urban practice we find the marketplace of cosmopolis teeming with a multicultural crowd: a Sufi rapper, a Chinese acupuncturist, a cockney bookseller, a Sikh taxi driver, Packer's chauffeur Ibrahim Hamadoua, or even Packer's young wife Elise Shifrin,<sup>4</sup> heiress to a European banking fortune, "Swiss or something"

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4 Shifrin is another subversive character in the novel. Her elusive presence, her drifting in and out of Packer's view, forces him each time to get out of his limousine and opens Packer to penetration by the city. Her refusal to have sex with him also undermines his

(17). All of them are a living testimony to the vicissitudes of global historical forces impacting the city and deconstructing the apocalyptic narrative by staging a return to history and urban life.

DeLillo's use of carnivalesque imagery to counter utopian schemes is telling in that it juxtaposes cyber-capitalist elitism with a popular practice that constitutes entertainment and which does not shy away from violent imagery. It is true that this entertainment is still based on possibilities offered by cyber-capitalism and the protesters' freedom to act is the freedom of consumers in history; yet perhaps it is precisely this hybrid character of carnival that allows it to penetrate cyber-capitalist apocalyptic vision. DeLillo is very much aware of the limits of open opposition to cyber-capitalism and it is for this reason that the Times Square protests seem so ineffective and pointless as political protests. The main thrust of carnivalesque is not revolution, but the ridicule of authoritative mythology. Instead of being directed toward the colonization of the future, it recycles the apocalyptic narrative, its typology and sublime mythical language, showing their conventionality by turning them into allegories.

### **Contagious Body**

Allegorical reading proves most instructive in making sense of what happens to Packer's body in the second part of the novel. Left more vulnerable after the encounter with the protesters and assault on his limousine, Packer is ritually "murdered" by Andre Petrescu, the pastry assassin, who plants a pie in Packer's face. Petrescu's overt and successful approach illustrates carnival's final triumph and even the violent kicking that Petrescu gets from Packer in response showcases that Packer has finally been manipulated into physical contact. When shortly after this beating Packer shoots his chief of security Torval, it is because he is seeking to balance out the situation, to murder someone who has either failed to protect him or willfully admitted Petrescu, since Packer suspects that Torval hates him. Yet Torval's offhand murder only debases Packer further; he has now acted not according to plan, but in line with some visceral automatism.

Therefore, when Packer finally reaches the barbershop that was his destination, he is no longer able to fend off the onslaught of the city or realize his dream of personal transformation. We see him suddenly become strangely human as he invites his chauffeur Ibrahim Hamadoua into the shop and together with his barber Anthony Aduato, they share stories over a meal. A friend of his father's, Aduato proves instrumental in turning Packer's vision to the past, not the future. Already infected and scarred by the carnivalesque, Packer then gives himself one of his final wounds, when he leaves the shop with only half a haircut, accepting the failed nature of his visit to the barber.

It is then that, at the end of his journey, Packer finds himself in Hell's

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ideas about her and their marriage, and when they finally do have sex, it is only after all of Packer's designs have missed the mark.

Kitchen, by a derelict tenement and limousine garage, wishing to burn his limousine “to a blackened scrap of dead metal,” but deciding—of all things—that “he could not subject Ibrahim to such a spectacle” (180). Having bid goodbye to his chauffeur, Packer is suddenly left with nothing to do, in an unplanned situation, in a dead neighborhood, in other words, in the ruins of history. Emerging from the day’s journey wrecked, reeking of sex, gunpowder and blood, penniless after his failure with the yen, and with half a haircut, Packer presents a lamentable illustration of what the apocalyptic vision can do to its prophets. At the same time, he is paradoxically uncannily close to realizing his initial ideal, since he has lived through a number of symbolic deaths and witnessed the staged end of the world. Despite suffering the assaults and seductions of the carnivalesque grotesque reality, he may seem to be incarnating the apocalyptic body: “a suffering body, a text written in the script of stigmata, scars, wounds and sores” (Gomel, “Plague” 406). This is a decisive moment for the apocalyptic vision driving Packer since it is now that Packer can morph into the paradoxical figure of the martyr, or Girardian scapegoat, whose death would bring transformation. The apocalyptic body can thus be counted among types of utopia comprising Packer’s typology that prophesizes fulfilment of his vision.

It is only once we realize that Packer has been physically drawn into the crowd of revelers that martyrdom disintegrates under the pressure of the staging of the plague. We can see this process when Packer participates in a techno rave and later when he joins in the staging of mass murder. Having stumbled upon three hundred naked people lying in the street—extras in an underfinanced movie—he joins them. The experience of becoming one of the mock-dead crowd unsettles his visions:

It tore his mind apart, trying to see them here and real, independent of the image on a screen in Oslo or Caracas. Or were those places indistinguishable from this one? But why ask these questions? Why see these things? They isolated him. They set him apart and this is not what he wanted. He wanted to be here among them, all-body, the tattooed, the hairy-assed, those who stank. He wanted to set himself in the middle of the intersection, among the old with their raised veins and body blotches and next to the dwarf with a bump on his head. He thought there were probably people here with wasting diseases, a few, undisadable, skin flaking away.... He was one of them. (176)

Packer thus drifts away from the utopian desire that has thus far structured everything he did and alienated him from people. Counting himself among the dead and not the chosen ones, Packer stops the pull of the apocalypse and elides its utopian trajectory. From the carrier of the plague of cyber-capitalism, through the apocalyptic body of a martyr, Packer is thus forced to slowly morph into the masses of anonymous victims of pestilence, becoming one with the contagious body. This inverse postcorporeality, which is the new grotesque body, turns the stigmata of Passion ushering utopia into the marks of mock-plague. As a grotesque mirror of apocalyptic body, the contagious

body shows apocalypse as material violence without redemption, a denial of history that results in the erasure of identity (Gomel, “Plague” 413).<sup>5</sup> The use of the allegory of the plague already by the protesters and later by extras working in the street indicates that the crowd is very much aware of their own status as statistical data in the history ledgers. This final inversion of the apocalyptic by the carnivalesque opens another plane in the apocalyptic narrative of *Cosmopolis*. Practical recycling of the carnivalesque, it turns out, is not the only response to apocalypse.

### Postapocalyptic Text

The recycling dynamic of carnival does not purport to reveal eternal truths; it mocks the idea of the outside of history, which is why as a counter-force to the apocalyptic narrative, it is only partly successful. A counter-narrative that complements carnival and does offer a revised vision of the horizon of history is the postapocalyptic narrative. Postapocalypse “is a discourse not so much of radical transformation as of ‘aftermaths and remainders,’” concerned “with the interminable duration of dying” and “enmeshed in the backward-looking narrative of trauma” (Gomel, “Plague” 408). It does not have prophets or jesters, but chroniclers, whose narratives are spun from beyond the horizon of a particular period in history. Still we cannot say that chroniclers write in the spacetime of immaterial utopia; instead, their reality is very much material—it is the reality of ruins and corpses.

Packer enters the realm of ruins when he is left alone in a dead neighborhood without a plan to his soul. It is there that he meets his former employee and future assassin Richard Sheets, or Benno Levin as he prefers to be known. Levin has been forced to eke out his existence on the dumpster of history after he was fired from Packer’s company. The only thing that remains to give meaning to Levin’s life is his plan to kill Packer, not for any especially well-harbored hatred, but due to his sense of historical necessity. Although Levin first appears to be the antithesis of successful Packer, by the time the narrative progresses to the meeting of the two characters such interpretation no longer holds true.

If apocalyptic typology had remained uncompromised, we could argue that Levin is a belatedly revealed type of Packer; but in the postapocalyptic reality of the ruins and fragmented narratives such as the one that Levin writes, it is no longer possible to say who here prefigures whom. Rather, changing registers in line with the ruinous setting of the last part of the novel, we can see Levin as Packer’s gothic doppelgänger. The similarities between the two are truly uncanny. If Levin has proven unable to keep up with minor currencies at Packer’s company, Packer has failed to chart the Japanese yen. Reduced to a squatter after his wife leaves him and his savings dwindle, Levin welcomes Packer, who in the course of one day has squandered his and his wife’s fortune and seen her leave him. In line with the mass character of the

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5 It is only once Packer begins to merge with the contagious body, in this way denying his utopian design, that his wife Elise Shifrin, herself an extra in the scene, has sex with him, which suggests that she is opposed to Packer’s utopian vision.

contagious body, Packer's body is not even special for holding inscriptions of both capitalist utopian desire and carnival since Levin suffers from a number of global "syndromes," such as *hwabyung*, or Korean cultural panic (DeLillo 56), Haitian and East African delirious gusts, or agitated behavior and extreme confusion (D60), Caribbean *susto*, or soul loss (152). Although seemingly unreal, these syndromes indicate that he is "susceptible," or shaped by a multitude of global forces as well as his own destructive desire to kill Packer (152). More than that, Levin shares the condition that has been haunting Packer; he too has an asymmetrical prostrate and has even had delusions about his penis receding into his body. It is thus only owing to the meeting with Levin that Packer learns finally that an asymmetrical prostate is a trivial condition that has no health consequences. As Packer's double, Levin implodes Packer's ideas about transformation, utopia or revelation, since Levin is a man transformed by cyber-capital, forces of globalization, and designs (his plan to become rich by working in the financial world) and symbolically hurled outside of history. Even Packer's own last attempts at making sense of Levin or his desire to kill him are repudiated when in response to Packer's accusations that Levin's murder plan is "cheap imitation," "a stale fantasy" and "has no history"—a charge that sounds especially ironic coming from the man whose original apocalyptic design was a similarly stale fantasy—Levin responds simply that "It's all history" (193).

Levin's grounding in history is emphasized in his second strongest drive, namely his intention to write a spiritual autobiography of thousands of pages that will narrate his murder of Packer, elevate him to the level of historical relevance and make him transgress his own bounds. The text of *The Confessions of Beno Levin* then becomes a post-historic utopia that Levin imagines within the bounds of his own postapocalyptic reality. Levin's *Confessions* actually insinuates itself into the core narrative of Packer's journey and from its early stages denies the chronological progression of apocalyptic narrative. *Confessions*, following backward trajectory, begins the scattering of apocalypse, prolonging it into a fragmentary consideration of the trauma of Packer's murder that forever remains outside the text, unnarrated. Left with Packer's corpse after the murder, Levin narrates his own growing obsolescence, describes Packer's corpse, the aftermath of the killing and his helplessness. The outdated form of confessions as well as Levin's writing method—pencil on paper on a writing desk—all position Levin as a remnant of the past, but also a chronicler of "the besieged city" from Herbert's poem.

As a chronicler, he is neither the proponent of the carnivalesque, nor the advocate of apocalyptic vision, but someone who acknowledges the influence of both of these forces on history by constructing a record. It is in this sense that Levin is "derived" both from Packer and forces opposing him (60). For this reason he is also the only person capable of writing about and thus paying respects to the contagious body, for "[u]nlike fantasies of global annihilation, pandemics are a matter of record" (Gomel, "Plague" 408). In an obverse way, Packer's digital dream of exceeding the limits of his body is realized in his corpse's inscription as a haunting voice in Levin's head and in Levin's *Confessions*, which mirrors Packer's entrapment in technology

during his life. But as part of the record, Packer is at the same time reduced to merely another “syndrome” from which Levin suffers.

Through the prism of Levin’s position as the chronicler, we can finally decipher the meaning of the persistent technological glitches that haunt Packer throughout his journey and expose him to broadcasts of future events before they take place. These screenings do not show Packer any abstract visions of the future, but rather the close future of his body. Whether he sees himself touching his chin line, orgasming with eyes closed, recoiling in shock, or ultimately lying dead in a morgue, what he witnesses is his material body. Contrary to Kinski’s theory that the visions are a testimony to the power of Packer’s hypermaniacal genius to influence his environment (DeLillo 95), in other words part of his apocalyptic vision, these screenings are moments when postapocalyptic narrative intervenes in and marks the apocalyptic narrative, just as Levin’s *Confessions* intervenes in the account of Packer’s journey. In this sense, in the final scene of the novel, when Packer sees his corpse designated as “Male Z” in the crystal face of his watch, he completes his transformation into an anonymous victim of cyber-capitalism. It is now only the haunted and fragmented narrative of Levin that can account for his life, but this narrative also traps him forever between death and record, the new time of postapocalypse that forever defers utopia.

The postapocalyptic perspective allows DeLillo to introduce a critical assessment of the shift in representation of capitalism into the novel, in this way making room for the evaluation of the writer’s place in history. *Cosmopolis* is not just about the apocalyptic desire inscribed in cyber-capital, or about the popular carnivalesque opposition to cyber-capital. It is predominantly an allegory of the process of writing about myths and representations, an allegory through which DeLillo questions his own right to write about myths from within another kind of mystifying language—the novel. By writing Levin and his narrative into the apocalyptic story, DeLillo prevents the glorification of the writer to the position of an authoritative voice in history. The chronicler in his treatment becomes simply the ruined man aware of his own reliance on conventions for describing events, but also reconciled with these conventions and influences. The idea that the chronicler can provide an authoritative critique of history is undermined when Levin himself says that “all the thinking and writing in the world will not describe what [he] felt in the awful moment when [he] fired the gun and saw [Packer] fall” (61). But Levin not only confirms the indescribable horror of the event, he also asks the reader “what is left that’s worth the telling?” (61). In this way, the record leaves the final judgment to its readers.

The allegorical formula employed in *Cosmopolis* is essential for the success of the novel’s depiction of the clash and shift of representation and this final surrendering of authority. Allegory, we are reminded by Olaf Hansen, “becomes a viable form of expression whenever its cognitive qualities are needed as part of a solution to a cultural crisis, which is best defined as a *question from within* of the symbolic character of reality” (Hansen 198). This is because allegory in its

ostensibly conventional structure that joins two disparate realms acknowledges the “nonsymmetrical relationship between meaning and event” and “not only acknowledges the fact that the symbolic character of reality is fictitious, it also works with this realization” (Hansen 198). As Walter Benjamin notes in his study of baroque allegory, allegory confronts the observer with “the *facies hippocratica* [death’s head] of history” and showcases the ruins and is in this way postapocalyptic (166).

In this way, *Cosmopolis* stands out among DeLillo’s works as a concise allegorical reckoning of cyber-capitalist mythology and forces responding to it. The conventional representation of the three main realms of apocalyptic narrative, carnivalesque play and postapocalyptic text in the novel as well as the allegorical transformation of Eric Packer help draw the reader into the conversation about modern representations and leave the final word to them. If DeLillo refuses to write high satire that would be better received by the critics, it is because he appears to envision the writer’s role among—not vis-à-vis—diverging conceptualizations of modern experience. Tuning into the concerns about the Y2K bug, the bursting of the dot-com bubble, the increasing precariousness of economic situation, DeLillo thus paints the picture of the end of cyber-capitalist mythology and the rise of the discourse of participative capitalism.

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## From Hopeless Selfhood to Hopeful Otherness: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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**Abstract:** The article examines the existential perspective—and its development—of the main character in Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*. Its protagonist is a man who, having witnessed the near total obliteration of the reality he was born into, struggles to find meaning in a world which continually reminds him of the debasement that the very notion of meaningfulness has undergone. In the apparent absence of any other available goals or social relations, ensuring the survival of his young son remains his sole guiding imperative, informed by the old concepts of filial duty and ethical standards, both interlinked with his faith, now deprived of all its affirmatory aspects. This cluster of moral motivations also compels him to assume an increasingly belligerent stance towards the “godless” outside reality. His radicalism is met with opposition from the son, whose own manner of being envisions empathy and hospitality where the father's sees only potential confrontation. The man gradually realizes the unbridgeable disparity between his own haunted psyche and the post-apocalyptic new identity of the boy, whose nature inspires defiant hope in the seemingly hopeless circumstances. McCarthy will eventually confront his protagonist with the necessity of making a choice which entails a major shift in his system of beliefs. It is only by electing to act in a manner which is absurd by his standards that the protagonist stands a chance of saving his entire struggle from sinking into meaninglessness.

**Keywords:** Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, post-apocalypse, meaning-making, God, father-son

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Among the privileges of living in the modern civilization is the received ability to apprehend—at least to a certain degree—the semiotic richness of everyday reality, to read the untold number of meanings and significations inscribed upon the material world, coupled with the relative freedom to define oneself, one's relation to and position vis-à-vis these meanings. Some maintain that the awareness of this richness, of existing in a perpetually open marketplace of ideas, as opposed to being wholly confined to a single dominant system of meaning-making, can have an adverse effect upon the individual, by posing constant problems of ontological nature. It is not frequently, however, that the ramifications of a hypothetical situation where an individual is confronted with a near total disappearance of this semiotic excess are explored, and the question of what happens to one whose environment ceases to provide support for one's notion of having his or her existence guided by a larger design is posed.

If contemporary American literature has an author whose credentials render him well-suited to explore such a scenario, this author is certainly Cormac McCarthy, a writer now celebrated for his uncompromising and frequently harrowing narratives, which, while situated usually in the American past, nonetheless tend to

be read as implicit mockeries of the notion of deriving order and significance from human history and existence. What happens to an individual plunged into a reality where the entire network of previously established meanings has been stripped away and discredited is a subject this essay intends to delve into in its interpretation of his novel, *The Road*. In my reading, I will refer to a number of philosophical systems that have shed light on the vexed relations between men's existential stances and faith.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Road*, McCarthy seems to arrive at a logical conclusion to the argument he ostensibly develops in the course of creating his body of work, by presenting a scenario where Earth has, by all indicators, come within a hair's breadth of a state of its complete biological death, spurred by a nonspecific catastrophe, in what seems to be the near future. The environment has assumed the form of a cold barren wasteland, and civilization, as one acquainted with the post-apocalyptic genre might expect, has devolved into atavistic barbarism, where the doomed, wretched, and "creedless" (McCarthy 28) remnants of humanity prey on each other, while trudging through the ash-coated roads towards nowhere. Rather than focusing on the most abject forms human existence can assume in such circumstances (as a reader acquainted with *Blood Meridian* or *Child of God* could expect), however, McCarthy chooses to center the narrative on characters determined to defy the savagery gradually suffusing their world, and to retain what little of the bygone civilization is still available to their powers of cognition. The protagonists—a father and his son—appear at the story's outset as basically of one mentality, with the son's mind being wholly receptive to the man's words. Eventually, though, each one proves to be fundamentally separate from the other in his essential condition. The man, witnessing his reality in the process of semiotic entropy, becomes belligerent in his desperate adherence to the core, stripped-down system of meanings and values he carries over from the past frameworks, even if he does so not without considerable anguish and existential uncertainty characteristic of an unhappy consciousness. This, however, leaves him ill-disposed to respond to the newly emerging system of meanings, born of and determining the *Dasein* of the child. This new system taking shape is oriented towards the absolute responsibility in regards to the other, as opposed to the self-centered and ultimately unsustainable value system that weighs upon and conditions the father's conduct. Oscillating between two irreconcilable imperatives—the external demand to act in accordance to laws that mandate a state of opposition to their current reality, and a desire to ensure his son's prosperity, possible only within that reality—the man faces an ultimate dilemma. The dilemma

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1 For an extended discussion of *The Road* in the context of Heidegger's theses regarding the self's loss and recovery as conditional upon the world and the self's possibilities of being in the world, see Thomas A. Carlson, "With the World at Heart: Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* with Augustine and Heidegger." For a detailed overview of the applicability of Levinasian and Derridean conceptions of responsibility and hospitality to the conduct of *The Road*'s protagonists, see Phillip A. Snyder, "Hospitality in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*."

only comes to be resolved at the story's climax, when the father commits to an act arguably most aptly described as a modern rendition of the Kierkegaardian leap of faith. Going against both his notions of morality and the dictates of reason, he chooses instead the absurd hope in what remains impenetrably other and alien to him—his sole remaining alternative to an utter erasure of the self.

From the novel's outset, the pair, determined to keep moving south in search of a hospitable land, defies the ongoing dissolution of order, which threatens to envelop the entirety of the physical world. The dissolution is hence "held up" in the process, according to Thomas A. Carlson, by their story, which serves as an "illumination of a darkness" that results from "the disappearance of worldly things and persons" (59). Their defiance is as daring as it is desperate, for in maintaining it they face forces inimical not merely to their physical existence—represented most notably by hunger, cold, and roving bands of cannibals—but, in the case of the father, whose psyche is anchored in the pre-apocalyptic past, also the very basis of his entire moral and psychological being. The man is vulnerable in these aspects, because his manner of reading the world emphasizes the teleological dimension of phenomena, and his mental balance depends on the ability to recognize and ascertain the meaning of objects and actions, understood in terms of their function, goal, or destination. In their predicament, the man struggles to uphold or recuperate the meanings of the material remnants of the former world, now deprived of any larger conceptual frame that formerly held them together within the realm of "meanings." The space in which they reside appears now as cold, vast, blind and indifferent to humanity's existence. The survivors are left to be governed by a "relentless circling of the intestate earth," surrounded by the incomprehensible force of "the crushing black vacuum," and feebly groping in the "autistic" darkness of the night (McCarthy 138). As a result, the considerable task of nourishing, or, if necessary, forging meaning where no apparent meaning persists, falls upon the man. Or so he believes before growing fully cognizant of an emerging new mode of reading the world—one proving to be incompatible with his ingrained preconceptions.

The primary wellspring of meaning available to the man derives from maintaining an absolute commitment to his son, and raising him to share the ethical values the man himself professes to uphold. He instructs the child that not to murder, eat, or steal from others distinguishes them as "the good guys" (81), who fulfill the uniquely ordained task of "carrying the fire" (87). The fire in question can be understood as representing on the one hand a life-giving power in the world plunged into a perpetual winter, but on the other also the flame of enlightenment, "the seeds of civilization," which, if it "is to return to the world, it will be through the efforts of 'good guys' like the man and the child," according to Erik J. Wielenberg (3–4). The child responds to the man's assertions with ample alacrity, and the principles outlined to him assume the form of unconditionally binding imperatives.

The father, whose one overriding imperative is the wellbeing of his progeny, does not remain unaware of this fact. Himself wrestling with personal flaws and existential doubts, he chooses to view the boy's unqualified belief, along with his

extreme selflessness, compassion and empathy, as a metaphysically based sign of a better reality inscribed in the boy, and, by extension, their bond. It leads him to perceive the son as holy, as the only indication of divine will still infusing the “barren, silent, godless” (2) world, or his “sole remaining referent of sacred idiom,” to quote Thomas H. Schaub (158). “If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (McCarthy 3), he concedes to himself in a statement which underscores the severity of his situation. It is on the boy’s survival alone that his hope of encountering or founding an order of existence fundamentally different from their present drudgery rests. Should that hope prove misplaced, his entire notion of goodness as real and meaningful is destined to collapse.

In what could be considered a consequence of formulating such an outlook, the man’s determination to preserve the boy from harm assumes a radical manner, which he articulates early on by assuring the son that he “will kill anyone who touches [him],” due to being “appointed to do that [i.e. protect the boy] by God” (McCarthy 80). His moral tenets become markedly flexible whenever the boy’s physical wellbeing is deemed to be at stake. Any potential encounter with strangers is perceived as a threat, which conflicts with the pair’s professed intent to find other good guys. This does not go unnoticed by the child, who treats their “good guys” status and the higher standards associated with it very seriously. In his view, informed by the father’s moral teachings, reaching out to fellow survivors, striving to expand the loving relation which the two of them share, constitutes their inarguable duty. The man “grudgingly recognizes [the] value” of the child’s unfaltering principles, and respects them, but he also “attempts to negate the boy’s empathy as a threat to their survival,” to quote Susan J. Tyburski (126). His inconsistency, hypocrisy even, in time becomes glaring and unavoidably factors into the pair’s relationship. After all, as Kristjan Mavri notes, “though the man may at times forget his own teachings, the boy always remembers” (10). After repeated instances where a possibility to attend to the other’s misery goes unheeded, the son comes to distrust the father along with his didactical accounts of the past, as seen when he rejects the father’s offer to tell him a story on the grounds that “in the stories we’re always helping people and we don’t help people” (McCarthy 287). The process of mental separation becomes here evident.

The man is naturally distraught by this developing estrangement, yet his hands remain essentially tied. He is only capable of reflecting his views on what constitutes a desirable morality by words and self-sacrificial gestures towards the child, and not in actual interactions with the outside world, which in his reckoning no longer evinces any signs of being compatible with or receptive to such behavior. “[T]he man’s first instinct is to distrust and avoid others” (Wielenberg 8), as well as to distrust any hints indicating a better tomorrow as possibly still awaiting them. In his eyes, happy dreams are an insidious temptation to quit struggling and embrace death, the boy’s claims of having spotted another boy betray a reckless illusion, and even a pristine bunker full of supplies soon becomes a potential trap. The material reality has utterly ceased to provide the father with existential guidance or support—

as noted by Carlson, “[g]oods and values, plans and projects, hopes and promises, all still appear... but in light of their now withdrawn possibility, in the failure of the world” (57). In such a world, sustained happiness or peace are no longer tangible, realistic possibilities, and they are instead relegated to the status of nebulous, unsubstantial concepts meant solely to prevent the struggle from appearing futile. The pair is, in the father’s estimation, posited in a state of unresolvable conflict with the inherently hostile world.

This stance is supported by his rational faculty, whose conclusions are best articulated by the man’s departed wife in their final exchange, which later haunts him in a flashback. There, she lays bare her conviction that the only feasible outcome of their journey will be that “they [i.e. the others] will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us,” and that the man has conceded to wait for it to happen instead of doing “the right thing” (McCarthy 58), which is to commit suicide. The woman arrives at a final conclusion in her reading of the post-apocalyptic landscape, and the father has no rational arguments with which to rebuke her, as his reason paints a fully concordant image of the world. What he has, in contrast to her, is an irrational love that “insists on a hope of possibility, which is to say of a world, in the child” (Carlson 62), and this love cannot be in any viable way transferred to the woman, leaving him to helplessly watch her abandon them to what she hopes to be an eternity of oblivion.

Yet, just as the man cannot share the hope his son embodies for him with the wife, neither can he extend it to the material present. It is here that the crux of an ontological division and disharmony afflicting the father is made apparent. As Alan Noble points out, “[t]he man has a hope in the future for his son,” but because of his radical opposition to the world, he “is incapable of conceiving of how such future could come about” (103). What is more, his perception of the son as special, even divine, seems to only be relevant, only acquire the dimension of truth, in the context of their personal relationship, so as to serve as an additional reason to guard him all the more fiercely. Behind it stands the possible fear that, if the son were to be exposed to the external conditions, the father’s reading of him as a supernatural being would be discredited, leaving just a helpless boy without personal agency and with an immense vulnerability to the world’s malign influence. This fear is implied by the man’s futile efforts to keep the child blissfully unaware of the various atrocities occurring on the road, but such gestures are also undermined by the fact that the son is in fact not oblivious to them, which does not interfere with his moral resolve. Nonetheless, the father’s faith reveals itself as entirely solipsistic and not projected outwards. Obviously, this poses the implicit danger of relegating the boy’s special qualities to the same functional limbo within which the father wishes to contain their stated dreams and hopes.

The father’s predicament is further exacerbated by the fact that, while his son remains the only presence to which he can relate positively, he is not the only entity with which his selfhood maintains a profound attachment. The apocalypse may have obliterated the previous order, the whole reality may have entered the process of

“shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities,” with “the names of things one believed to be true,” “slowly following those things into oblivion” (McCarthy 93), yet in the mind of the protagonist, the past has not yet faded out entirely. The specters of his life prior to the cataclysm keep intruding onto his consciousness, even if the meanings, signifiers and narratives associated with that life have now lost their footing, their referents. Perhaps not surprisingly, the strongest and most enduring of these meanings is the one supposed to transcend the physical realm, i.e. the divine, God. Steven Frye puts forward a view that “one of the most important questions posed in McCarthy’s works [is]: the question of God’s existence and nature, his presence in the world, and his role in steering the course of human lives and world history” (111). Few if any of the novelist’s works demonstrate this more plainly than *The Road*, which offers an extended meditation on this subject, presenting the father’s relationship to God as layered and deeply ambivalent, including the likelihood that the latter only became a significant aspect of the former’s existence in the aftermath of the apocalypse. As previously noted, the man states that his mission to protect the son, with violence if necessary, was appointed to him by God. This conviction appears to have a fundamentalist tinge to it, and indeed, the acts of violence committed by the man have a streak of religious zeal in them. Of note here is the follow-up to the pair’s confrontation with a cannibal—who ends up shot in the head by the father—where, while washing the assailant’s blood from his son’s hair, the man thinks of the action as “some ancient anointing”; also pertinent in this context is the scene where the father catches a thief and strips him naked in order to “leave [him] the same way [he] left [them]” (McCarthy 276). The notion of justice in the second instance in particular seems to distinctly evoke the harsh teachings of the Old Testament.

The father feels duty-bound to fulfill the imagined appointment, the commandment, even if it calls upon him to perform actions blatantly contradictory to the professed ethos of “the good guys,” and in turn to further alienate the son. Despite those sacrifices, the transcendent is apparently capable of offering very little in return, for the reason that, much like the rest of the man’s reality, it had eroded, dwindled, until it regressed to only a singular aspect—that of the aforementioned commandment. No longer inhabiting the “godless” world, in the father’s perception God cannot offer him any solace or mental support. Divinity, situated both somewhere outside and in the boy’s immanence, is positioned in sharp conflict with the material realm, much like in the case of an unhappy consciousness described by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. In delineating this term, the philosopher referred to his view of traditional Judaism, where man was supposedly placed at odds with hostile nature and his own corporeality, while yearning for unity with the utterly disparate and qualitatively distinct transcendent.<sup>2</sup> Likewise for McCarthy’s protagonist, God is no longer reachable—this sentiment of his is made apparent in his bitter exhortations to God—and if the boy is deemed fit “to house a god,” then the necessity of preserving him from the world is rendered all the more pressing. Similarly to the

2 See Mark C. Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard*, 37–42.

transcendent of the unhappy consciousness which figures primarily as an impossible demand, the father's transcendent has assumed a purely prescriptive nature, though this nature is maintained solely by the man's own mind, which continually refers back to the religion-influenced conceptions of paternal duty internalized prior to the apocalypse. As such, and again in concordance with Hegel's theory, it represents nothing but a burden for the protagonist, who in his cynicism is left unable to build upon this remaining singular aspect of religiousness, and can only impotently invoke His name and damn it. To quote Hage, the father "clings to his God and his morality and considers himself a final agent of His will, even if his mission exists in a void, the larger design of the world having been annihilated" (143).

As it becomes increasingly evident that the pair's path does not lead towards any utopian refuge, and that the man's physical condition will soon deteriorate to the point that travelling further will be beyond his physical capabilities, the matter of the sharp division between the outside world and the man, his God, and the God's last referent, assumes a critical significance. John Cant notes that "[t]his signifier of the father's doom is encountered at an early stage of the journey and we know that the question the novel must answer is not what will happen to the father, but to the son?" (187). After all, the father figures, without his protection the boy cannot be expected to fend off the hostile world. The commandment is to shield him from the pervasive evil of the world at all costs, and if the man is not to serve as his guardian, then the only alternative appears to be disentangling the son from the world permanently. The man finds himself in a predicament calling to mind the trial of the biblical Abraham, though there is no voice here to guide his actions, despite his pleas to God: "[t]ell me how I am to do that [i.e. die and presumably take the boy with him]" (McCarthy 187). Yet, to commit to such an act and to give expression to his faith in the transcendent and His demand—supported here, notably, by reason represented by the voice of the man's wife—is to annul the hope he has managed to maintain all this time; hope nourished by his love of the child. A contradiction between these forces emerges, prompting the father to chastise himself for not facing up to the reality of his obligation. Having bound his sense of meaning so strongly to a source profoundly disassociated from and opposed to the reality he has been "thrown into," he finds himself at loss when trying to justify his continued presence in this reality by appeals to this source, which leads to the self-accusations of cowardice and delusion.

Is it truly cowardice, though, which prevents the father from killing the boy and finally denying hope any legitimacy? Or is it perhaps the result of his underlying realization that what the boy embodies is what actually truly transcends him, goes beyond his understanding, his cognitive capabilities, or even his spirituality? During the one substantial conversation that the father conducts with a stranger in the course of the story, a man calling himself Ely, he admits, upon being asked if the boy believes in God, that he doesn't "know what he believes in" (185). And indeed, the boy's faith emerges as qualitatively distinct from his father's, to an extent that renders it near incomprehensible to him. As opposed to a craving for meaning in a world emptied out of meaning, the boy's faith seems engendered by an innate

sense of responsibility for the other. Innate, for even though it was the father that passed down his code of ethics to the son, the latter does not make his adherence to them conditional upon the father's approval or even his example. Not simply an acquired reflex, the son's sense of responsibility appears rather to determine his perception of morality than be determined by it, which is why he goes far beyond what the man desires in his attempts to reach out to the other. In this sense, the boy's stance correlates with Levinas's interpretation of responsibility as the primordial basis of all formalized ethics. On this view, the other figures as the true transcendent to whom one is inextricably and absolutely bound to respond.<sup>3</sup> This is very much reflected in the boy's behavior. When the father, after locating the unpillaged shelter, encourages him to speak a prayer as a gesture of gratitude for the supplies they have found there, the boy addresses it to its departed human builders, rather than God. The prayer, while inspired in a sense by the traditional thanksgiving prayer, is actually remodeled entirely by the son, to whom traditional religious customs are all but alien, compelling him to reinterpret man's approach to faith and imbue it with new significance. It is appropriated for the needs of the present circumstances, where it is faith in the other human that is necessary for survival, for finding strength to keep going. It is precisely this conviction that the father, with his "consistently traumatized and exhausted thought and speech patterns" (Cooper 226), has increasing difficulty in offering to the son. The boy addresses the presumably dead people by treating them as the good guys in absentia, even while acknowledging that the pair in all likelihood would not be enjoying their hospitality if the owners were alive. Phillip Snyder infers that the boy feels responsibility towards everyone, living or dead, whose actions had the effect of helping him and his father in their journey, whether intentional or not (84).

When at a different juncture the man washes the son's head of the cannibal's blood, he compares the action to a sacred ritual, presumably christening: "[s]o be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (McCarthy 77–78). The scene presents an attempt to attribute encoded, metaphysical meaning to a decidedly worldly action. Yet the similarity the "ceremony" bears to an actual christening does put the father's thoughts in question. There seems to reside in the father "a self-conscious awareness of his own actions as forms of analogy that wobble between faith and irony" (Schaub 159): he admits that no higher power, no divine consecration accompanies the deed, only his "breath," his own substance. More than anything else, it resembles a superficial reconstruction of the past expired customs, rather than the construction of truly new ones, indeed "out of the air," which could then be infused with equal legitimacy and possess the vitality needed to support one's inner life; or, to use Hegel's terminology, an objective rather than subjective religion.<sup>4</sup> The father has witnessed the collapse of civilization, morality, religion, and is now too jaundiced to carry out the act without an undercurrent of irony. He cannot transpose his faith in the son onto the world he

3 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, xii–xiv.

4 See Thomas A. Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel*, 26.

perceives as bankrupt and void of meaning. Even when he suggests the possibility of the son's divinity in the conversation with Ely, he seems to treat it more as an academic query than a sincere declaration of one's belief, effectively excluding his interlocutor from the possibility of participating in the pair's spiritual communion.

Now to contrast it with the attitude of the son: his prayer is also largely constructed ad hoc, "out of the air," but the sense of his conviction, his faith, truly resounds in it. There is no doubt, no irony or sense of futility to be detected in his thought-process, and that remains true throughout the novel, with his seriousness and dedication being reflected in his opinions and actions. More light on the boy is shed during interactions with others, including Ely. As a self-appointed prophet, Ely seems to carry only the message of despair and abandon—claiming that "there is no God and we are his prophets" (McCarthy 181). Nonetheless, he does, if perhaps not intentionally, offer a piece of valuable insight in his assertion that "where men cant live Gods fare no better" (183), which explains why the boy's belief in men remains unwavering regardless of the horrific accounts of their actions that he is subjected to—without belief in men there can be no belief at all. The man, initially reluctant to approach the haggard Ely, does so and subsequently offers him food only on the insistence of the child, to whom an act of kindness does not come preceded by stringent calculation. When afterwards the father compels the old man to thank the boy for sharing food with him, only to hear Ely's refusal, he admits: "[t]hat's not why he did it" (184). The boy insists on hospitality without expecting the father's approval, or any sort of reciprocation, which in Levinas's view is the only legitimate hospitality. Overall, he persists in seeking human goodness and opportunities to do good, when the father has long since forfeited the search. What is more, the boy does not shirk from assuming responsibility for the instances when they could not adequately respond to the call for help, as well as when the father consciously rejects it or perpetuates harm on the other. Such resolve definitely testifies to his strength of character and uniqueness; it proves that the man's belief in him is not unfounded, even if this fact ends up leading to friction between them.

No matter how much the father may object to the boy's attitude at times, he is nonetheless aware of the extent to which their relation, his son's presence in his life, actually keeps him from turning entirely towards the negative aspects of his existence. When he studies the features of the killed cannibal and punctuates this action by calling him "[m]y brother" (79), he thereby admits to an affinity that all the dregs of the old world inherently share. According to Carla M. Sanchez, this affinity consists in carrying a "burden that torments all adult survivors who witnessed the destruction of their world and the emergence of a lawless, godless, hopeless society" ("Survival and Morality"), but also in having experienced the complete undermining of the meanings and narratives which they have spent their lives cultivating, likely incapable of seeing beyond them. The father expresses this sentiment when mentally accusing the cannibals of "making of the world a lie every word" (McCarthy 79). A similar angry reaction is observed in him when he visits a ruined library. While there, the sight of rotting books inspires in him "rage at the lies arranged in their thousands

row on row” (199); a rage which can be partly explained by the man feeling himself saturated with these lies to the point that he can no longer disentangle himself from them, seeing as they constitute a crucial element of his identity. Mavri talks of “the failure of ‘old’ language and its concomitants to relate the truth of the natural and civilizational breakdown” (7), and among the language most culpable concomitants are those who speak it, including the father.

At this point the answer to the father’s ostensibly non sequitur, enigmatic query: “how does never to be differ from what never was” (32) becomes apparent. The difference is that between him and the boy, with him as an individual belonging to, “thrown into,” a particular time and culture—radically different from the present—and condemned “never to be.” Similarly to the dilapidated books, whose “value [is] predicated on a world to come” (199), the man’s mindset is oriented towards arriving at an impossible future defined by a set of conditions which once could, but now can no longer be fulfilled; conditions which stipulate that, among other things, approaching the other ought only to be undertaken when it is not accompanied by an inherent risk factor, and when it does not need to entail a willingness to sacrifice something of one’s own without an expectation of reciprocity. The father may act by apparently sensible considerations, but in doing so he nevertheless excludes the possibility of a positive final outcome. It is only the child—the one that “never was,” whom the past has not irreversibly affected with its no longer applicable modes of reasoning, whose moral commitment is not mediated by a sense of history or any other reservations—who can present to the father an alternative to living solely by the harshest notions of justice and self-preservation.

Yet no matter how much the man might appreciate the child’s significance, it does not change the fact that their differences cannot be fully reconciled. It is in connection to this that a thought occurs to him how “to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect” (163). This is probably his strongest articulation of the paradox implicit in their relation: which on the one hand is as intimate as possible for two human beings, and translates also to their mutual conditioning, yet on the other does not necessarily mean that they fully understand one another. Their modes of reading the world have essential differences—the boy believes the values the father teaches him, but he does so in a manner not available to the father himself, who is too saddled with the residue of history to maintain them with near as much sincerity. And history itself cannot be related from one to another, being as it is inextricably bound up with all the suffering its erasure has caused. The father concludes that “[h]e could not construct for the child’s pleasure the world he’d lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known this better than he” (163). The second part of this sentence involves a notable acknowledgment of the son’s inherent capacity for empathy and sensitivity to another’s pain. It may also imply, though, that the boy is aware of the experience gap between them, and how it is essentially incommunicable. In other words, it may well be that the boy has an intuitive feel for the utter remoteness of the other, or for that which, according to

Levinas, is the other's transcendent separateness. This is something the father has lost sight of, in his willingness to pronounce judgments and execute punishments to his preference. The man claims for himself the right to make categorical statements, to totalize—which is a tendency that the French philosopher identifies as violent.<sup>5</sup> The boy, by contrast, stays humble and open to otherness. At a different point in the novel, the boy seems to let out an additional clue as to his awareness of this disparity, when he tells the man, in relation to their encounter with Ely: “I wont remember it the way you do” (186).

Comparing the two's discrepancies obviously does not favor the man. However, as flawed as he emerges under such examination, we must take full notice of the exceptionality of the moral standard the father is set against. The boy presents a paragon of selflessness and conscientiousness that innumerable people existing in far less desperate circumstances than the father could in no way measure up to. To live in the shadow of such moral firmness, knowing that it falls upon you to nourish it all the while being continually scrutinized by it, is a daunting ordeal in itself. According to Snyder, it is Ely's primary message when he states that “to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true” (McCarthy 183), for “[w]hat may be terrible about travelling with this boy/god revolves around the ethical pressure he always brings to bear on his father” (Snyder 81). Indeed, the boy is hence simultaneously a source of comfort and pressure, much like a genuinely worshipped deity could be. The pressure cannot be relieved, for the father will always fall short of the absolute demands the son silently imposes on him as on the only one who can present to him an example of ethical conduct. What the bygone world was to the father, the father himself is to the boy, though while the world failed the father irrevocably, the child's capacity to forgive prevents him from becoming disillusioned by the father's various misdeeds. Instead, the boy's silent presence serves to constantly remind the man of the need to consider and try to amend his behavior.

In fact, it could be argued that the son already displays the ability not only to continually redeem the father, but also to, in his own unassuming but perceivable way, redeem the world, their environment. According to Sanchez,

The child experiences the environment differently from his father, not only because he belongs to it, but also because its lifelessness is temporarily cured by his presence. While the Father experiences a ‘cold autistic dark,’ the Boy is compelled to extend his hand to receive a snowflake, as if it were a natural gift, and he watches it dissolve ‘like the last host of Christendom.’ (“Survival and Morality”)

In the son's treatment, his reading of it, even the most trivial and transient elements of reality can be imbued with wonder, if not sanctity—features which the father can no longer distinguish or derive from reality on his own, being “newly

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<sup>5</sup> See Kevin McCain, “Response to Levinas,” 66, 68.

blind” and condemned to yearn for the bygone sensations of the old world. What is more, Sanchez suggests, while “McCarthy’s distinction of the flake as the last remnant of the Eucharist might seem to indicate an end of a benevolent Christian presence... this scene actually presents hope for a new covenant” (“Survival and Morality”). The boy is, after all, not held down by the preconceptions and prejudices which mandate seeing the present world as “barren” and “godless.” Containing within himself the “inherent vitality of the ardenthearted” (Cant 187)—which is possibly also the referent signified by the pair’s “fire” metaphor—he has the power to metaphorically transubstantiate the encountered objects so that the good, the beautiful, can never be eclipsed entirely by evil. In addition, the beauty itself carries no baggage for him, can be appreciated without reverting with his mind to the loss he has sustained, whereas for the father “[a]ll things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes” (McCarthy 56). Not even the still lingering objects worthy of admiration offer the man respite from his mourning; pain accompanies his every waking moment.

As a release from his sorrows no longer figures as an attainable prospect in life, the man’s only consolation stems from the certainty of the boy’s forgiveness. He knows that the boy’s unconditional love will allow him to live on in his thoughts and hence not vanish entirely from the world, the way he has experienced so many signs and referents vanish. He realizes that the transient nature of the world’s corporeality precludes men and their language from securing a lasting presence in this reality—at an earlier point, he asks himself: “What will you say? A living man spoke these lines? He sharpened a quill with his small pen knife to scribe these things in sloe or lampblack?” (280). Only his flesh, only his child can hold the memory alive; the memory of who he was and the values he stood for, unobscured by resentment. The father expresses this conviction while watching the boy framed by the campfire, thinking how “[t]here is no prophet in the earth’s long chronicle who’s not honored here today” (297). The child’s mode of existence, defined by responsibility and forgiveness, provides a better testimony to what was laudable in humanity than whatever the father could hope to achieve himself. However, this function of providing a testimony is of course contingent upon the son surviving the father.

Towards the end of the novel, the matter of the boy’s fate assumes center stage. The man’s health gives out, forcing him to arrive at a final decision in regards to his stated commitment to protect the child’s purity, to face that which he previously scolded himself for not daring to face. His dilemma, as previously noted, echoes that faced by the biblical father of faith. Noble describes it as an “inversion of Abraham’s test of faith” (103), since, ostensibly, in this case to abide by the divine mandate—which also speaks in accordance with reason—is to kill the son. However, as I tried to establish earlier, the sense of the divine present in the man’s life originates as much, if not more, from the child and what he represents, as it does from the man’s inner convictions, the vestiges of “a sacred idiom [now] shorn of its referents and so of its reality” (McCarthy 93) resounding in his troubled mind. The man’s immanent conception of the divine is the one he can more readily understand; its vengeful,

uncompromising and single-minded nature being attuned to his own psychological state. The boy's alternative divinity, on the other hand, is not to be internalized by the man. The prospects of an existence proposed by the son are wholly impenetrable to him: the child himself appearing to him towards the story's conclusion as "standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle" (293). From this passage it is obvious that the father infers two ideas. First, the son embodies the promise of a new covenant between man and the world. Secondly, the said covenant is not one he can partake in. Moreover, this covenant must appear as absurd to the man, being so at odds with his own experience in the wasteland, where the defenseless are herded like cattle and butchered. The son "glows" with the hope and possibility; his presence shines light upon and clears the view of a different mode of being, much like the clearing delineated by Heidegger.<sup>6</sup> The man is, however, too ensnared in his own being, his own *Dasein*, to perceive more than a glimpse of it. In light of that, the father's resolution to allow the son to go on unguarded can only be considered legitimate—as opposed to being motivated by cowardice or indecision—if it involves an actual leap of faith.

For the definition of a leap of faith I refer to Kierkegaard, who made use of his personal interpretation of the story of Abraham and Isaac to establish its essential aspects. Abraham was to him a Knight of Faith, who, loving Isaac and trusting God unconditionally, responded to the latter's call to sacrifice the former by acting accordingly to the "virtue of the absurd" (Kierkegaard 27). Believing against all sense that God expects him to perform the deed and yet will not take his son away from him, he committed to an "infinite resignation" of the self and acting "in absolute contradiction to his feeling" (64). The impenetrable reasoning of the transcendent Will became to him the overriding mandate, even if it necessitated a stance which rendered him an "individual in opposition to the others" (qtd. in Taylor 179). The philosopher noted that to observe a genuine leap of faith in a modern society is exceedingly rare, as religion has become tame and accommodating, with those performing radical acts not guided by the belief in the incomprehensible absurd, but rather in a version of the transcendent modeled by their own ego. Indeed, the set of circumstances described in this essay could hardly emerge in more grounded, familiar conditions, and it is partly due to the very extremity of the post-apocalyptic world that the opportunity for a true Kierkegaardian leap of faith could arise. The man is confronted with a choice either to snuff out the boy's life, effectively acceding to his internalized notions of "doing the right thing" suggested to him by voices from the past, or to trust the irrational, absurd hope that the impenetrable mode of being—the mode embodied by the boy—can flourish in this world even without his presence. To choose the latter, the father would need to withdraw or suspend the claims of his innermost beliefs. In Levinasian terms, this would also mean to sanctify the transcendence of otherness.

The man does not kill the boy, and while he explains it by his inability to

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6 See Theodore R. Schatzki, "Early Heidegger on Being, The Clearing, and Realism," 177.

do so, it is evident that his decision stems not from mere cowardice. His parting words to the son comprise a message of hope, in which he assures the son, even then worried about another boy he believes to have seen, that “[g]oodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again” (McCarthy 300). This utterance hints strongly at an act of reconciliation with the world taking place within his expiring heart, a willingness to admit the possibility of more than the constant peril and the “crushing black vacuum.” Tyburski proposes a reading of this statement as a “prayer of a dying man asking God to watch over his son” (127). However, this prayer is unlike any of the previous man’s verbalizations concerning God in that it presumes His continued presence and agency in the world—definitely indicating a progress taking place within the man’s perception. In line with that, his withdrawing the intention to end the son’s life represents the man’s singularly most profound gesture of religious trust, “the ultimate act of faith” (Noble 106) in that the divine within the boy can fare better than the God who used to claim dominion over the man. Hage, who notes the “suggestions that the son of the man is actually the Son of Man,” also quotes the critic William Kennedy, who describes the boy as an “unsubstantiated messiah” (53). Tragically, his quality of “unsubstantiation” had to persist for as long as the two remained together, as it was the man’s mode of life that remained binding, effectively obstructing the demands of responsibility.

The father passes away, leaving the son, who, Wielenberg writes, “is unable to connect with other good guys as long as his father is alive” (8), alone to face his greatest trial yet, to define his life anew outside of the relation with his former “world entire” (McCarthy 4). After three days of mourning, the boy is made to confront the other, now without a guardian and mediator at his side. By a stroke of luck bordering on implausibility, the others turn out to be the fabled good guys extending an invitation of hospitality. The boy, by not escaping or trying to defend against them—reactions which the father could be expected to have enforced on him—can now join a miniature community, with surrogate parents and siblings. “The fulfillment of this messianic expectation justifies the dying father’s faith in the future as well as his refusal to use his last bullet on his son,” writes Snyder (83). The departed man, from whom he has inherited “the breath of God,” which according to his new mother “pass from man to man through all of time” (McCarthy 306), assumes the place of a divine to whom the son may direct his prayers. Organic now, as well as congruent with the tangible lives of the people of the road, instead of engendering separation and conflict, the “God is immanent in the breath of the living and continues, perpetuating itself through the bonds of human connection” (Frye 177). The faith assumes a subjective nature, rather than an objective of a “dead idiom.” The fire continues to burn, shared now by an expanding group of survivors, whose prospects are uncertain yet not hopeless. A startlingly upbeat conclusion by McCarthy’s standards, it appears to lend credence to a mode of being that lies outside the strictly rational framework, implying that the possibility of coexistence with the other can never be discounted entirely, even if no indicators of it remain.

Despite ending in death, the man's fate should likewise be considered decidedly less gloomy than that of many McCarthy's protagonists. Having wrestled throughout the novel with the accelerated entropy of the world, along with the meanings, referents, and principles he once took for granted, he did not end up with nothing. Nor did he finally accede to the voices which threatened to deprive him of all hope and consolation in the name of upholding the tenets that plainly remained no longer applicable to the present reality. Whether posing as reason or as the transcendent, these internalized frameworks of meaning-making had in the process of world-spanning effacement been reduced to the most radical and callous sets of directives. The man could not erect any more affirming structures of thought, too weighted down by the pain of such a sweeping loss, such a profound undermining, of what he had held to be true. His agency in that area was compromised by his experience and the ensuing distrust of his own faculties. However, while the man could not navigate himself out of that quagmire, he was at least conscious of how the other closest to him remained free of it, suggesting thereby that a mode of existence alternative to his own despair was possible still. The other, his son, was not only unburdened by an existential load, but was in fact willing to embrace one by unconditionally accepting responsibility for other human beings. For the man, this attitude constituted a mark of divinity, which nonetheless resulted in an even more severe struggle against the world with an effect of not allowing said divinity to substantiate itself in that reality. Incapable of partaking in that divinity, convinced that any form of it is incompatible with the world, he endeavored to maintain their isolation while ostensibly pursuing a nebulous goal. Once his own body started failing him, though, he was forced to face the true choice—the choice between nothingness, which his inner voices called for, and the transcendent otherness, which however could hopefully carry a particle of his into the future, no matter how absurd that hope might have seemed. By choosing hope, the father died without being consumed by the vacuum, the oblivion; he did not disappear into the past only to have any traces of his life duly follow. His name, incorporated into a prayer, remains resonant, for as long as the fire remains lit.

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## Dangerous Pets, Misguided Owners: The Pitfalls of Pet-Keeping in T.C. Boyle's Stories

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**Abstract:** The present article is an attempt to look at the human-animal relationship in selected stories from T. Coraghessan Boyle's two collections: *Tooth and Claw* (2006) and *Wild Child* (2010). In "Thirteen Hundred Rats," "Tooth and Claw" and "Admiral" Boyle ponders on human motivations behind such controversial contemporary practices as keeping exotic pets, hoarding animals and cloning dogs. The stories focus on the dark side of pet-keeping, rarely touched upon in literary representations of this widespread social practice. Boyle seems to doubt the sincerity of human devotion to animal companions, presenting characters who acquire unusual or exotic pets for purely utilitarian or egotistical reasons. In Boyle's stories human dominance over life and death of pets symbolizes human power over nature. Yet these fantasies of power prove illusionary when exotic or unusual pets (python, serval, rats) transform civilized domestic space of the characters' homes into the uncivilized "jungle." In a sense, abused animals take symbolic revenge on their irresponsible caretakers. Dog-cloning, in turn, is presented as a misguided attempt to combat death, a means to provide immortality for a dog, which is treated both as a surrogate child and a status symbol by his millionaire owners.

**Keywords:** T.C. Boyle, short story, pet-keeping in literature, exotic pets, animal hoarding, dog cloning, human-animal relationship

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Pets became an integral part of the middle-class family life in the United States in the nineteenth century. A happy and respectable middle-class household could not be complete without a family dog on the front lawn or cats, canaries or parrots in the living room. Pets were not only kept for pleasure—love and kindness to animals were also a visible proof of high moral standards of the family members. According to Katherine C. Grier, "the domestic ethic of kindness evolved from ideas that defined middle-class, or 'Victorian,' culture in America: gentility, liberal evangelical Protestant religion, and domesticity" (131). Prior to the Victorian era, pet-keeping was seen at best as a leisurely pursuit of the rich, stemming from personal extravagance or perverted maternal instinct. It was in the nineteenth century that care for domestic animals came to be seen as instrumental in teaching children important moral values and useful social virtues. As a result, pet-human relationship was idealized with happy pets cast in the stereotypical roles of loyal friends and children's playmates.

While most proponents of pet-keeping at that time focused on childhood, some of them also commented on the therapeutic value of pets for lonely adults: "The companionship of cats and birds in solitary lives has unquestionably kept more people than we suspect out of the insane asylum; and if friendless men took kindly to them, there would be fewer misers, drunkards, and criminals than there are now"

(qtd. in Grier 179). The tendency to associate pets with the quality of life—quite a novel idea at the turn of the nineteenth century—is at present seen as a dominant rationale behind pet-keeping. Positive influence of companion animals, especially dogs, upon human health has been confirmed by medical research (Wells 145-156). Sociologists who study interactions with pets have recently argued that dogs and cats not only function as non-human family members for many single people but also provide much needed social support as their presence helps to overcome social isolation and to make new friends in the neighborhood (Wood et al. 1-2).

Even though companion animals are no longer expected to improve one's moral character but rather one's health and social life, present-day Americans, much like their Victorian ancestors, are eager to find out more about various aspects of the human-animal relationship. There is a surge of interest in animal ethology and animal psychology. "The secret life of pets" has been analyzed and explained in countless training manuals and popular science books addressed at a general reader. Animals and human interactions with them have also recently become a legitimate topic of scholarly research. Explaining "the animal turn" in the humanities, Kari Weil suggests that it "grows out of, on the one hand, a weariness with post-structuralism's linguistic turn and a resulting search for a postlinguistic and perhaps posthuman sublime and, on the other hand, an often conflicting turn to ethics that raises the question of our human responsibility to the animal-other" (xx). Ethical concerns are in fact of primary importance to Critical Animal Studies (CAS) whose practitioners combine scholarly research with animal advocacy hoping "to eliminate the oppression of nonhuman animals in all social contexts" (DeMello 17). While Human-Animal studies (HAS), as DeMello asserts, are "not about animal advocacy" they cannot be seen as divorced from real-life human-animal interactions. Cultural or literary scholars who examine the bond with animals in culture or literature produce knowledge which is likely to affect their readers' attitude to the animal question (DeMello 17). In other words, taking real animals and their literary representations seriously may make readers aware of the existence of some ethical quandaries inherent, for example, in such a popular social practice as pet-keeping.

The present article is an attempt to look at the human-animal relationship in selected stories from T. Coraghessan Boyle's two collections: *Tooth and Claw* (2006) and *Wild Child* (2010). The titles point to some recurrent themes in Boyle's oeuvre, namely his preoccupation with mankind's place in nature and the human/animal divide. The stories—"Thirteen Hundred Rats," "Tooth and Claw" and "Admiral"—can also be read from Animal Studies' perspective as Boyle ponders in them on human motivations behind such controversial contemporary practices as keeping exotic pets, hoarding animals and cloning dogs. In fact, Boyle's objections to these phenomena raised in the stories evoke—indirectly or directly—arguments used in similar cases in the real life.

The species earliest domesticated by humans—dogs and cats—are still the most popular animals kept as pets in American households. According to *American Pet Product Manufacturers Association*, there are more than 94 million cats and

almost 90 million dogs living in the American houses in 2017 ("Pet Industry"). A prevalent view that a dog or a cat (rather than a fish, bird or exotic snake) is an appropriate companion for a lonely person is the premise for "Thirteen Hundred Rats." The story is set in a secluded village—"a model of Utopian living"—which was designed and built one hundred years ago by some wealthy industrialist (Boyle, *Wild Child* 182). The fact that it is now inhabited by affluent, upper-middle class professionals, frequently childless by choice, has fostered "a closeness and uniformity of outlook you wouldn't find in some of the newer developments" as the story's narrator proudly claims (182). The members of this sheltered and privileged community, which evokes John Cheever's vision of American suburbs, think of themselves as model neighbors.

The narrator, acting as a voice of the village, tells a curious tale of Gerard, a man "who never in his life had a pet of any kind until his wife died" (182). The opening sentence not only sets Gerard apart from most Americans but also seems to suggest that such lack of experience with pets may have some dire consequences. After his wife's death Gerard succumbs to depression. He is thin and haggard, he wears dirty clothes and he neglects his house so the concerned neighbors suggest a perfect solution: "He should have a dog, people said" (182). At first, Gerard stubbornly refuses to follow this folk wisdom but eventually he does buy a pet—young Burmese python. As can be expected, the narrator is dismayed at this extravagant choice: "It was just that a snake wasn't what we'd in mind. Snakes didn't fetch, didn't bound into the car panting their joy, didn't speak when you held a rawhide bone just above shoulder level and twitched it invitingly. As far as I knew, they didn't do much of anything except exist. And bite" (185). In short, wild and potentially dangerous snakes do not make proper pets. In this comment, the narrator refers back to his own experiences with companion animals, experiences which Gerard unfortunately lacks. However, when the narrator ponders on his own relationship with pets, it becomes clear that his attitude is more utilitarian than emotional. The narrator's dogs—a pair of shelties named Tim and Tim II—are kept to provide daily exercise during the walks. Additionally, their energy and friendliness is to cheer one's up—according to the article quoted in the story "ninety-three percent of pet owners say their pets make them smile at least once a day" (182). The role of the two chattering lorikeets is to create "a tranquil background to our evening by the fireplace" with their chatter, while a fat angelfish in a tank serves as a decoration of his otherwise austere study (182).

Satirizing both the narrator's expertise about pets and his snug complacency, Boyle seems to ask about the real motivations behind contemporary pet-keeping fad. Have not pets simply become one more commodity required to live a healthy and comfortable life? According to a recent APPA survey, American pet owners tend to perceive themselves as people who are "health conscious, like to look [their] best and like to exercise with [their] pet. [They] are also happy and maintain a well-organized home" (Anderson 84). All the inhabitants of the village, except for Gerard, fit the above description and it is quite obvious to the reader that their devotion to companion animals stems from practical, rather than sentimental, reasons.

In the light of these largely anthropocentric and utilitarian views on the role of pets in human life, the narrator's dismay at the snake is understandable—it is not really a domesticated animal and it is neither useful as a companion nor can it create a cozy, domestic atmosphere. As such, it has no therapeutic potential for Gerard. Moreover, Gerard is far from a responsible pet guardian as he has bought the snake on a whim and treats it only as a curiosity, clearly enjoying the narrator's reaction of shocked disbelief. The name he wants to give to the young python—Siddhartha—evokes Oriental mysticism rather than closeness and familiarity. As can be predicted, Gerard quickly gets bored with the python and when the snake freezes to death during a power cut, it is not missed. In the meantime, the lonely widower becomes fascinated with a live rat, originally bought for the snake's dinner. Again acting on a whim, Gerard saves its life and the rat, named Robbie after Gerard's brother, soon becomes his true pet—it sleeps in his bed, eats morsels of his food and accompanies him everywhere, perched on his arm. Since rats are social creatures, Gerard decides to buy more rodents to keep Robbie's company, disregarding the warning of the pet store shop assistant that the species breed quickly.

Unlike a dog, which would facilitate interaction with neighbors during the walks, the “pets” that Gerard has chosen deepen his social seclusion. He loses interest in any contacts with the neighbors, rejects invitations to dinners and turns into a recluse, leaving the unkempt house only to buy food for his growing colony of rats. When the smell emanating from the house finally alarms the neighbors, it is too late. Gerard is found dead—ostensibly from pneumonia—among approximately thirteen hundred rats. Wondering what made his neighbor “sunk so low” the narrator states:

There must have been some deep character flaw in him that none of us had recognized—he'd chosen a snake for a pet, for God's sake, and that low animal had somehow morphed into this horde of creatures that could only be described as pests, as vermin, as enemies of mankind that should be exterminated, not nurtured... [H]ow could he allow even a single one of them to come near him, to fall under the caress of his hand, to sleep with him, eat with him, breathe the same air? (195)

Rats, associated in Western culture with poverty, dirt, plague and death, have always been treated as humans' rivals and enemies, and they inspired revulsion and terror rather than sympathy (Sax 201). By adopting “pests” as his pets Gerard violates the arbitrary yet still powerful social and cultural division between tame/safe versus wild/dangerous animals. From a functional and symbolic perspective pets are “kept in or near a human household, are relatively controllable and cared for by humans, and are either domesticated or at least tame” (DeMello 149). While a single rat can perhaps become a pet, a whole colony of them cannot be tamed or kept under control. As a result, in his final period of life Gerard is at the mercy of these “low” animals, living only to satisfy their needs and neglecting his own. His horrifying demise reveals the scope of his self-deception. He has symbolically and literally forsaken

the civilized human world with its norms and rules in order to share with his pe(s)ts chaotic and violent world of nature “red in tooth and claw.” This is no place for a psychologically unstable and physically frail widower, who feels “overwhelmed” by the “force of nature” as he confesses in his final conversation with the narrator (Boyle, *Wild Child* 194).

In classic horror tales, for example in Lovecraft's “Rats in the Wall,” the rat is the agent of fear and human dissolution not only in a physical but also in a mental sense (Burt 10). In “Thirteen Hundred Rats” Boyle relies on the same trope—the growing number of rats in the house symbolizes Gerard's growing insanity. The abhorrent smell—first the smell of unwashed human body, then the smell of deposited animal excrements in the house—suggests the character's regression into the animal state of existence, beyond cleanliness, reason and rationality. Unlike his neighbors, who are nauseated by the idea of sharing a house with a colony of rats, Gerard finds rats oddly fascinating. His inability or unwillingness to interfere with the breeding habits of pests remains a mystery but the results are disastrous. Hungry, maddened rats which breed, fight and cannibalistically devour one another, transform a safe domestic space into a nightmarish arena of primal struggle. Not merely dirty and chaotic, Gerard's house becomes uncivilized because the conventional societal norms regulating domestic animals' behavior, eating and excretion have been abandoned.

On another level, for all its stock horror elements, the story can also be read as an fictionalized account of a mental disorder called “animal hoarding” characterized by the compulsive need to collect and own pets. According to the recent estimates, there are 700 to 2000 cases of animal hoarding reported in the United States every year (Arluke et al. 114). Some researchers point out that this “deviant expression of the human-animal bond” should be in fact treated as a third dimension of animal abuse because it leads to physical and psychological suffering of animals and frequently ends in their death (Patronek 221). Typically, the collected animals are concealed inside the hoarder's homes which, as a result, become unsanitary and unfit for human habitation (Patronek 222-223). Paradoxically, animal hoarders often act on good intentions but then are unable to provide adequate amount of food and proper living conditions for a growing number of animals (Arluke et al. 114). “Thirteen Hundred Rats,” much like real-life press reports of animal hoarding, mixes drama, revulsion and humor in its presentation of Gerard's case. However, while most actual hoarders are motivated by “love” for animals and wish to “rescue” feral cats or stray dogs from the harsh life on the streets, Gerard starts his collection primarily because it gives him a sense of power. As the narrator asserts: “He felt like a god, like a Roman emperor with the power of fatality in his thumb” (189). Yet, as the story develops, this sense of power proves illusory because the animals eventually take control of the house and cause his death.

A similar motif of a wild animal which is supposed to function as a pet but instead wreaks havoc in the domestic space and in his owner's life is employed in “Tooth and Claw.” The title of the story clearly alludes to Tennyson's famous phrase “Nature red in tooth and claw,” which sums up a post-Darwinian concept of nature

as brutal and amoral. A first-person narrator of “Tooth and Claw” is Junior, a young worker in his twenties, living in a town where he has no friends or relatives. Every afternoon he goes to Daggett’s, a local bar, where, one day, he unexpectedly wins a serval—the feral African cat. The caged cat is won in a play of dice; this fact as well as the title of the story suggest that Junior is a pawn in a play of forces he can neither understand nor control.

The plot of the story may seem unusual but servals and other wild cats, including tigers, are indeed kept as pets in the United States. It is estimated that there are more tigers currently living in the American homes or being displayed in private zoos (between 5,000-10,000) than there are left in the wild worldwide (approx. 3,200) (Mosbergen). Unfortunately, proper supervision of exotic pets’ owners and control over their treatment of animals is poor because state laws and regulations are insufficient or even non-existent. Animal welfare organizations, which try to monitor exotic pets, point out that nobody knows how many such animals are owned and bred by the individuals or what happens to them when they die (Mosbergen). There is a suspicion that some exotic animals may fuel the exotic pet trade, which has become a multi-billion dollar industry in the United States, making it the second largest importer of wildlife after China (qtd. in Klossner).

Why do people keep wild animals as pets? Some Animal studies scholars see an analogy between economic and cultural subordination of the foreign, exotic peoples by the European colonial powers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the contemporary desire to possess and display an exotic animal in one’s home (Klossner). In the past, only the kings and princes could afford to maintain zoos or menageries which testified to their wealth and power (Ritvo 206). Even today exotic animals are much rarer, harder to obtain and more difficult to maintain so tigers, bears or apes kept in the house point to the high social status of their owners. Moreover, the wild animal may be attractive for some people precisely because of its wildness: “it is less subservient... unpredictable and won’t take orders. The owners also often want to prove that they have power over it and to shock people” (Derr). It is noteworthy that gender may also influence exotic pet preferences. While male owners prefer dangerous predators, women are more likely to adopt “cute” creatures (Derr).

In Boyle’s story, the wild cat certainly functions as a symbol of masculine power and sexual attractiveness. The first owner of the serval is presented as an intriguing and self-confident young man. As soon as he enters the bar, he attracts everyone’s attention with an extravagant order of two raw eggs for his wild cat. Clearly, owning the wild animal puts this man in a position of power, the position Junior himself craves, that is why he agrees to play dice with a stranger. Immediately, the regulars take notice of the shy young man and Daria, an attractive waitress, offers to drive him home, helps with carrying the cage and feeding the animal.

For Junior, the animal is first and foremost a means to get closer to the girl. He is fascinated with the cat’s otherness but also afraid of it: “The cat flowed like a molten ore from one corner of the room to the other, its yellow eyes fixed

on the door, the dun, faintly spotted skin stretched like spandex over its seething muscles (Boyle, *Tooth and Claw* 218). Daria, in turn, is definitely more interested in the exotic cat than its accidental owner but she chooses to erase the animal's otherness by treating the pacing predator as if it were a scared domestic cat: "Nice kitty," Daria cooed. "Does he want out of that awful cage? Hmm? Does he? And meat—does he want meat?" (215). The girl's reaction seems absurd yet somehow understandable—she simply resorts to the type interaction familiar to her from her personal experiences with domestic cats. Daria wishes to tame the wild serval, turn it into "a nice kitty." According to Serpell, keeping wild animals at home is always a source of tension because "People want them wild, but they also want them to behave" (qtd. in Derr). Most exotic species, including big cats, cannot fulfill these contradictory expectations and it is no different with the cat in the story.

Nevertheless, Junior has homemaking fantasies connected with the wild cat—he envisions the girl falling in love with him and moving into his flat. They will "look after the big cat together, see to its needs, tame it and make it happy in its new home—no more cages, and meat, plenty of meat" (224). In other words, he dreams about them as a happy couple with the serval in the role of a pet child which strengthens the bond between the parents. This vision of domestic bliss is as naïve and unrealistic as Daria's syrupy baby-talk directed at the cat yet it is not totally divorced from life since at least some young couples treat caring for a pet as a good practice before becoming parents.

Just like Gerard in "Thirteen Hundred Rats," Junior has no prior experience with pets and treats the animal as an object that can be exchanged and discarded at will. In contrast to Daria, he feels no sympathy for the cat. He is afraid of being left on his own with the dangerous animal. The cat, released from the cage, is pacing the tiny bedroom and soon starts demolishing it: "The carpeting—every last strip of it—had been torn out of the floor, leaving an expanse of dirty plywood studded with nails, and there seemed to be a hole in the plasterboard just to the left of the window. A substantial hole. Even through the closed door I could smell the reek of cat piss or spray or whatever it was" (222). Even though Daria assures Junior that the cat will soon settle down, this seems very unlikely and he feels even more resentment towards the unlucky serval: "The only thing I did know was that there was no way I was going to attempt to feed that thing on my own, not without Daria there. It could starve for all I cared, starve and rot" (226). In his interior monologue the cat has now become a dangerous, unpredictable "thing." There is no possibility of taming it, the only solution seems to be releasing the animal before it attacks the owner.

Junior's immaturity and lack of control over his life is evident not only from the fact that a stranger in the bar so easily maneuvered him into accepting the wild cat but also from his internal dilemmas. Junior lacks self-assurance, he constantly wonders about how he should act or what people may think of him or say to him. He gets drunk to give himself some confidence but alcohol only makes him rash and reckless. When he finally decides to solve the problem of the cat he acts in a totally irresponsible way as he steals a ladder and leaves it below the open bedroom

window. Only after that decision, as he returns to the flat and looks at a makeshift den that the serval has built in the ruined room, he begins “to feel something for the cat, for its bewilderment, its fear and distrust of an alien environment: this was no rocky *kopje*, this was my bedroom on the second floor of a run-down apartment building in a seaside town a whole continent and a fathomless ocean away from its home” (228). At this point Boyle establishes a parallel between the lost young man and the restless young cat—both are far away from home and both feel out of place. The story has an open ending since it is unclear whether the cat has really escaped the room. In the last scene Junior enters the bedroom and suddenly closes the door shut behind him as if ready to face the possible predator’s attack.

Both “Thirteen Thousand Rats” and “Tooth and Claw” present cases of pet-keeping gone awry, mainly because the animals kept as pets do not really belong into this category. The wildness of snakes, rats or servals makes them act on their instincts. These species are not social, expecting them to become companion animals stems from human ignorance. They cannot adapt to life in a closed space. Moreover, these animals have been acquired to boost their owners self-esteem and attract attention of others. Gerard is pleased when the snake causes a stir among his neighbors. Since no one has even thought about buying such an extravagant pet, he may feel superior to those who keep ordinary dogs and cats. The wild serval in “Tooth and Claw” is also an exotic “pet” which ensures Junior’s instant, if short-lasting, popularity with Daria and recognition from the people at Daggett’s. It is obvious that he does not want the animal but human interest that comes with it. In both stories animals are treated in an instrumental way and their actual needs are disregarded. Introduced into domestic space, semi-tamed rats and the wild cat gnaw and tear at house furnishings, urinate and defecate on the carpets thus transforming orderly “civilized” space of a human house into “uncivilized” smelly dens unfit for human habitation. In a sense, abused animals take symbolic revenge on their irresponsible caretakers and dispel their fantasies of male power and domination.

Gerard and Junior’s fascination with otherness proves disastrous—confrontation with “the beast” introduced into the house reveals fundamental weakness of these men. Dangerous pets get out of control because their owners are unable to exercise control over their own lives and destinies. Gerard’s rat-like existence in the final days of his life means he has indeed “sunk so low” as to violate all the taboos regarding personal and domestic cleanliness, order and safety. The price for forsaking humanity is high—Gerard loses his house, his mind, and eventually his life. Compared to Gerard, Junior has fared better and survived his failed pet-keeping experiment, yet there is no indication that he has learned any lesson from it.

The third story I want to discuss—“Admiral”—also offers a comment on pet-keeping as a social practice but this time the target of Boyle’s satire is excessive love for a dog combined with complete disregard for the feelings of fellow humans who happen to be below the owners on a socio-economic scale. Obviously, this is a familiar theme in literature devoted to pets and their masters. Eighteenth-century British moralists often relied “on a common contemporary association between

women, fashion and pet keeping” castigating aristocratic ladies for lavishing all their love and tenderness on spoiled lap-dogs while neglecting needs of the poor (Tague 293). In Boyle’s contemporary rendition of this familiar narrative the role of heartless aristocrats is played by the Strikers, middle-aged Californian millionaires and the pampered dog is Admiral, a purebred Afghan hound. When the beloved dog is hit by a car and dies, the Strikers decide to clone him and in order to complete the process of upbringing, they employ Nisha, an African-American college graduate who used to take care of Admiral I. The girls’ task is to repeat all the youthful experiences—except for the risky ones—of the original dog in order to “produce” exact replica of the dead Admiral.

The story is narrated from Nisha’s point of view and centers on her internal conflict: she accepts the Strikers’ generous offer because she needs this easy money for her sick mother, yet, at the same time, she feels exploited and doing the job much below her qualifications and aspirations.

As for the dog, she tried to be conscientious about the whole business of imprinting it with the past—or a past—though she felt ridiculous. Four years of college for this? Wars were being fought, people were starving, there were diseases to conquer, children to educate, good to do in the world, and here she was reliving her adolescence in the company of an inbred semi-retarded clown of a cloned Afghan hound because two childless rich people decreed it should be so. (*Tooth and Claw* 153)

For Nisha, the idea to spend so much money and energy to (re)create the “perfect dog” seems crazy and absurd but initially she treats it only as an extravagance of the very rich and does not think about any ethical implications of the process or her own role in it.

“Admiral” can be read as a fictional equivalent of “the pampered pet tale,” a subcategory of pet reportage about the dogs owned by the millionaires (Schaffer 26). Such purebred pet celebrities like Paris Hilton’s tiny chihuahuas are usually treated as status symbols. Much like other fashionable accessories they are displayed in order to confirm celebrity status of their mistress. Even though these dogs have their own staff and all their needs—both real and imagined—are immediately satisfied, they function mainly as ornaments, not as companions. Pampered pet tales speak of extravagant lifestyles of the very rich and usually evoke a combination of amazement and disdain in the general reader.

Little Admiral II also enjoys a celebrity status in Boyle’s story. Moreover, much like purebred dogs of the European royal families or the English gentry, this unique puppy confirms high social position of the Strikers—after all not everybody can afford to pay 250 000 \$ to clone a dog. No wonder his owners are eager to talk to the press and proudly inform Nisha about the articles in both *Newsweek* and *USA Today* featuring their story. It is interesting to contrast the Strikers’ self-promotion and thirst for fame with the much more reserved behavior of their real life counterparts—a millionaire couple from Texas who launched the Missypticity

Project in 1998 to clone their family dog—Missy. Missy’s owners wished to remain anonymous, redirecting instead the media’s attention to Missy and the project itself. Another crucial difference lies in Admiral’s and Missy’s respective pedigree—while the former is a purebred Afghan hound, Missy was a mixed-breed bitch. According to Susan McHugh, the fact that her owners invested two millions dollars to clone a mongrel family dog sets the Missyplicity Project apart from earlier cloning experiments: “By attempting to clone an animal who, from the standpoint of the burgeoning ‘technoscientific’ animal industries, represents a non-human-regulated and therefore worthless genetic record, the Missyplicity Project, in its object-choice, moves against the tide of economically driven science in the Genetic Age” (181). Though the researchers engaged in the original project did not manage to produce Missy’s clone, genetic material from Missy has been later used to produce her three clones at the Sooam Biotech Research Foundation in Seoul in 2005. Missy was not the world’s first cloned dog, however, because earlier in 2005 South Korean researcher Woo Suk Hwang and his team at Seoul National University proudly presented Snuppy to the world.<sup>1</sup> Like the Striker’s Admiral, Snuppy was an Afghan hound. In his tale, Boyle combines elements from these two, much publicized, real-life stories of cloned dogs but he seems less interested in bioethical dilemmas<sup>2</sup> than in human motivations behind the decision to clone a family dog.

In “Admiral” these motivations are far from noble. In the words of Erhard, animal right activist and journalist who befriends Nisha, the Strikers clone their dog “to satisfy their own solipsistic desires” (160). Indeed, the Strikers are presented as one-dimensional, stereotypical millionaires: egotistical, emotionally withdrawn, convinced that money can provide solutions to all the problems. They have no children so the dog clearly functions as a surrogate “perfect” offspring—well-bred and well-mannered. Admiral’s oil portrait in the living room confirms the dog’s high position in the family. Erhard, with his leftist views, dismisses the couple’s love for the dog as an example of “bourgeois excess” and certainly Mrs. Striker’s emphasis on her dog’s pedigree and its exceptionality can be read as a manifestation of upper-class snobbery.

It is probably not accidental that the story is set in California, the state whose inhabitants are known for their obsession with wealth, youth, and fitness. Death is not allowed into an enclave of wealth and comfort that the Strikers created, isolating themselves from the mundane reality by state-of-the-art security systems and high walls. They refuse to accept any changes—when Nisha reenters their house after a

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1 The decision to clone the dog was considered controversial because, unlike cloning for agricultural purposes or for biomedical research it could not have been justified with advancement of science or medicine for the greater human good (Fiester 34). Moreover, the procedure was exorbitantly costly and detrimental to health of the animal donors involved in the procedures; out of more than a thousand extracted eggs implanted in 123 surrogates only two embryos developed properly and only one puppy survived to grow into an adult dog (Brownlee 83).

2 Some of these dilemmas are discussed in Haraway 133-157.

few years' absence she is surprised that everything looks exactly as it did in the past. Their refusal to accept death as a part of life speaks about "a larger symptom in our culture of not dealing with death" (qtd. in Fiester 37). By cloning a pet, the owners are making a statement about its irreplaceability—they do not wish to adopt or buy another dog of the same breed. They seem emotionally unprepared to face grief and too afraid of change to open up to the possibility of loving another pet. Thus, cloning becomes a biotechnological weapon to win the war with death, a means to provide immortality for a beloved animal.

Sadly, both for Erhard and for the Strikers, the dogs are more important than people. Convinced of his own righteousness, the young man wishes to prove that the couple would not be able to distinguish their precious pup from another, ordinarily bred Afghan hound. Nisha, infatuated with him, agrees to have Admiral II replaced with Erhard's dog but Mrs. Striker immediately recognizes the switch. Even though Erhard's animal rights zeal seems sincere it is obvious that he treats Nisha in an instrumental way. The Strikers buy her dog-sitting services with money while Erhard uses his masculine charm to seduce the girl and thus ensure her assistance. When the plan fails, he disappears without a word. Once again, Nisha has been treated as a pawn in a big game played by others. Eventually, as the conclusion of the story suggests, her quiet rebellion is likely to undo the whole perfect scheme as she is planning to teach Admiral II all the risky behaviors that contributed to his predecessor's death.

"Show me your pet and I will tell you who you are"—Boyle is telling the readers in his animal stories. Unlike the authors of funny, sentimental pet memoirs like Grogan's *Marley and Me*, he does not focus on positive aspects of pet-keeping and is far from exploring the depth of emotional bonds between pets and their guardians. Exotic or unusual pets in his stories become a source of problems, rather than a source of joy. The very decision to welcome them into the civilized domestic space defies both common sense and self-preservation instinct. Principal characters in "Thirteen Hundred Rats" and "Tooth and Claw" believe in human control over the natural world. Confrontation with a colony of rodents or an African predator reveals their physical and psychological weaknesses and inability to supervise these dangerous pe(s)ts. Consequently, wild animals transform the civilized human space into "the jungle" where only the fittest will survive and the weak will perish.

Though fictitious, Boyle stories are based on sound observations of the American society. As a humorist, he is interested both in some general trends in pet-keeping (exotic pets, pet cloning) as well as aberrations in the human-animal relationship (instrumental treatment of animals, animal hoarding). To some extent, these stories can be read as cautionary tales, warning the readers against a role reversal in the human-animal relationship. According to Thomas Cusick, president of the American Animal Hospital Association: "Pets are clearly becoming an integral part of the American family, enjoying much of the same attention, care, and treatment that is given to a child or spouse" (qtd. in Fiester 37). Indeed, Boyle's characters invest time, money and feelings in a relationship with an animal "child"

instead of caring for their own offspring. It is hardly a coincidence that all the married couples presented in these stories are childless by choice. As the narrator in “Thirteen Hundred Rats” recollects, he and Gerard used to “bask in an air of mutual congratulation over our separate decisions not to complicate our lives with the burden of children” (183). What seemed a complication and burden in the days of youth is not necessarily perceived in the same way by an elderly, lonely person. Pets are easier to care of but cannot help their elderly owners and satisfy their needs in the same way as their children would. Far from alleviating the loneliness, inappropriate pets may even deepen the sense of social isolation and plunge their misguided owners into madness.

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Jerzy Durczak

## Between Pictures and Words: Sally Mann's *Hold Still*

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**Abstract:** Sally Mann's autobiography *Hold Still* is a rare book which examines from the point of view of a photographer the way literature and photography complement each other in creating complex artistic visions. At the same time, it is not merely a famous artist's autobiography, but an artful literary creation in its own right. The paper examines the nature of relations between literature and Sally Mann's photography.

**Keywords:** photography, autobiography, memoir, Sally Mann, *Hold Still*

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Sally Mann's autobiography *Hold Still* is a rare book which examines from the point of view of a photographer interrelations between photography and literature. It is not only an account of Mann's artistic career, but also a study of the way literature and photography complement each other in creating complex artistic visions. At the same time, it is not merely an artist's autobiography, but an artful literary creation in its own right.

Mann is not the first author to write extensively on the connections between the visual and the verbal. In fact, those interrelations have been a subject of interest for many literary theorists, art critics, and artists themselves. Although for a long time writers—for obvious reasons—considered painting to be important for feeding their visions, in the second part of the nineteenth century the invention of photography made many of them turn to this revolutionary new medium and explore its artistic possibilities. A similar process was taking place in literary criticism. At first, even when photography was already treated as a legitimate art form, critics were predominantly interested in exploring the interaction between literature and painting. In the recent decades, however, they have changed their attitude and now, more and more often, explore the nature of relations between literature and photography. Perhaps the best study of those relations is Jane M. Rabb's monumental anthology, *Literature and Photography: Interactions, 1840-1990*, together with the follow up volume, *The Short Story and Photography, 1880's-1980's*. Both studies include passages from works by major international authors who in various ways deal with photography or draw directly from it.

In the introduction to the former volume, while explaining fiction writers' growing fascination with photography, Rabb notices that as soon as photography became recognized as a legitimate new art form, "many novelists... may have tried to emulate the camera with its personal, disciplined, detailed, and accurate mirroring of surface reality" (xxxviii). Indeed, she quotes Walt Whitman who—fascinated with the invention of photography—"boasted that 'in these *Leaves [of Grass]* everything is literally photographed, nothing is poeticized, not a stop, not an inch, nothing for

beauty's sake” (xxxviii). This fascination and early enthusiasm for photography, shared by, among others, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, and Jack London, obviously had its critics. The enthusiasm was, for example, toned down by the main advocate of realism, William Dean Howells, who—as Rabb notices—“often used the word ‘photographic’ pejoratively to suggest a limited imagination or ignoble purpose” (xxxviii-xxxix). Although such objections were not uncommon, the interest in the medium was steadily growing.

The attractiveness of photography to writers became apparent when some of them also chose to express themselves through photography. Jack London, Eudora Welty, Richard Wright, Jerzy Kosinski, and Allen Ginsberg were among those who recognized the artistic potential of photography and practiced it along with writing. Walker Evans, a failed writer but an accomplished photographer, whom Rabb quotes in her essay, noticed:

Photography seems to be the most literary of the graphic arts. It will have—on occasion and in effect—qualities of eloquence, wit, grace, and economy; style, of course; structure and coherence; paradox and play and oxymoron. If photography tends to be literary, conversely certain writers are noticeably photographic from time to time—for instance James, and Joyce, and particularly Nabokov. (qtd. in Rabb *Literature and Photography*, xlii)

The similarities between the two kinds of artistic expression are even more pronounced when we notice that their development patterns are similar. As Eugenia Parry attests, “[b]oth art forms have secured aesthetic respectability while treading roughly parallel paths from objective narrative to idiosyncratic statement” (ix).

The importance of interrelations between literature and photography has been recognized not only by literary critics but also by those whose perspective is largely photographic. An art critic, François Brunet, boldly asserts that “in the age of Barthes, Baudrillard, Sebald, and Sherman photography has become a new muse of literature—or perhaps one of the driving forces behind ‘the eviction of literary speech’—and a principal weapon in the critique of the very reality it was once supposed to certify” (143). Those who trace the connections between the visual and the verbal from a literary perspective refer somewhat obviously to imagist poetry as the territory where those links are most visible. However, as Parry notices, writers themselves “compare photography to the short story as the extraction of a few simple truths ‘worth the trouble to stay and watch,’ as Cortázar puts it” (xvii). Obvious examples of photography with strong literary potential would be the art of Gregory Crewdson, William Eggleston, Diane Arbus and Cindi Sherman. Their photographs bring immediate associations with the short stories of Raymond Carver or Frederick Barthelme and might, in fact, be used in creative writing courses as offering inspiring starting points for storytelling and triggering creative impulses.

While critics pay much attention to the narrative potential of photography, they also tend to agree with Roland Barthes that “[t]he photograph is literally an

emanation of the referent" (80). This inherent referential quality of photography makes critics recognize the similarities between "light writing" and "life writing"—the most referential among literary genres. Those connections were carefully studied and documented by Timothy Dow Adams in his *Light Writing and Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography*, where he describes different kinds of interrelations between the two. His focus is on "the way interrelations between photography and autobiography demonstrate the inherent tendency in both to conceal as much as they reveal, through their built-in ambiguity, their natural relationship to the worlds they depict, which always seems more direct than it really is" (xxi). Adams takes into consideration several different categories of life writing in which the role of graphic elements is of particular importance and discusses the many functions they serve. The final section of Adams's analysis is devoted to autobiographies written by photographers themselves. The critic discusses self-narratives of Eudora Welty, Wright Morris, and Edward Weston, and demonstrates different ways in which the visual and the verbal interact in their texts.

In his essay on Welty's autobiography *One Writer's Beginnings*, Adams notices that although "there are important connections between her photography and her *nonfiction*," there is "no specific, conscious connection between her early career as a photographer and her learning to write *fiction*" (175). The critic stresses the fact that despite her "photographic involvement, Welty has consistently resisted attempts to make too direct a connection between her photographs and her stories" (152). In a chapter devoted to Wright Morris's autobiographical writings, Adams focuses on what he finds characteristic of the writer's method, which he characterizes as a "complicated and original way of incorporating photography into and behind his writing, as well as within his actual life" (176). His analysis of the interrelations between photography and literature in Morris's writings shows that the photographer/writer was mostly interested in combining the two by creating "photo-texts," that is "books that include sophisticated combinations of his prose and his photographs" (177). In his intertextual works, Morris—who was obviously not the first one to do it—used images and words to create an original art form.

The way in which photography and writing interact is still different in Edward Weston's self-narratives. Adams sees the role of Weston's writing as providing "abundant autobiographical information which helps to see Weston's photographs more clearly and deeply" (205). The critic adds: "By combining his photographs with his daily writing, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston* illustrates the interrelationship between what might otherwise be thought of as separate areas of artistic expression, for by reading his writing and his photographs together we can see how much they have in common" (224). Weston's diary helps his readers to understand how his photographs came into being and what thoughts and emotions stood behind them. This strategy, especially popular among artist photographers, was often an attempt—especially at the time when photography was not yet considered to be a legitimate art form—to defend photography's artistic potential and situate it in a larger artistic and cultural context.

For his analysis, Adams selected texts by three different photographers, apparently assuming that they illustrate the most representative strategies of photographers/writers. Although Adams was aware that there were other examples of photographers' life stories, he ignored them in his study, apparently convinced that they merely repeated the patterns of Welty, Morris, and Weston. Interestingly, fifteen years after the publication of *Light Writing and Life Writing* there appeared a text which adds much to the discussion of interrelations between photography and autobiography, or—actually—between photography and literature. This book is Sally Mann's autobiography *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, where the author meticulously explores connections between words and images at the same time skillfully demonstrating that she is as fluent and insightful in literature as she is in photography.

Mann, respected by photography enthusiasts as a particularly original artist who often employs in her work a nineteenth-century technique of wet collodion, became known to the general public with her exhibition (1990) and her third book (1992), both entitled *Immediate Family*. The album includes black and white photographs of her three prepubescent children, often nude, enjoying their life on the Manns' farm. A chronicle of growing up, *Immediate Family* documents the everyday chores and joys, but also the little problems that all children have. The photographs, published in what was considered to be a very conservative decade in American history, created a major controversy with the artist being accused of exploiting her children and actually coming dangerously close to child pornography. The debate became even more heated after Richard B. Woodward, an arts critic, published in *The New York Times Magazine* a cover story, "The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann," in which he described the nature of the controversy. The critic noticed that "probably no photographer in history has enjoyed such a burst of success in the art world" (29), but suggested that the reasons of this success were not necessarily of an artistic nature. Woodward's article started a fierce discussion, which—for obvious reasons—focused on moral and political issues rather than on the artistic ones thereby making Sally Mann a public figure.

*Immediate Family* was not the only project of Sally Mann that created controversy. In *What Remains* (2002) she included a section with photographs of decomposing bodies taken at the University of Tennessee's Anthropological Research Facility ("The Body Farm"), while in *Proud Flesh* (2009) she documented the painful process and effects of muscular dystrophy on her husband's body. In this, as in many of her photographic projects, Mann does not aim to stun the viewer with technical perfection or beauty. In an interview she explains: "[T]he work I'm doing is in service to an idea rather than just to see what something looks like photographed" (O'Grady). Here Mann alludes to the famous statement by Garry Winogrand: "I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed" (Diamonstein), suggesting that she is not merely interested in the visual aspect of photography, but that she wants to tell stories through it.

Sally Mann holds a very special place in American photography and yet her art is hard to ascribe to one particular category or genre. Woodward rightly

notices that Mann's work "embodies several antithetical trends in contemporary photography," and explains:

By locating her material in the lives of her own family, Mann belongs among the confessional documentarians, like Tina Barney and Larry Sultan. But the construction of her photographs as fiction rather than fact, with a moody narrative linking the images, puts her in a camp with Cindy Sherman and the post-modernists—the antique look of the prints—the vignetting, shallow depth of field, blurred edges and general languor—connects her to neo-pictorialists like Bruce Weber and the Starns. Like them, she depends as much on evocation as description. ("The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann")

The critic sees another tradition in Mann's photography as well: "Sally Mann is very much an anomaly. Her large-format camera and thorough exploitation of black-and-white printing techniques hark back to 19th-century ideals. She may have more in common with Victorian photographers, like Julia Margaret Cameron and Lewis Carroll, than with anyone contemporary" ("The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann").

Woodward, who stresses the "fictional" character of Mann's photographs, is not the only one to recognize the literary character of Mann's art. Commenting on Mann's series of photographs of black male bodies characterized by obvious anti-slavery overtones, John Stauffer, a professor of African American Studies, notices:

[T]hey become visual poems that connect the memories of slavery to the legacies of racism today, coupled with a desire for understanding, empathy and reform. There is a lyrical aspect to these portraits, achieved partly from Mann's use of a large format, 8-by-10-inch view camera and the nineteenth-century wet-plate collodion process, which captures unusually subtle tonal ranges. (89)

The literary quality of Mann's photography has also been noticed by James Christen Steward who writes that Mann's "works have combined factual observation and contrived fiction, nature and artifice, putting her in the camp of postmodernist photographers such as Cindy Sherman." Another critic, Sarah Boxer, notices that Mann's photographs of her children are not meant to be treated as a family chronicle and explains: "[C]apturing reality is not typically the aim; her children play roles, much as little girls played beggars, dreamers, and fairy tale characters for Lewis Carroll's camera." Boxer writes that Mann's photographs go beyond mere reporting. and that, for example, "[t]he dangers in them represent not the real dangers at hand, but dangers that might have been or could be." Mann's photographs then—like fiction—primarily tell stories. They also provide viewers with intriguing material to feed their minds and incite them to turn those images into their own stories.

Sally Mann herself acknowledges the literary character and literary inspirations behind her photographs. Talking about her slavery cycle, she clarifies: "What got me started was reading William Styron's book *The Confessions of Nat*

Turner, which led me to photographing the Great Dismal Swamp” (O’Grady). Elsewhere she admits:

Some of my pictures are poem-like in the sense that they are very condensed, haiku-like. There are others that, if they were poetry, would be more like Ezra Pound. There is a lot of information in most of my pictures, but not the kind of information you see in documentary photography. There is emotional information in my photographs. (Rong)

It is evident that Mann finds photography and literature closely interrelated. In “By the Book” section in *The New York Times* she writes: “Yes, the two sensibilities, the visual and the verbal, have always been linked for me—in fact, while reading a particularly evocative passage I will imagine what the photograph I’d take of that scene would look like.”

In her autobiography, Mann explores these issues much further, creating a volume in which the interrelations between photography and literature are particularly prominent. Her *Hold Still* reads like a traditional autobiography with the story told more or less chronologically and covering all stages of the artist’s life. The reader learns about Mann’s family background, her childhood, growing up, college days, love affairs, and her passion for photography. Since the author is a renowned photographer, her autobiography is of course heavily illustrated both with family snapshots and her artistic works. The reader will also find many pages devoted to the South, which Mann considers essential in shaping her artistic sensitivity, and to her immediate family, art, memory, and the question of truth in photography. Occasionally Mann will explain the meaning of her photographs to the readers or will argue with those who unjustly accused her of exploiting her children by making them pose for what they considered “provocative” photographs.

It is not surprising that photography features so prominently in a photographer’s autobiography, but what is also worth noticing is the strong, multilayered presence of literature in her self-narrative. The author quite appropriately opens her memoir with a line from a poem by W.H. Auden in which the poet refers to photography: “The steady eyes of the crow and the camera’s candid eye / See as honestly as they know how, but they lie.” The conviction that literature and poetry are interrelated and that photography should not be treated merely as a document reappear throughout Mann’s photographic memoir.

Even in the Preface Mann repeatedly refers to poets and fiction writers, mentioning William Carlos Williams, Eric Ormsby, Joan Didion, and Émile Zola. Quoting the latter, she disagrees with his conviction that photography “preserve[s] our past and make[s] it invulnerable to the distortions of repeated memorial superimpositions” and instead argues that “photographs supplant and corrupt the past, all the while creating their own memories” (xiii). Those reflections come to her after she decides to inspect the contents of old boxes—hidden in the attic and “untouched for decades”—which contain letters, documents and photographs illustrating her family history and her own childhood. Mann wants to learn more

about her formative years and about her parents' roots; she tries to find out how people, places and events have shaped her artistic sensitivity. She writes: "Cutting the strings on the first family carton, my mother's, I wondered what I would find, what layers of unknown family history. Would the wellsprings of my work as an artist—the fascination with family, with the Southern landscape, with death – be in these boxes?" (xiv). Mann hopes that what she finds in the dust covered cartons might provide her with enough material not only to understand her own growth as an artist, but also to tell a story of her life to others. She admits:

I will confess that in the interest of narrative I secretly hoped I'd find a payload of southern gothic: deceit and scandal, alcoholism, domestic abuse, car crashes, bogeymen, clandestine affairs, dearly loved and disputed family land, abandonments, blow jobs, suicides, hidden addictions, the tragically early death of a beautiful bride, racial complications, vast sums of money made and lost, the return of a prodigal son, and maybe even bloody murder. (xiv)

These lines are followed by what sounds like a blurb or an advertisement for the volume: "If any of this stuff lay hidden in my family history, I had the distinct sense I'd find it in those twine-bound boxes in the attic. And I did: all of it and more" (xiv). With these words, Mann promises the reader a story which will not only—through the inclusion of photographs and documents—be a truthful story of her life, but which will also have all the essential ingredients of a novel.

As early as the first chapter, Mann's self-narrative informs the reader of her love for words. She writes that until her early twenties she "kept handwritten journals" (3), and quotes the first paragraph from the earliest volume: "It has been a mild summer, with more rain than most. We work hard and grow tired. The evening is cool as we watch the night slide in and hear each sound in the still blue hour. The silver poplar shimmers and every so often the pond ripples with fish. The mountains grow deep. They are darker than the night" (3). Forty years later, analyzing this and some later passages from her journal, she recognizes the influence of her reading: "Judging by the unembellished declarative sentences in those first paragraphs, it's a safe bet I was reading Hemingway that summer, somewhere around my seventeenth. But read down a few more lines and I come over all Faulknerian, soaring into rhapsodic description" (3). Her writing style, sometimes drawing on Hemingway and sometimes on Faulkner, reveals her visual awareness, and it is no wonder that the title of the chapter in the autobiography dealing with her prose attempts and literary influences is "The Sight of My Eye." This combination of the visual and the verbal is evident throughout her book.

The first chapter establishes a kind of setting for Mann's autobiography. It is significant, however, that instead of concentrating on nature and the scenic beauty of Rockbridge County in Virginia, where she was born, she focuses on what might be called an "intellectual setting" and mentions as its important elements the names of artists and writers who used to live there. Among others, she mentions

Carson McCullers, Tom Wolfe, Edward Albee, Reynold Price, Eudora Welty, Mary McCarthy, and W.H. Auden.

Writers continued to be an important element of her formative years, especially since her mother managed a university bookstore, “bringing in writers as diverse as Truman Capote, Howard Nemerov, Betty Friedan, Tom Wolfe, and James Dickey” (200). Mann’s parents were liberal intellectuals who with their convictions and open-mindedness exerted a huge influence on their daughter. Mann’s father, a physician, was a liberal minded person who “had strongly held beliefs and was brave about asserting them.” Mann adds that he made his “kids be brave, too, facing the little-understood challenges of civil rights, integration, and separation of church and state” (103). She characterizes her family in the following way: “Our family had no wood-sided station wagon, no country club membership, no television, no church, and no colonial house in the new subdivision. We read the *New York Times* and used the sports pages to line the parakeet’s cage” (103-104). Mann’s father—“a renegade Texan with an excellent northern education, an atheist, and an intellectual” (100)—showed a special interest in art. He often created his own provocative and irreverent art pieces, usually in the form of floral or wood arrangements. One of his pieces was a segment of a tree trunk resembling a man with three penises. Mann’s father, Dr. Munger, called it facetiously *Portnoy’s Triple Complaint*. The writer, who had been sent a photograph of the piece, wrote back to the artist: “I react with wonder and awe. None of us should complain, of course; art reminds us of that. Dr. Munger is a brave man to have such a thing in his garden. I would be tarred and feathered and thrown out of my town if I dared. Luckily people forgive me my books” (103). Such anecdotes involving literary figures can be found often in *Hold Still*.

It is not surprising that being brought up in a family where art and literature are so prominent and respected, young Sally Mann—for whom “[w]riting came first”—starts writing poetry. She recalls: “Beginning in the first year at Putney, I could be found, way after lights-out, crouched in the closet earnestly composing long, verbally dense poetic meditations, almost always in some way relating to the South” (33). The South—unlike “unpoetic” Vermont where she attends college—is her main inspiration and will remain so, even after she replaces her love for literature with her fascination for photography.

Mann’s early gift for language and letters is quickly recognized by her writing instructor who writes in a report: “You are launched on a lifetime writer’s project. I feel privileged to have seen your work in progress. Your splendid critical intelligence qualifies you, as maker, to receive a high order of gift.... You are a person by whom language will live. I shall look forward to reading you” (37). And while photography begins to slowly replace literature as Mann’s major passion, literature maintains a very prominent place in her life. A good illustration of this is Mann’s description of her wedding:

We had some difficulty finding someone to marry us because there was no mention of ‘God the Father’ or ‘the Holy Spirit’ in our handwritten

vows. We solved it by reading aloud the E.E. Cummings poem ‘i thank You God for most this amazing day,’ that first line satisfying the God requirement, and, as for the Holy Spirit, we figured Cummings had it covered in ‘the leaping greenly spirits of trees.’ The almost childlike lack of punctuation and capitalization that characterizes Cumming’s poetry and his affirmation of the natural ‘which is infinite which is yes’ somehow caught the innocent spirit of those barefoot nuptials, our green optimism, and the wingding gaiety of the day. (53)

Literature is present not only during the wedding ceremony, but it also accompanies Mann throughout her life. Describing her family and home, she often sees them through a literary lens. Learning about her mother’s ancestor from the *Mayflower*, for example, she refers to William Bradford, writing:

That *Mayflower* ancestor was John Howland, a ‘lustie yonge man’ who, according to Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation*, was swept overboard but managed to hang on to a dangling line long enough to be pulled to safety. Reading about him, I marvel at the contingency of my own existence, dependent here on the strength of a seventeenth-century piece of woven rope. (171)

Elsewhere, writing about her great grandmother, she informs the reader that “she had regularly been ‘petted’ by Charles Dickens” who “called her ‘my little Nelly’.” This makes her wonder if her great grandmother “possessed something of the pure and untainted innocence of his famous heroine in *The Old Curiosity Shop*” (176). Recalling her photo session at “The Body Farm,” she describes one of the decomposing male bodies she saw there, again resorting to literature: “Several days of postmortem beard growth had roughened his cheeks, and his fingernails were dirty and long. He looked like a Dickensian down-and-out who had stumbled into Lewis Carroll’s body-stretching fantasy by mistake” (422). Completing her visit at the research facility, she observes another body with a face seriously disfigured by a vulture. Mann does not react with repulsion, but instead recalls Robinson Jeffers’s poem “The Vulture,” in which the poet “anticipates the ‘sublime end’ of his body when it is eaten and becomes part of a carrion bird, a feathery, sharp-eyed life after death, ‘an enskyment’” (424).

Looking closely, we find still other reflections on writers and literature. When Mann describes her friendship with the Cy Twombly, a famous painter, she admits how fascinated she was by the artist’s story about how he met Ezra Pound, the poet she had written her Master’s thesis about. With childlike enthusiasm, Mann writes:

Imagine that—on my peckerwood porch, late in the humid, cloyingly fragrant Virginia night, Cy, in a Pound-like whisper, tells a story I found marvelous in the many improbable threads it wove together: that he had seen, had *heard* Ezra Pound, the author of the lines written on my father’s memorial stone, with whom I held a long fascination. (80)

On another occasion, she remembers going to the car races with her father. Mann does not like the experience, describing the races as “boring” and the motor court in which they were staying as a place “that Humbert Humbert would have found too squalid” (344).

References to Pound and Nabokov can be found often in Mann’s memoirs, but the writer who turned out to be the most instrumental in the shaping of her artistic sensitivity was William Faulkner. Reading *Absalom, Absalom* was her “moment of awakening, the one described by Graham Greene as the door to the future, after which the world is never seen in the same way” (263). Mann declares: “Faulkner threw wide the door of my ignorant childhood, and the future, the heartbroken future filled with the hitherto unasked questions, strolled easefully in. It wounded me, then and there, with the great sadness and tragedy for our American life, with the truth of all that I had not seen, had not known, and had not asked” (263). Significantly, in *Hold Still* Mann deals with those “unasked questions” and devotes much space to the question of slavery and to the complex race relations in the South. Her autobiography becomes more than a linear story of her life; it is rather a collection of meditations on various issues that were relevant in the life of the artist as she was growing up.

Besides including many literary references and stories, *Hold Still* is a densely documented autobiography that includes dozens of family photographs which are carefully explained, as well as a postscript with facsimiles of letters written to Mann by her father. And yet this is not a simple sort of documentation, as the author realizes that the objective truth in autobiography cannot be attained and—as early as the introduction to the volume—speaks of “betrayals” of memory and “beautiful lies” (xiii). Feeling freed from the duty of presenting the reader with “scientific, objective truth” (xiii) and yet not ignoring documentation, she produces a text which, while heavily factual, has a strong fictional quality. The following quote in which Mann explains why her parents decided to send her to a boarding school is typical of this tone:

It would suit this narrative if I were to tell you that my mean and insensitive parents sent me to boarding school in the snowy north to separate me from my true love, Khalifa. But the truth is this: my confused and concerned parents sent me to the snowy north (that part is still true) because my reckless behavior on horseback had morphed into reckless behavior in other areas. (15)

This desire to go beyond life’s reality and documentary obligations can be seen, for example, in Chapter 4, where—trying to solve some family history—she gives her autobiography features of a detective story, or in Chapter 6, where—describing her family farm—she adopts the kind of language associated with pastoral narratives. What is more, one of her chapters, Chapter 14, is essentially a short story and could be even published as fiction.

Sometimes, as if feeling that her autobiographical prose, even when combined with her evocative photographs, cannot fully express how she feels about

something, Mann resorts to her poetry. For example, she describes her favorite Virginia landscape in the following way:

[T]hat July morning in the upper pastures, where the vine-oppressed trees looked like stooped giants shambling along what had once been a fence line, and a plangent humidity filled the fields, exactly the way it did when I wrote in March 1969:

A heavy scent of honeysuckle hung  
 In thick, sweet layers over the land  
 And the ripples of heat echoed the rhythm  
 Of vines twined around the trunks of trees,  
 Dangling from their branches. (210)

Mann uses her poems on several other occasions as if convinced that poetry can express certain emotions more fully and truthfully than autobiographical prose. This can be seen in the following passage which shows her and her husband making love in the fields:

When I pushed the last slide into the last film holder, I felt my impatient husband pushing against me and my dress rising around my hips. And there we were again, just like the lovers of 1970 when I wrote of us in just such a moment, also here on the farm and in these same fields:

Our breath  
 Caught like a needle  
 On the skin of water

You said 'Will it be here?'  
 'Here where the grass  
 is so tall?  
 And I thought  
 Yes  
 Yes here. (212)

It often seems that Mann feels it necessary to use a combination of images, prose and poetry to convey certain messages or to reveal her emotions. A photograph or a poem—she thinks—are basically different art forms and should be appreciated for what they are, but in a text that is meant to be primarily autobiographical such a combination of words and images might be more effective in presenting what exactly happened and how she felt about it.

Mann often resorts to a technique that some will associate with her photographic skills, while others will consider them a tribute to the literary neorealists, such as Raymond Carver. Like Carver, she often pays attention to minute details, which may not mean much to an average reader, but whose presence will be recognized and appreciated by those whose sensitivity is comparable to Mann's. This photographic attention to details has been noticed by Lucy Davies:

The stories in this book are the stuff of the novels, and Mann brings her photographer's eye to the striking visual vignettes. The pinky round of a peeled apple in her black nanny Gee-Gee's palm, a dead chicken dropping from the wrist 'like faded bouquet'; the lone, incongruously cheerful orange pill left in the bottle after her father commits suicide; her mother-in-law's soiled underwear, discarded on the floor, before she shot her sleeping husband and turned the gun on herself.

As it can be seen, Mann uses a variety of literary techniques, borrows from different genres and generally enjoys playing with language, which is emphasized—for example—in the titles of her chapters. One of them, in an obvious reference to Cormac McCarthy, is called "All the Pretty Horses," while another includes a reference to the famous 1955 photography exhibition and is called "The Family of Mann." There is little doubt that while writing about photography she pays tribute to her other passion—literature. In an interview she explains why she did not become a writer, but chose to express herself in images rather than words: "I wish I could be a better writer, but writing is so difficult. I get seduced by visual aesthetics" (Rong).

In fact, photography and literature are for Mann complementary. She writes about her fascination with the farm she was brought up on and about her love for the wonderful landscapes she could admire every day. Mann admits that she wrote poems about them obsessively, but sometimes could not find the right words to express her fascination. She explains:

And if I couldn't do justice with words... I tried with my camera, composing silver poems of tone and undertow, the imagery saturated still with the words of authors I read in my teenage years—Faulkner, Whitman, Merwin, and Rilke. Many of my (poem-)photographs would sing those words, heady with beauty, ponderous with loss, right back to them. (208)

Although photography can often show what literature cannot, Mann often feels that photography has its shortcomings, too. She explains: "At its most accomplished, photographic portraiture approaches the eloquence of oil painting in portraying human character, but when we allow snapshots or mediocre photographic portraits to represent us, we find they not only corrupt memory, they also have a troubling power to distort character and mislead posterity" (308). This conviction is evident in the section devoted to her grandfather. Writing about him, Mann refuses to speculate on what kind of person he was on the basis of the only image of him that she has. Mann writes:

But since we have just this one picture of Henry Munger, we have no way of knowing if it's a distortion or true to life. Studying it, I resist the impulse to make assumptions based on a fraction of a second snatched from time, perhaps, the same second that a slight gassy sensation troubled

his lower bowel. So despite his crabbed countenance... I must take into account evidence of his character derived from other sources. (308)

Only documents, letters and testimonies of those who knew him may help in presenting a fuller picture of Henry Munger.

For Mann, photography labeled as documentary is not to be trusted fully. She stresses repeatedly that her “controversial” family photographs from *Immediate Family* are artistic creations and not documents. Responding to the wave of accusations that she was taking pictures of her children in embarrassing situations and was exploiting them in this way, Mann writes:

How can a sentient person of the modern age mistake photography for reality? All perception is selection, and all photographs—no matter how objectively journalistic the photographer’s intent—exclude aspects of the moment’s complexity. Photographs economize the truth; they are always moments more or less illusorily abducted from time’s continuum. (151)

Angered by an opinion expressed by one of her detractors—“Mann has shown us children with ice in their veins; her kids give me the chills”—she responds:

The fact is that these are not my children; they are figures on a silvery paper slivered out of time. They represent my children at a fraction of a second on one particular afternoon with infinite variables of light, expression, posture, muscle tension, mood, wind, and shade. These are not my children at all; these are children *in a photograph*. (151)

The controversy started with Mann’s publication of *Immediate Family* must have astonished and hurt the author, as she often resorts to irony and speaks with a kind of artist’s superiority when responding to those who implied that she was a heartless, immoral manipulator rather than an artist. Angered by some unjust opinions, she writes:

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I actually *was*, as some *New York Times* letter writers suggested, ‘manipulative,’ ‘sick,’ ‘twisted,’ ‘vulgar.’ Even if I were all of those things, it should make no difference in the way the work is viewed, tempting as it is to make that moral connection. Do we deny the power of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* because its author was unspeakably cruel to his wives? Should we vilify Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* because its author’s nutty political views? Does Gauguin’s abandoned family come to mind when you look at those Tahitian canvases? If we only revere works made by those with whom we’d happily have our granny share a train compartment, we will have a paucity of art. (153)

Defending herself, Mann includes photographic documentation to prove that she did not take documentary family snapshots showing her kids in embarrassing situations, but that she consciously and meticulously worked on each photograph to create a

meaningful artistic image. For example, she demonstrates eleven takes of the same scene and explains why she was not happy enough with the images to include them in her album. Her method of working is similar to that of a poet who tries different words or different word placement to finally arrive at what he considers a successful poem.

Mann also describes another method of picture taking. It involves not so much painstakingly staging certain situations to be photographed, but rather observing a scene and when something interesting or aesthetically intriguing happens asking everyone to “hold still.” She explains:

You wait for your eye to sort of ‘turn on,’ for the elements to fall into place and that ineffable rush to occur, a feeling of exultation when you look through the ground glass, counting ever so slowly, clenching teeth and whispering to Jessie to *holdstillholdstillholdstill* and just knowing that it will be good, that it is true. Like the one true sentence that Hemingway writes about in *A Moveable Feast*, that incubating purity and grace that happens, sometimes, when all the parts come together. (129)

Here, again, Mann compares the satisfaction of capturing an ideally composed photograph with the joy of a writer who, after many tries, has finally found the right words to accurately express a certain concept or an idea, or a poet who after much effort has finally found the right kind of image.

But the inspiration for Mann’s photography does not come only from watching her children grow or from contemplating beautiful Virginia landscapes. She finds good literature as nourishing and inspiring as nature or people. Her famous slavery cycle, as she admits, was inspired by Walt Whitman’s poem “I Sing the Body Electric,” and she attributes different photographs from the cycle reprinted in her volume to individual lines from the poem and uses them “as a template for [her] own exploration” (286). Literature is also behind another famous photography project of Mann’s devoted to images of American battlefields. She explains that Wisława Szymborska’s poem “Reality Demand” is “a haunting, wildflower-at-ground-zero of a poem that gazes unblinkingly as life goes on at the world’s most blood-soaked battlefields” (412). One line from the poem—“There is so much Everything that Nothing is hidden quite nicely”—she finds particularly thought provoking and illuminating. She writes: “These lines, I decided posed an artistic challenge and needed answering” (413).

*Hold Still*, the autobiographical project of Sally Mann, an ambitious project of a famous photographer, shows how pictures and words affect, fuel and complement each other. Her volume explains better and more convincingly than any critical text devoted to this subject how photography and literature are interrelated.

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**Smooth, Bumpy and Ghostly Rides:  
(Re)Viewing the American Landscape  
and Travel Imagery in Bill Morrison's  
*Night Highway* (1990), *The Death Train* (1993),  
*City Walk* (1999) and *Ghost Trip* (2000)**

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**Abstract:** In this paper I analyze various ways in which Bill Morrison's travel films, *Night Highway* (1990), *The Death Train* (1993), *City Walk* (1999) and *Ghost Trip* (2000),<sup>1</sup> tend to challenge the concept of the American landscape through the use of cinematic conventions traditionally associated with early cinema's phantom rides as well as contemporary travel ride films and road movies. Particularly, I argue that Morrison's experimental pictures, while simultaneously drawing on and playing with selected phantom ride, travel ride film and road movie tropes, exploit the dynamics between the spectator's unique frontal perspective, visual mobilities and distant panoramic views as well as evoke a distorted experience of sensational and contemplative voyages, hence challenging panoramic perception and an idealized image of American (film) landscape intrinsically bound with the natural and technological sublime. To achieve this particular effect, the analyzed material incorporates such elements as deteriorated footage, manipulated travel imagery and image looping enhanced by atmospheric scores, slow and fast motion cinematography or more conventional traditions of abstract formalism.

**Keywords:** American avant-garde and experimental film, Bill Morrison, American landscape, travel ride film, phantom ride, road movie

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In the history of American avant-garde, experimental and self-reflexive cinema, the name of a young New York-based multimedia artist and filmmaker, Bill Morrison, has been largely unrecognized for a relatively long period of time. Only with the release of a feature-length audiovisual symphony scored by Michael Gordon, *Decasia* (2002), and praised by Hoberman as "the most widely acclaimed American avant-garde film of the fin-de-siècle" ("The Poetry of Decay"), Morrison made his name as one of the most adventurous contemporary American directors. Since the early 1990s, he has created a number of absorbing, hypnotic and visually soaring projects as well as successfully collaborated with some influential composers, including John Adams, Gavin Bryars, Bill Frisell, Michael Gordon, Henryk Górecki, Jóhann Jóhannsson, David Lang, Steve Reich, Todd Reynolds and others, many of whom commissioned him to direct pictures to accompany their live performances

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1 All the analyzed films, *Night Highway* (1999), *The Death Train* (1993), *City Walk* (1999) and *Ghost Trip* (2000), have been produced by Bill Morrison's Hypnotic Pictures.

(Morrison, "Bio/Filmography"). However, it is not merely an extraordinary audiovisual quality that renders Morrison's works such a memorable and almost palpable viewing experience. The majority of the artist's collage films are often distinguished by featuring rare archival material as well as found 35mm nitrate and chemically decomposing footage utilized in an attempt to "revive," reinterpret and re-contextualize a selection of old and often forgotten cinematic narratives. Morrison's editing seems to serve yet another historically and culturally significant function, that is that of rediscovering, resurrecting and preserving a set of deteriorating images in both physical and metaphorical sense pertaining to such philosophical notions as the human existence and mortality, history and memory, materiality and spirit, real and surreal or space and time (see e.g. Baron 128-131, 133-134; Herzogenrath 131). Often referred to as a cine-chemist (MacDonald, "Orpheus of Nitrate" 116) or a filmmaker obsessed with the concept of death and decay, Morrison accounts for the meaning of his work in the 2006 interview with Ronan and Le Cain:

The images can be thought of as desires or memories: actions that take place in the mind. The filmstock can be thought of as their body, that which enables these events to be seen. Like our own bodies, this celluloid is a fragile and ephemeral medium that can deteriorate in countless ways. The nitro-cellulose base gradually returns to the elements that comprise it: cotton, nitric acid, and camphor. The images deform and coalesce throughout the length of the film, appearing to melt, burn, drip or tear away from the base. This is a natural phenomenon. I chose only those images where this deterioration has happened over time, while stored in archives. Like the film, our bodies will eventually be reduced to what essentially forms us. What they contain is who we are: our thoughts, dreams, and memories. These will be reprised as something new, and hopefully, more lasting.... I think I'm more interested in finding beauty in the commonplace or what other people consider trash or garbage, to try to see the world in a new way. The idea that everything's going to turn to nothing isn't the point of *Decasia*, it's that you can re-form things, and it takes on a new life. (Ronan, "Trajectories of Decay")

As implied by above, the act of re-creating the found footage lies at the core of Morrison's present-day legacy as an avant-garde and experimental filmmaker. Most of his self-reflexive narratives, usually in the form of doc-fiction hybrids heavily relying on montage of damaged celluloid materials, should be seen in terms of oblique symbolism, which continuously inspires both generations of artists and varied audiences. Interestingly, Tryon also considers them as consistent with the 1990s trend in popular film criticism exemplified by Cheshire's famous article, "The Death of Film/The Decay of Cinema," which has anticipated the death of cinema being an inevitable consequence of the rise of digital media (73-74). More importantly, however, the analyzed material can be seen as epitomizing perhaps the most pervasive tendency in the last twenty years of American filmmaking called perceptual retraining and defined by MacDonald as involving "the use of the film

experience to retain and reinvigorate viewer perception of cinematic space and time, and in particular, the representation of place" ("American Avant-Garde" 255). Unsurprisingly, the trend, mostly identified with the post-1970s avant-garde and experimental works by Gehr, Gottheim, Dorsky, Rudnick, Sonbert, Hutton, Huot, Benning, Lockhart and other artists, becomes particularly evident in Morrison's travel films. Though envisioning landscape and cityscapes by means of largely spontaneous and rhythmic editing rather than stationary and often silent shots, the pictures still seem to revive the contemplative and meditative way of experiencing the travel imagery and offer "the possibility of renewed perceptual engagement and awareness" through their reliance on a series of extended and continuous shots (MacDonald, "American Avant-Garde" 255).

Born on November 17, 1965 in Chicago, Illinois, Morrison devoted most of his career to realizing his lifelong fascination with collage and archival footage, which also stems from the filmmaking practices of early avant-garde artists, including Bruce Conner, Joseph Cornell, Ken Jacobs and others (Verrone 210). After graduating from the Reed College in 1985 and the Cooper Union in 1989, where he studied painting and animation, the artist began making short film backdrops for the New York Ridge Theater's avant-garde productions. Simultaneously, however, he directed his first and less known pictures, such as *Night Highway* (1990), *Lost Avenues* (1991), *Photo Op* (1992), *Footprints* (1992) or *The Death Train* (1993). Morrison's extensive work as a multimedia artist and experimental filmmaker has been recently honored by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, which organized his mid-career retrospective between October 2014 and March 2015. Morrison is a fellow of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (2000) and the Foundation for Contemporary Arts as well as a recipient of the Alpert Award for the Arts, a National Endowment for the Arts Creativity Grant (2004), the FCPA Grant (2003) and Creative Capital. He has also received two New York Dance and Performance Bessie awards for *Every Day Newt Burman* (1993) and *Jennie Richie* (2002) as well as an Obie Award for Sustained Achievement (2002) (Morrison, "Bio/Filmography"). One of his most notable projects, *Decasia*, was selected for preservation by the Library of Congress' National Film Registry in 2013 as "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant," hence becoming the second most recently released film to be inducted into the list ("Complete National Film Registry Listing"). Today, Morrison's works are generally critically acclaimed and widely distributed by Icarus Films and the British Film Institute; they are also preserved in the Museum of Modern Art's, Walker Art Center's, and the Amsterdam EYE Film Institute's collections.

Morrison asserts that over thirty short experimental films mostly comprised of archival celluloid strips and sometimes referred to as supernatural, "possessed" or marked by the occult aesthetics (Donnelly 120), should be perceived as images of contemporary world and have been selected for digital projection primarily due to their resonance with numerous existential issues burdening the present-day society. In the 2016 interview with Nytra, the artist claimed that the process of adapting the original cinematic material to the new media does not simply aim at escaping

“archaism” (Nytra, “My Films”). Instead, decaying nitrate prints are scanned digitally to present audiences with the stories from “beyond the grave” in some novel and unique context and perhaps in the only technologically feasible way. As suggested by Zimmerman in the introduction to Morrison’s retrospective held in Cyprus in 2015, “Morrison’s diverse filmography uses the decomposition of 35mm nitrate film as the catalyst for his existential investigation of memory, the archive, and the history of moving images” (“Decomposition / Recomposition”). In order to achieve a desirable effect, both his early and later pictures, including *City Walk* (1999), *Ghost Trip* (2000), *The Mesmerist* (2003), *Light is Calling* (2004), *Outerborough* (2005), *The Miners’ Hymns* (2011), *Re:Awakenings* (2013), *The Great Flood* (2013) and others, tend to draw on European and American avant-garde generic conventions traditionally associated with documentary, educational, travelogue and landscape films of the silent era. Often alluding to early cinema’s expressionism, abstract formalism, phantom rides’ superstructure and camerawork, the city symphony’s spatial arrangement of urban environments or the 1950s and 1960s mythopoeic films in the tradition of Stan Brakhage, Morrison employs editing, which clearly contributes to the complexity of imagery and mood conveyed on screen. Such effects as dissolves, time-lapse, slow motion, fade-outs, distorted lenses, superimposition, thick haze, unmatched cuts, etc, are also incorporated to depict another common theme prevalent in the filmmaker’s works, that is that of a trip or a ride, as well as allow him to creatively play with the continuously moving, rhythmic, indistinct and optically manipulated imagery, additionally enhanced by music. Even more interestingly, rather than expose Morrison’s concern with life and death, some of his travel films, particularly *Night Highway*, *The Death Train*, *City Walk* and *Ghost Trip*, tend to challenge and celebrate the concept of the American landscape, hereby rediscovering its beauty in a peculiar, yet hypnotizing and aesthetically appealing way.

The notion of a travel ride film, a well known form of entertainment utilized in a number of visual and film productions since the late nineteenth century, was first proposed by Rabinovitz, who traced its beginnings to Hale’s Tours of the World, a short-lived, yet popular attraction in the U.S. amusements parks and related venues of the early twentieth century designed to simulate the realism of a railroad trip and evoke certain sensory experiences accompanying it (42). Hale’s Tours, however, soon went out of fashion and were absorbed into post-war narrative cinema, where they reemerged in widescreen motion simulation rides, such as Disney’s *Trip to the Moon* (1955) or *Impressions of Speed* exhibited at the 1958 Brussels International Exposition. These and akin attractions relying on a travelogue format were successfully resuscitated by the IMAX Corporation, which employed and mastered some Hale’s Tours- and early travel ride films-related techniques like high camera angles and movements. What follows is the definition of (travel) ride films as proposed by Rabinovitz:

I propose a model of cinema that shifts from a technologically determinist cinema as an ongoing effort for improved cinematic realism. Ride films

are not just about what is being depicted—the sight of the destination—but are bound to how they reveal the capacity of the apparatus for summoning novel points of view, for extending the panoptic gaze, and for eliciting perceptually felt wonder at the apparatus. Ride films always present their subjects as a cinema-of-novelty-display: they transform the landscape into pure spectacle. Conquering space not only with the gaze, such spectacles foreground the body itself as a site for sensory experience within a three-dimensionally contained space. They coordinate the cinematic images with a range of other cues: visual and auditory effects may emanate from different points in the auditorium; atmospheric or environmental stimuli affect skin responses and sensations; and there may even be efforts to produce kinesthesia (or actual movement). (Rabinovitz 46)

In the same chapter, Rabinovitz elaborates on travel ride films' primary functions revolving around the idea of spectatorship seen as an active and immersive experience:

Travel ride films foreground the bodily pleasures of the cinematic experience, pleased already inherent in cinema itself and important in such bodily-oriented genres as pornography, action adventure, horror, and melodrama. But Hale's Tours carefully coordinate the spectator's physical and cognitive sensations, whereas one might argue that the standard Hollywood approach involves substantial conflict between various cognitive cues. Across the history of cinema, ride films best represent an experience unaccounted for by theories of cinema spectatorship that have generally represented movie-going as a passive experience in which spectators are increasingly drawn out of their bodies and sent into the screen. (Rabinovitz 43)

In the latter part of his discussion, Rabinovitz contends that the ongoing popularity of ride films can be attributed to their thrilling function of accustoming the viewer to new technologies at the level of embodiment and sensory activity seen as a consequence of the collapse of the nineteenth century regimes of perception, which paved the way for the rise of autonomous vision (43). Basing his hypothesis on the aforementioned theory proposed by the art historian Jonathan Crary, Rabinovitz argues that “cinema represents a complex interplay between embodied forms of subjectivity and arguments for embodiment” and such a purpose is served well by ride films, whose goal is to “dematerialize the subject's body through its visual extension into the cinematic field... [and to] emphasize the spectator's body itself as the center of an environment of action and excitement” (45). In order to trigger a sense of physical and emotional immersion as well as reinforce the “participation effect,” Hale's Tours and modern simulation rides, which go back to the 1986 *Tour of the Universe* installed by Douglass Trumbull at Toronto's CN Tower, are also founded on the principles of realism expressed through the cinematographic image and the conventions of narrative (Rabinovitz 48-49). While the former employs

editing, camera movement and extended shot to reproduce a continuous flow of motion, the latter provides temporal information and visual cues within the frame, which indicate passing of particular environmental markers and features of a given landscape according to the lines of perspective.

The very idea of virtual travel, however, can be also related to the earlier concept of panorama, one of the most crucial factors, which determines, reformulates and facilitates the viewing experience associated primarily with the realistic effect of immersion. The term itself, denoting a wide-angle view or representation of a given physical space, stems from the Greek words “pan” (all) and “orama” (sight). Originally known as “La nature a coup d’oeil” (nature at a glance), the panorama was invented by the English painter Robert Barker to describe his panoramic canvasses of Edinburgh and London exhibited on a cylindrical surface. Meanwhile, the name itself was first used in 1791 in reference to circular panoramic paintings, which gave the illusion of unrestricted perspective and enabled the spectator to experience an almost infinite field of vision (Verhoeff, *Mobile Screens* 36). Barker’s invention, often considered the forerunner to the moving panorama and phantom rides, did not only become one of the first commercially successful forms of visual entertainment and a predominant model for the nineteenth- and twentieth-century landscape representations, but it also gave rise to some key concepts and conventions used in contemporary media. Some of them referred to the new modes of viewing, termed monologic (perspective, voyeuristic and panoptic gaze) and dialogic, the latter of which is usually defined as a more immersive, engaged and bodily way of looking (Verhoeff, *Mobile Screens* 42-44). The monologic gaze is quite evidently interrelated with other early and contemporary film genres and conventions, often exploiting the panoramic representations through various forms of tourist or “mobilized virtual gaze” (Friedberg, *Window Shopping* 2).

The latter concept, defined by Friedberg in her study of film as a postmodern experience as “a *received* perception mediated through representation,” is strictly based on a paradoxical combination of mobility with virtual reality or, in other words, the movement of viewing with the immobility of the spectator: “The visuality here is compensatory, in line with the paradox that I have emphasized elsewhere: as the mobilized gaze became more virtual, it grew to involve less physical mobility, and became located within the confines of a frame” (*Window Shopping* 2, *The Virtual Window* 162). Hence, the compensation often allows the viewers to experience a sequence of edited images as one single shot in the form of a fluid camera movement. Schilverbusch further suggests that the new modes of transportation and a radical acceleration of travel have affected our perception of time and space and led to the emergence of panoramic viewing, which implies a fast, scanning, deep, yet simultaneously static, restricted and superficial gaze as the screen clearly frames the field of vision (189). Taking this line of reasoning, Verhoeff makes an interesting hypothesis that “the highway panorama is in fact a prolongation of the panoramic experiences such as mediation and mobilization... by panoramic painting, circular and immobile, theatrical and mobile, and by photographic, filmic and digital panoramas” (*Mobile Screens* 46).

However, the study of mobilized virtual and panoramic gaze can be related not only to some modern and postmodern modes of viewing, but also to somewhat rarely explored design of designated panoramas, which become subject to the viewing experience itself. In Morrison's travel films, audiences are exposed to American landscapes presented in an explicit travelogue form,<sup>2</sup> which both draws on and challenges visual and narrative conventions traditionally associated with phantom rides and modern road movies. Interestingly, certain shots, particularly aerial shots of a nightscape in *The Death Train*, highly stylized shots of a road journey in *Night Highway* and *Ghost Trip* or glimpses of urban travel imagery in *City Walk*, may be indicative, somewhat ironically, of standard cinematic conventions utilized to conceptualize natural and urban landscapes and influenced by a distinctively U.S. tradition of depicting sublime, picturesque and luminist qualities of natural scenery, which goes back to the nineteenth-century Hudson River School movement. While the aforementioned concepts, also inseparably connected with the school's strands of pastoral elegiac and scientific exoticism, were first proposed in the eighteenth-century European aesthetics and further discussed by Burke, Kant, Schopenhauer or Gilpin, they are also related to Turner's Frontier Thesis, which successfully advanced the myth that pioneering the American West has played a substantial role in shaping the national character, as well as Manifest Destiny, which stressed the U.S. primacy in exploring and expanding across North American territories (see e.g. Allen 27, Carmer 19-24, Driscoll 8-20, Nash 67-71).

This kind of approach was later adopted in twentieth century American cinematic landscapes, which frequently envisioned an infinite and immense sublime scenery. According to MacDonald, "the grand landscape epitomized by Frederic Edwin Church and the "Rocky Mountain school" (Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran, Thomas Hill) became, and has remained, the literal, as well as historical, background of epic commercial films, from the earliest attempts to interest filmgoers in natural scenes to John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), *Fort Apache* (1948), and *The Searchers* (1956) to such recent popular hits as *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Legends of the Fall* (1995)" (*The Garden* 274). Furthermore, Natali suggests that both Hudson River School and contemporary film depictions of American landscapes tend to share ideological and iconological scenarios associated with "sublime imperial fantasies":

Film landscapes are never purely narrative backgrounds nor simply distracting spectacular settings. They bear the traces of political projects and ideological messages. They press onto viewers' senses, memories, and fears and become part of their memory, carrying the subliminal strength

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2 The term travelogue is defined in *Oxford English Dictionary* as "an (illustrated) lecture about places and experiences encountered in the course of travel; hence a film, broadcast, book, etc. about travel; a travel documentary." Gunning ("Before Documentary" 14), Peterson (197) and Ruoff (2) note that since the end of the nineteenth century, travel films' most notable formal elements have been the focus on place as their primary subject as well as the use of travelling shots, which tend to foster "the view aesthetic."

of a past, even archaic, worldview ready to come back as future progress. Like the footprints left on the surface of the moon by U.S. astronauts, Hollywood landscapes bear the footprints of the United States' recurrent manifest destiny. (Natali 100)

The statement, though to some extent simplified, may also serve as a comment on many independent and experimental productions, which attempt at, as put by MacDonald, “revivifying our sense of place in all its complexity—that is, for evoking something of the original discoverers' wonder at where we are, something of the original explorers' excitement in transforming the possible into the actual, and something of the original settlers' understanding of the practical failures of their surround—while at the same time recognizing the problematic moral, environmental, and political implications of five centuries of European involvement in the Western Hemisphere” (*The Garden* 91).

Unsurprisingly then, the focus on landscape in avant-garde and experimental cinema, often rendered with the sublime or luminist sensibility or implying some of the aforementioned ideological messages, can be seen as a rather persistent trend in the history of American filmmaking. Some influential works representative of this tendency include Steiner's *H2O* (1929), Baillie's *Castro Street* (1966), Dorsky's two-part *Hours for Jerome* (1980), Gottheim's *Fog Line* (1970), Brakhage's *Desert* (1976), Benning's *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977), Mangolte's *The Sky on Location* (1982), Rudnick's *Panorama* (1982), Fenz's *Forest of Bliss* (1986), Reggio's *Qatsi* trilogy (1982-2002), Gehr's *Side/Walk/Shuttle* (1991), Hutton's *Study of a River* (1997) and many others. Morrison's pictures, however, tend to challenge the sublime and luminist concept of American landscape by means by form and content. While the former is achieved by drawing on selected European and American avant-garde traditions, primarily the phantom ride, travel ride film and road movie conventions, the latter is built with the artist's own innovative use narrative revolving around the theme of a road trip. It seems that particularly phantom rides, based on the viewer-as-passenger schema (Musser) and widely believed to have pre-dated the enduring road movie, intensified sensual illusions created by the moving panorama and produced an almost palpable spectacle of motion, which dramatized the act of visual appreciation by evoking “the uncanny effect of ghostly movement” (Gunning, “Landscape” 55). Although the genre partly continued the nineteenth-century American landscape tradition grounded in the notions of the romantic sublime and the picturesque, it also questioned some of its stylistic tropes by utilizing psychophysical sensations of movement or reversing the spectators' position and disorienting their relation to the imaged scene. Taking such an assumption, I argue that Morrison's experimental pictures, while simultaneously drawing on and playing with selected phantom ride, travel ride film and road movie tropes, exploit the dynamics between the spectator's unique frontal perspective, visual mobilities and distant panoramic views through evoking a distorted experience of sensational and contemplative voyages, hence challenging panoramic perception and an idealized image of American (film)

landscape intrinsically bound with the natural and technological sublime (see e.g. Grey 55; Verhoeff, *The West* 200).

Both *Night Highway* and *City Walk* are 16 mm black and white shorts, often considered two companion pieces stylized in the convention of abstract formalism, that is devoid of any emotional or social relevance, yet simultaneously promoting an engaged and intellectual form of spectatorship (see e.g. Monaco 278). Interestingly, the films, along with *Ghost Trip*, use the footage shot by Morrison himself, which makes a contrast to the director's most celebrated works composed of decaying nitrate film stock. The former project, originally conceived for the opera *The Manson Family* (written by John Moran and directed by Bob McGrath), produced by Ridge Theater with Lincoln Center and accompanied by John Moran's music, simply pictures the passing highway lines during the night filmed from the upward position. Meanwhile, the latter picture is a more elaborate portrayal of the city streets shot from a moving vehicle and scored by Michael Gordon. While *Night Highway's* opening scene features white vertical scratches that, as put almost poetically by Totaro, "give way to manipulated white line fever shots which arch and curve along with the road," *City Walk's* imagery seems to contain more distinguishable elements indicative of a hectic urban life and provides the audience with brief, visceral and almost ephemeral glimpses of pedestrians, sidewalks, buildings, bridges, automobiles, etc. ("The Cinematic Poetry"). The film's narrative depicts a twelve-mile drive down the Flatbush Avenue through Queens' Jacob Riis Park, the Manhattan Bridge and, finally, Chinatown. Again, Morrison deliberately distorts footage, as shot from an automobile's back seat, by means of time-lapse and related editing techniques in an attempt to "give the impression of a stark, charcoal-like chiaroscuro black and white" (Totaro, "The Cinematic Poetry"). Totaro pinpoints that "the texture of the image at times becomes so porous it recalls Georges Seurat's pointillism," which might be interpreted, among other things, as a reminder of a metaphysical elusiveness of the human existence ("The Cinematic Poetry"). Interestingly, the films' complex classical and industrial-symphonic scores enhance a sense of movement and confusion conveyed on screen; for instance, Totaro pinpoints that *City Walk's* soundtrack forms a striking contrast to the picture's indistinct and almost hypnotic content:

In *City Walk* the music begins with an edgy guitar, and then layered with a tinkling, minimalist piano and female voicing. As the film progresses the music becomes 'thicker,' more complex, with throbbing, low end piano chording and recurring percussive guitar stabbings. This precise, staccato rhythm forms a contrast to the blurring imagery. (Totaro, "The Cinematic Poetry")

Similarly, *Death Train*, originally designed to accompany John Moran's opera *The Death Train of Baron von Frankenstein*, takes inspiration from certain phantom ride conventions, particularly in its use of immobile camera situated inside or on top of a moving vehicle. The short, however, presents a much more complex

imagery and, as pointed out by Pinkerton “draws out an extended visual analogy between analog moving picture and railroad technology, rhyming spinning reels and spinning wheels” (“Dead Alive”). The prevailing motif of a railway travel constitutes the recurring image of the whole work, which consists of found footage from the 1950s educational film, *How Motion Pictures Move and Talk*, as well as the two phantom rides, *The Georgetown Loop* and *A Trip Down Mount Tamalpais* (Strauven 254). Strauven argues that “the railway stands emblematically for the dispositif of pre-cinematographic perception” and the spectator is confronted primarily with the montage of the locomotive and the projector presented figuratively as a technological parallel:

the perforated film strip consisting of identically-sized individual frames is prefigured in the zoetrope strips and the individual images in the phenakisticope; in the case of the train the rows of windows figuratively match the film frames and the rows of wheels correspond to the perforations. In both cases the individual pictorial space can only be perceived in stasis. (Strauven 254-255)

Strauven further discusses the functions of this technical comparison, which aims to highlight the contrast between “the modern, panoramic gaze in the railway train and the optical effects generated by the viewing slits in the rotating zoetrope” and hence shifts the film’s focus to the phenomena of light and movement “consistently seen as the uncanny dimension of film, with its unexpected apparitions waiting to leap out at the seated spectator, only to turn out to be lifeless and immaterial once the projector’s lamp is extinguished” (255). The use of zoetrope’s animation inspired by Muybridge’s chronophotography is effectively combined with a series of proto-cinematographic images of the railway travel, the most evocative of which include repetitive views captured by the camera installed on top of the train passing through a tunnel reminiscent of a black hole. Other equally immersive effects involve the employment of numerous repetitions and loops made of the early travelogue cinematic material interrupted by insert shots of some circular movements of motors and pre-cinematographic optical toys. Strauven notes that such a repetitive structure, which allows to “generate rhythmic and kinetic optical stimuli,” is also manifested in the adoption of extremely short intervals between the subsequent frames within a single shot (255). As a result, Morrison presents his audience with a horror-like story, where the ride in a ghost train surrounded by largely unidentifiable apparitions remains the narrative’s central motif and the major source of suspense, thrill and excitement. The titular death train literally corresponds with some spectral qualities the phantom itself, which, according to Strauven, derive predominantly from “the relationship between movement and stasis and... the clouding-over of the visible” (256). The haunting effect is achieved primarily by means of slow lap dissolves, blurring superimpositions as well as transitions between the phantom ride’s shots of the train moving in and out of a tunnel and aerial shots of a nightscape, which also evoke a sense of a looming apocalypse.

Meanwhile, *Ghost Trip*, described by Totaro as an enchanting “neo-Gothic” noiresque work, remains Morrison’s major fully representational 35 mm short road movie, which features no “decay effect” and introduces some distinctive characters and elements of the plot (“The Cinematic Poetry”). Here, the concept of a road trip is implemented on a narrative level and simultaneously distorted by the use of high contrast black and white stock, slow motion, time-lapse, fade-outs, extreme wide angle lens, unmatched cuts and image looping, which render the titular journey an almost ghost-like experience and foster “the sense of a slow descent into another dimension” (Totaro, “The Cinematic Poetry”). The opening scene presents a low angle shot of a cemetery, where an old black man plants flowers while singing “the man has arose from the dead,” possibly an ode to someone who has passed away and is about to come back to life. Interestingly, the film follows a circular structure and thus reflects an “existential limbo,” a frequent motif in Morrison’s cinematography, and narrates a story of a hearse driver (played by Slink Moss), who collects a corpse in New Orleans and transports it back to the same cemetery. Much of the plot revolves around Reverend Dennis’ across the country drive in a Cadillac hearse, which occasionally stops on the side of the road with settings, including a local grocery store, a bar and a casino, filmed rather abruptly from the perspective of the driver and his companion. To reinforce a hallucinatory funereal, the picture was shot in overexposed black-and-white, where images are either white and blown-out or black and extremely deep additionally emphasized in lighting, especially due to the use of silhouette (O’Donoghue, “Bill Morrison”; Kenny, “Beauty in the Broken”). As a result, the imagery may be reminiscent of an over-reproduced photocopy replete with haunting reflections, movements, sounds and occasional utterances suggestive of Morrison’s artistic and philosophical stance. What follows is O’Donoghue’s attempt at exploiting the interpretative potential of *Ghost Trip* concerned with transcending the physical or, more literally, raising it from the dead:

Reflections of a palm-tree-lined town in a car window allude to the perforations or soundtrack on celluloid stock. Tics of continuity (dissolves, fade-outs, time-lapse and slow motion as signals for time passing; the interplay between score, silence, direct and indirect sound; movements in space distorted by lenses and unmatched cuts) are subjected to formal play. The refrain of the mourner’s spiritual ‘And he never said a mumbling word’ may reference Morrison’s beloved silent cinema. In one scene, the driver and the hitchhiker gatecrash a funeral; might Morrison be acknowledging the death of film itself, as material artefact, artistic medium or social ritual? (O’Donoghue, “Bill Morrison”)

The twenty-three-minute footage is also the result of Morrison’s collaboration with Michael Montes, whose psycho-industrial compositions contribute to an almost supernatural quality of the titular road trip, where the material merges the spiritual on both narrative and symbolic level:

[Ghost Trip] is dominated by Michael Montes' 'soundscape,' its psycho-industrial churning deliberately echoing Angelo Badalamenti's legendary scores for David Lynch. As in Lynch's films, rising howls of sound indicate shifts between different realms of reality. This supernatural road movie follows the purgatorial drift of white men in cowboy hats—exiles, lost souls or revenants—through highways, railways, abandoned homesteads and empty beaches, casinos, cemeteries and scrublands, guided spiritually on their way by African-American singers, preachers and musicians. (O'Donoghue, "Bill Morrison")

As mentioned before, Morrison's travel films tend to challenge the concept of the American landscape by the use of cinematic conventions traditionally associated with phantom rides and modern road movies. Particularly *Death Train* seems to successfully achieve the "phantom ride effect" by incorporating such elements as deteriorated footage, manipulated travel imagery and image looping enhanced by atmospheric scores, slow and fast motion cinematography or more conventional traditions of abstract formalism. The film's attachment to early cinema representations aims to revive the-turn-of-the-century encounters with the American wilderness through the lens of technology, which relies on evoking the technological sublime of a railway travel while nurturing the sublime and picturesque qualities of nature. Simultaneously, however, Morrison's picture evokes a far more uncanny effect by disorientating the spectator's frontal position in relation to the imaginary space and creating highly immersive and almost psychophysical sensations of motion, which render the viewers both contemplate and fear the moving panoramas. Gunning summarizes some major functions of the traditional phantom rides and their impact on the reception of landscape:

These films fully exploit the dynamics of their unique frontal point of view, driving a wedge between the 'phantom ride' and the distanced panoramic perception of the train tourist.... Far from a contemplative mode, this viewpoint summoned up the possibility of shock and intense sensual involvement that had migrated from the painted panorama.... If the panorama films shot from the front of the train seem to abolish the traditional reception of landscapes by accelerating the fantasy of travel into a landscape with a vengeance, one might note that the early excursions mounted by railway companies for artists also frequently featured rides on the front of the locomotive.... [T]he intensity of this experience... exceeded a simple reproduction of travel and transformed the experience of landscape.... With their front-on viewpoint, the phantom rides provide a unique realization of the fantasy of penetrating a landscape, of chasing the horizon into the depth of an ever-unfolding image. (Gunning 56-67)

Furthermore, Gunning observes that phantom rides provided a novel experience of spectatorship and redefined the role of the unseen locomotive, which "literally embodies an unseen energy that compels the camera, the film and the viewer down

the track” (58-59). In other words, the ride itself does not create a sense of separation between the viewers and the panoramic viewpoint but rather confronts them with a vanishing vantage point and hence evokes the illusionary possibility of collision:

The vanishing point, the fixed convergence of classical perspective, its point of coherence, becomes in the phantom ride a point of constant transformation and instability.... Our point of view, as stand-ins for the camera, becomes the point at which everything converges and then disappears, reversing the traditional schema of perspective.... As shaped by the camera lens, instead of offering the broad and inviting foreground, a stable viewing point on which traditional landscape staffage figures can loll at ease to gaze into the distance, the foreground of a phantom ride represents the narrowest point of the image, as well as the point of greatest velocity, the anticipated site of collision. (Gunning 58-59)

Following this line of reasoning, it seems that akin to some of the aforementioned conventions, Morrison's *Death Train* does not only alter the spectators' relation to landscape, but it also invokes an almost trance-like state during which they reach into the distance while passing through and leaving behind the visible scenery. The views themselves can be referred to what Gunning calls an anti-landscape, which stands in opposition to its contemplative equivalent grounded in the Hudson River School tradition (60). Similarly, *Night Highway*, though far less complex in terms of imagery and narrative content, challenges the concept of American (idealized) landscape not only by means of exposing the uncanny qualities of the titular highway lines, but also by restricting the spectators' perspective exclusively to the subject matter, thus fundamentally questioning the distance between them and an ever-unfolding landscape. Therefore, the road trip becomes a pure allegory and celebration of the movement and velocity experienced as a head-on confrontation between the speeding highway and the viewer's vantage point, which forms a striking contrast to a sense of separation created by a more lateral and traditional view of the driver inherent in panoramic perception.

Meanwhile, a sense of detachment from the panorama is evoked in Morrison's remaining works, *City Walk* and *Ghost Trip*, where the windshield serves both meditative and disorientating functions by constantly providing conditions for instability prompted by illusionary physical sensations. However, contrary to the hypothesis that “the panoramic viewpoint corresponds to the magisterial gaze of manifest destiny” (Gunning 59), the films transform the standard cinematic representation of natural and urban landscapes through fostering the technological sublime along with a sense of immersion and dissolution as well as presence and absence. The whirling city life in *City Walk* is continuously seen through distorted lenses except for a few brief moments when the vehicle stops so that the contemplative qualities of the drive become somewhat overshadowed by those dominated by speed and confusion. Interestingly, the meaning of the route itself, according to Morrison, may be interpreted as follows: “Flatbush [a neighborhood in the borough

of Brooklyn, New York City] is a direct route through the city to nature. When you get out to the end, it is all light. It is sort of like a dissolution of the city” (Kinetz, “Urban Tactics”). Similarly, Kinetz draws a parallel between the film’s focus and the process driving seen as “squinting at the city”:

In *City Walk*, Mr. Morrison strips the city of its modernity, turning red and blue signs black and white, and blowing out many identifying details. The result is a timeless sort of street: a round woman in a striped dress who could be alive or dead; a boat that could have streamed by 50 years ago. People pass through the film, but they aren’t the point: ‘They are cogs in a whirling landscape,’ Mr. Morrison said. Instead, the film focuses on speed and scale and what it feels like to move through the city. ‘You look at a thing and squint,’ said Ms. Olinger, who is a painter. ‘You can see the structure of things more clearly.’ (Kinetz, “Urban Tactics”)

Meanwhile, *Ghost Trip* utilizes the notion of a trip as a limbo state, yet presented in a fully representational form. What distinguishes it further from the previously discussed films is that it provides the spectator with an even more unconventional viewing experience, namely with multiple perspectives based on the viewer-as-passenger schema as the camera is directed at the driver, the vehicle or the passing landscape. In an attempt to draw even more confusion, it has been installed in various places both within and outside the hearse, for instance, on different sides of the bonnet, behind the driver, at the back seat with the view at the back window as well as on the roadside. Interestingly, wherever the location of the camera is, low angle shots of the moving panoramas accompanied by audio-visual loops seem to prevail in the whole picture, hence contributing to the complexity of mood conveyed on screen. This undoubtedly peculiar camerawork greatly enhances a sense of claustrophobia rather than that of wide open spaces traditionally associated with the frontier experience and thus corresponds with both European and American road movie conventions used to depict 1960s automobile travel:

[I]n the European films, travel in an automobile was filmed either from inside the vehicle or from directly in front of the windshield, creating (at least for Americans) a sense of claustrophobia. In the American films, automobile travel was filmed from outside the vehicle, often from above and moving along with it, creating a sense of exhilaration and freedom. The ‘wide open spaces’ of the American frontier, first depicted by such painters as Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran in the nineteenth century and marketed so effectively by American automobile manufacturers after World War II, have remained central to American thinking about automobile travel—and about freedom, which for many Americans is less a question of the ability to choose between political or even economic options than an emotion connected with the opportunity to take off in a car and, at least for a brief moment, escape from the

claustrophobic demands of family, community, and society. (MacDonald, *The Garden* 127-128)

Therefore, it seems that except for the choice of some quintessentially American settings constructed with apparently hollow “western” countryside and characters, *Ghost Trip* draws on a number of representational modes opposing some typical road movie conventions. The latter genre, as defined by Corrigan or Cohan and Hark, presents technological means of transportation as “self-descendant of the nineteenth-century train” (Corrigan 144) and traditionally places them at the center of the narrative: “The significance of technology in the road movie, differentiating its quest narratives and wandering protagonists from those of the Western, has as much to do with representing modernity, its historical achievements as well as its social problems, as it does with reiterating masculinist fantasies of escape and liberation” (Cohan and Hark 3). Laderman further suggests that “while often preserving from this literary tradition a focus on the learning experiences of the traveling hero in an unfamiliar setting, road movies rearticulate the quest motif in the ‘increasingly mechanized’ framework of automobile modernity” (13). Meanwhile, *Ghost Trip*, though seemingly following some of the genre’s fundamental stylistic and iconic features, simultaneously challenges its linear, open-ended plot and character structure, representation of travel as an explicit or implicit critique of American society or an individual’s lifestyle as well as use of the interstate highway system and vast landscape heightened with “pit stops” like diners, bars, sundry detours, motels or gas stations as the central mise-en-scène. In terms of framing devices, aerial, side-by-side or inside the vehicle traveling and tracking shots, often exploited in the road movie with the aim of conveying “a visceral sense of traveling at a hyperhuman, modernized speed” (Laderman 15), are intercut and edited so that the actual driving sequences tend to overshadow the plot itself. Moreover, while following the genre’s common use of front or side windshield and rearview mirror views, Morrison further distorts *Ghost Trip*’s frame compositions, as evident in the formalistic frame within-a-frame as well as wide and low angle shots, and thus exaggerates the camera’s presence, creating a strong sense of isolation, enclosure and confusion. Also, contrary to some major road movie’s narrative and visual conventions, the film pictures the American landscape in a largely fragmented way, which hardly evokes sublime, picturesque or pastoral qualities of nature and technology, and hence renders the protagonist’s journey seemingly aimless and devoid of purpose.

Not surprisingly, one may argue that the term “sublime decay,” coined by the creative nonfiction writer and New York Times arts critic Lawrence Wechsler in reference to Morrison’s aesthetics, also lies at the core of the discussed films. By incorporating such elements as deteriorated footage, manipulated travel imagery and image looping enhanced by scores, slow and fast motion cinematography or phantom ride conventions, the analyzed material does not only envision the American landscape through distorted lenses, but also playfully evokes some traditional associations with sublime qualities of both visible and invisible wilderness, urban

life and transportation technology. While *Night Highway* and *City Walk* enhance an almost hypnotic sense of velocity in the convention of abstract formalism, which symbolizes the way humans perceive the passing views from the perspective of a speeding vehicle, *The Death Train* and *Ghost Trip* expose the uncanny dimension of light and movement in a more elaborate manner. Particularly the former project, built upon a repetitive structure and a range of editing techniques, relies on a genuinely haunting effect of the phantom ride and experiments with some conventional landscape representational modes to reproduce a highly immersive and travel ride-like feeling of descending into another, ghostly-like dimension. Similarly, *Ghost Trip*, whose representational form offers a much more varied interpretative potential, contributes to an almost supernatural and hallucinatory nature of the titular road trip through embracing a circular structure, multiple perspectives and creative montage. Naturally, the “phantom ride effect” is predominantly exploited in *Death Train* and *Night Highway*, which, while reviving the natural and technological sublime, also redefines a novel experience of spectatorship by evoking an illusionary possibility of collision and anti-landscape views. In contrast, *City Walk* and *Ghost Trip* tend to trigger a sense of claustrophobia and detachment from the passing panoramas and hence depict them in a more distinguishable, yet simultaneously fragmented, disorientating and confusing form, which questions an archetypical frontier-inspired landscape representation often encountered in contemporary road movies.

There is no denying that Morrison’s works have deserved their reputation as both original and intriguing collection of self-reflexive projects enthralled and permeated by decay. The celebration of largely disintegrating, fading and thus seemingly distressed archival film footage has brought him the worldwide recognition as one of the most acclaimed conceptual artists of the present day preoccupied with “revivifying dying film stock” (Monaghan, “Bill Morrison Revivifies”). In the interview with Monaghan in New York on November 9, 2010, Morrison commented on his attempts at disconnecting the fluidity of film and exposing its transient or contemplative nature, which creates the illusion of audience members’ concurrently entering and distancing themselves from the imagery:

Typically an audience wants to lose themselves in the movie. We enter the illusion of the moving picture willfully, and the degree to which a film is successful is often gauged by how easily it sweeps us up into its world. A film that has blotches and blemishes is not as easily entered, however. The eye seeks out recognizable forms, and strives to create continuity between them. But they are constantly being reminded that they are watching a plastic medium that has some shadows trapped from another time. And while that medium is at once unrolling before us in contemporary time, it is, on another time level, continuing to deteriorate. So the audience member is always made aware of him or herself as being just that: a viewer who has been placed in this weird limbo of at once striving to enter the illusion of the film, and being kept at bay by that which houses it. And that tension,

when successful, creates a somewhat meditative state in those who are receptive to it. So that's the real sweet spot that I try to find. (Monaghan, "Bill Morrison Revivifies")

As mentioned before, Morrison's continuous goal as a filmmaker is to experiment with various forms of spectatorship as well as to restore some inherent qualities of deteriorating nitrate-film-stock seen as the way of both preserving the past and reinterpreting it anew for the purpose of contemporary art-making. In this respect, the discussed travel films, whose reliance on a selection of decomposing images is mostly absent except for *The Death Train*, remain distinguishable from the director's works in terms of their employment of a modern-day source material and travelogue format. However, despite being devoid of any explicit signs of physical decay, the pictures still draw on the concept of "imaginary ruins" in a more metaphorical sense (Habib, "Thinking in the Ruins"). Namely, they encapsulate a vast array of influences coming from silent and post-war cinema as well as use intellectual montage, which triggers a reflection on human perception of space and time and provides a sumptuous allegory of vanishing idealized landscape forms. It seems then that Morrison's works, predominantly associated with the found-footage film, which is literally raised from the dead, have yet another, equally entrancing dimension built on the narration of a surreal trip. Perhaps it only attests to the fact that nothing can be taken for granted in the artist's "theater of decaying memories" (Skirball, "Bill Morrison's Theater"). What appears to be certain, however, is that both decomposing nitrate and travel films, often presented in the form of musical symphonies, can be regarded not only as diverse reincarnations of the past, but also as a fascinating pursuit of deconstructing Americana by means of historical and contemporary cinematic material.

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Małgorzata Olsza

## “Running in Both Directions”: The Reflective Character of Single-Image Narratives in Joe Sacco’s Graphic Journalism

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**Abstract:** This article examines single-image narrative forms, demonstrating how they inform and problematize Joe Sacco’s works of graphic journalism. I analyze three different single-image narratives, the splash page, the spread, and the bleed, originally found in superhero and adventure comics, and show how they function in Joe Sacco’s *Safe Area Goražde*, *The Fixer*, and *Palestine*. Single-image narrative forms problematize visual reporting as suspended between involvement and distance. I investigate how Joe Sacco, a graphic artist and a journalist in one person, manipulates images which were originally conceived as “attention grabbers” for the comics reader so that they become a commentary on the ethics of journalism

**Key Words:** Joe Sacco, graphic novel, graphic journalism, graphic storytelling, visual narration

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“They say when the shooting starts, the writers run for shelter, the photographers run toward the shooting. Since comic artists use both words and images, perhaps they have to run in both directions at the same time,” W.J.T. Mitchell (70) once observed, commenting on the work of the graphic journalist Joe Sacco. Indeed, running in both directions at the same time also appears to be an apt metaphor for how the graphic novel functions in general. The form utilizes both words and images to convey the storyline and is continuously suspended between reading and viewing. It has long matured beyond the carefreeness of “funny stories” or the juvenileness of superhero tales, addressing such serious issues as trauma, violence, and war. Concurrently with the development in the field of subject matter, there came the development in terms of form. Traditional building blocks of comics, including sequences, panels, and single-image forms, such as splash pages, spreads, and bleeds, have begun to undergo transformation. Joe Sacco is one of the artists who re-invigorated graphic storytelling as both an art and a narrative form capable of critical investigation of the contemporary world.

As a trained professional (Sacco studied journalism at the University of Oregon), the graphic journalist always places great emphasis on realistic drawing and the accuracy of facts, numbers, and dates. His shorter pieces have appeared in such celebrated titles as *Time*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *Foreign Policy* (Duncan et al. 1). He is also the author of a number of long-form works, in which he investigates extensively the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (*Palestine*, *Footnotes in Gaza*) and the Bosnian War (*The Fixer*, *Safe*

*Area Gorazde*, and *War's End*). Apart from wearing the hat of the reporter, however, Sacco also explores the immediacy and emotional impact granted by the image. The appeal of graphic journalism lies in the multiplicity of points of view, experiences, and voices it is able to relate. According to Sacco,

[i]t's a visual world and people respond to visuals. With comics you can put interesting and solid information in a format that's pretty palpable. For me, one advantage of [graphic] journalism is that I can depict the past, which is hard to do if you're a photographer or filmmaker. History can make you realize that the present is just one layer of a story. (Gilson)

Indeed, in Sacco's works the basic level of "telling other people's story" is further widened to include not only the past but also yet another dimension, that of Sacco himself. Sacco thus does not hesitate to break the first rule of journalism: that is to be objective. In fact, Sacco's graphic journalism combines the traditions of graphic novels, comics, and the New Journalism, synthesizing "the professional methods of a journalist and even the historian with the necessarily subjective filter" of graphic storytelling (Worden 6). Sacco creates the art of war that is historically accurate, emotionally engaging, and ethically reflexive.

The purpose of this article is to explore single-image narrative forms in Sacco's works, including *Safe Area Gorazde*, *The Fixer*, and *Palestine*. I shall examine the splash page, the spread, and the bleed and demonstrate how they inform and problematize "graphic reporting" practiced by Sacco. I will analyze three different forms of single-image narratives which were originally found in adventure and superhero comics and show how their function within the larger structure of the narrative changes when employed in a work of graphic journalism. Specifically, I would like to examine how Joe Sacco, a graphic artist and a journalist in one person, is able to manipulate elements which originally functioned as "attention grabbers" meant to attract the comics reader so that they transform into powerful statements on the journalism's moral responsibility. Indeed, the splash page, the spread, and the bleed act as subversive elements which make the reader/viewer reflect on the nature of the story he or she is reading, challenge the journalist's creed, and problematize reporting as suspended between the objective and the subjective.

### **"Go Away": The Splash Page as a Subversive Tool**

Though formally related, splash pages, spreads and bleeds play different roles in the system of comics. The splash page introduces the story, the bleed renders it more dynamic, while the spread, spanning two or more pages, is often employed for a dramatic effect or in order to momentarily bring a fast-paced story to a standstill. Still other varieties are also possible as well—for example, one may speak of splashes or bleeds in the form of a spread. Indeed, as Charles Hatfield points out, a key tension on the comics page is the result of confronting a series of images with a single full-page image, where the page-as-a-whole counterbalances the rhythm imposed by the

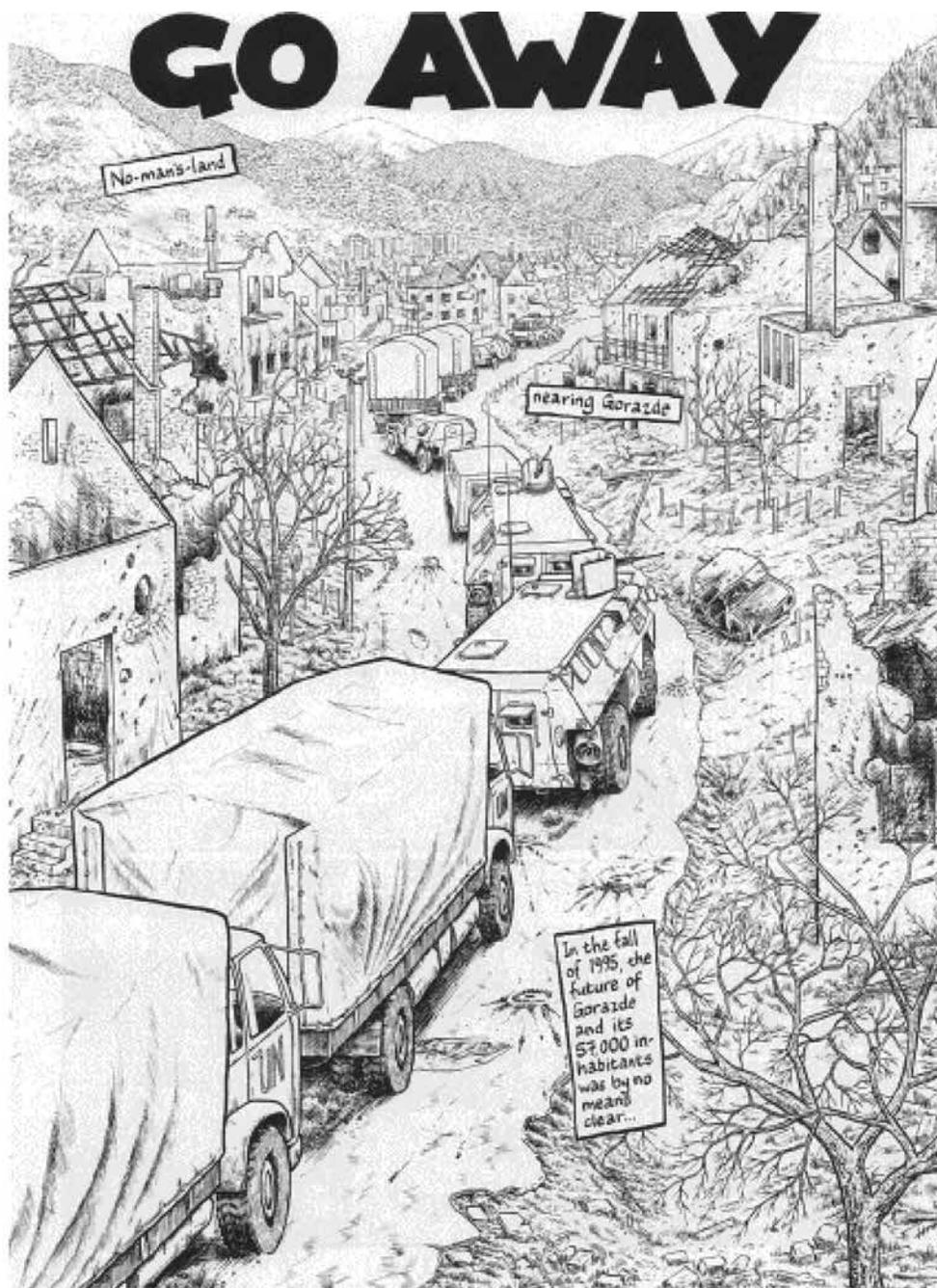
sequence (85). While splashes, spreads, and bleeds partake in the aesthetic experiments described by Hatfield, they also pose some interesting semantic questions.

The splash page is most often an opening page in a comics book. It is an image that extends beyond a single panel and very often occupies the entire page or even two facing pages. It may be limited by the margin or run to the edge of the page. As Robert S. Petersen explains, the splash page

functioned in a manner similar to a monoscenic narrative where the whole page would be turned into a single large image that would grab the reader at the start of the story. Like the cover of the comic book, the splash page often illustrated some important later moment in the story, distilling the conflict, and setting the mood for what was to come. (150)

The splash page was developed and mastered by Will Eisner, who first began using it in *The spirit* in the 1940s (Greenberger 39-41). “When I began, I saw the splash page merely as something that should grab the attention of someone flipping through the newspaper,” Eisner observes, “I soon became theoretical about it and saw it as something more than a design element. It could set the scene, set a mood, define a situation” (qtd. in Harvey 70). The first page of the story acts as an introduction—it is a “launching pad” for the story that follows. It also establishes a “frame of reference” (Eisner 62) for the entire narrative. The splash page is a canonic element of comics devised in order to “sell” the story. The entire page, and not just a single panel, is devoted to attract the reader/viewer’s interest.

Essentially commercial and promotional in nature, the splash page appears to be at odds with the serious themes tackled by graphic journalism. It has been adopted and adapted by Sacco, albeit with a twist. The graphic reporter consistently opens respective chapters of his works with introductory splash pages, including *Palestine* (1996), *Safe Area Goražde* (2000), *The Fixer* (2003), and *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), but his rendering of the form is meant to challenge and not simply attract the reader/viewer. Indeed, *Safe Area Goražde*, a journalistic graphic account about the Bosnian War, opens with a splash page which introduces the reader/viewer to the story, making him or her reflect on the nature of the story at the same time (*Goražde* 1) (Figure 1). In a clever and ironic gesture, the title of the first chapter and the corresponding drawing contradict and oppose one another. The title reads “Go away” and the image shows a convoy of UN trucks and army vehicles entering Goražde. The city is ruined by the war. The abandoned houses bear the marks of missiles and fire. Toying with the phrase “no-man’s land” inserted in a caption below the title (*Goražde* 1), Sacco presents both the city’s complex geopolitical situation and the fact that it is partially deserted. The convoy, however, proceeds up the page, into Goražde, only to face the title “Go away” looming on the horizon at the top. Thus, Sacco draws the reader/viewer in by means of carefully planned composition (the reader/viewer may “enter” the image in the bottom left corner where the road leading simultaneously into Goražde and towards the top of the page starts; the reader/viewer then follows the road) and discourages him or her with an ambivalent verbal message.



**Figure 1.** From *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-95* by Joe Sacco, copyright © 2000 by Joe Sacco. Used by permission of Fantagraphics Books, Inc.

While in *The Spirit* the splash page was supposed to attract the comics reader, in Sacco's account of the war the role of such an image is more nuanced. On the one hand, in keeping with its comics heritage, the splash page introduces the story and establishes the mood. Sacco clearly shows the devastating effects of war and the situation of the people living in the constant fear of military attacks. In a way, he treats the landscape like a character, allowing it to speak for itself and convey the harsh realities of life in a military zone. Viewed in this perspective, Sacco's splash page in a sense adheres to its traditional role, insofar as it sets the mood. On the other hand, through the urgent appeal of the title, the splash page also advises the reader/viewer to "go away" and discontinue reading. "Well then, Sacco seems to be saying," Christopher Hitchens (ii) observes, "will you turn away from the extermination and dispossession of those who are so much like your own unlovely self?" or will you continue reading despite the story's grave subject matter. Sacco's splash page does not attract but demonstrates the ugly truth of war. Indeed, in a single intricate gesture, Sacco both acknowledges his comics roots and challenges them, establishing the splash page as a subversive tool.

### **“When Does a Picture Speak for Itself?”: The Spread as a (Professional) Statement**

Another strategy that the contemporary American graphic novel adopted and adapted from the comics book is the use of the so-called spreads. The spread is an image that extends over more than one page, incorporating the neighboring page as well. It may be surrounded, and thus framed, by a margin or run freely to the edges of the two pages. Unlike the splash page, it never commences a new story or a new chapter but "intervenes" in the sequential visual narrative, disrupting its flow. The spread functions as an anti-thesis and counterweight for the sequential character of the story, questioning the understanding of comics and graphic novels as "[j]uxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud 9). The spread draws attention to its own painterly and purely visual qualities instead. It can also be seen as "a complete narrative unit in itself" (Magnussen and Christiansen 85). The power of the spread as a narrative unit is derived from its layout. Indeed, as Thierry Groensteen observes,

pages situated opposite each other are dependent on a natural solidarity, and predisposed to speak to each other. If it is possible for the artist to ignore this predisposition, there are, nonetheless, numerous ways to benefit from it... The solidarity of the left hand page and the right hand page is never pushed farther than it is in the case of a story told in two pages... leaving the eye to carry out the synthetic apprehension of the story in its totality. (36)

While numerous contemporary graphic novelists frequently insert full-page illustrations into the predominantly sequential graphic narrative, including Charles Burns in *Black Hole* (2005), Craig Thompson in *Habibi* (2011) and *Blankets* (2003), or David Small in *Stitches* (2009), no one has explored the full possibilities of double-page spreads in a manner similar to Joe Sacco.

In *Safe Area Gorazde*, Sacco presented the reader/viewer with the stark realities of War in Bosnia. In *The Fixer*, the graphic reporter returns to Bosnia to once again examine the causes of the military conflict and look at its aftermath. Sacco weaves a bitter but brilliant tale, in which he not only chronicles but also diagnoses the country as inherently torn and traumatized. Sacco's drawing style corresponds to the grave subject matter. His drawings are "monochrome, intricately cross-hatched and shaded, very much a product of the American underground scene that rejected the superhero ethos," Michel Faber writes, they "often have the impact of photographs that no photographer would dare take" ("An Anti-Hero of Our Time"). Sacco's "photographs" very often take the form of spreads, combining visual detail with the expressiveness of black and white drawing. They disrupt the narrative flow of the sequential tale and make the reader/viewer reflect on a scene which extends over the two facing pages. The analysis of a spread from *The Fixer* (12-13) showing a ruined cityscape of Sarajevo shall exemplify the possibilities of the form.

A clean geometrical form of the Holiday Inn hotel in Sarajevo dominates the page. Although located towards the right-hand side of a two-page spread, and not in its center, it draws the eye through carefully organized perspective lines which correspond to the outline of the road in front of the hotel. The building's sheer size and lighter shading also contribute to its dominant presence, as it stands out from a dark grey and stormy sky. The line of the horizon adheres to the "two thirds" rule of landscape painting—it is placed in the bottom part of the page so that it leaves the upper two thirds of the page for the sky—and the massive block on the right is balanced by two tall buildings towering against the sky on the left. While it looks like a photograph in black and white, or perhaps even as a lithograph or a woodcut, and adheres to the traditional compositional rules of landscape painting by utilizing the rules of perspective, this image is not a stand-alone work of art but a "disruption" in the flow of the sequential visual narrative that dominates in *The Fixer*. The spread lacks frames and gutters, the basic building blocks of graphic storytelling, and is limited only by the edges of the two pages. The drawing is not sequential but monoscopic and as such raises questions about its role and function in the story.

The spread is not to be admired for its painterly qualities only. Through the drawing's careful composition and expressive black-and-white drawing style Sacco in fact makes a professional statement on the role of the reporter. At the same time, he also manages to make a comment on the role of the reader/viewer in a non-fiction graphic tale. The drawing suggests desolation and depression. The mood is established by the stormy sky which, as has been noted above, takes up almost two thirds of the entire spread. As Sacco professed in one interview, though he essentially engages himself with journalism, he always acknowledges the medium in which

he is working (Mitchell 56). A certain expressiveness in drawing, Sacco claims, even if it conveys his subjective point of view, should be part and parcel of graphic narration. "It was dark. It was oppressive.... It is an expressive way of drawing it," Sacco observed in relation to the image of the Holiday Inn hotel in Sarajevo (Mitchell 56). Not only the sky carries emotional qualities. The damaged skyscrapers on the left, in turn, are a testament to the destructive power of the war as well as the country's economic decline—Hillary Chute calls them "relics of modernity and also, abandoned, artifacts of violence" (225). All in all, the entire scene reads not only like a beautiful, though dramatic, landscape but also as a testament to the horrors of war. Sacco takes full advantage of the space provided by the two opposite pages and composes an image that counters the reading rhythm introduced by panel arrangement. The spread slows down the reading and invites the reader/viewer to study a single drawing in more detail, thus revealing its hidden political and social significance.

Once engaged in such an analysis, the reader/viewer is certain to notice a solitary figure on the left. It is Joe Sacco—the reporter—walking to the hotel, hunching his shoulders. Indeed, as noted above, apart from reporting, the spread also offers a reflection on the role of the reporter. Sacco looks as if overwhelmed by the cityscape, the war, and the demands of his profession. Sacco in fact has commented on his ambiguous and ethically complex role of the war reporter in many an interview. As a trained journalist, he is fully aware of what it means to be a "professional" reporter. Sacco acknowledges that

journalism is kind of a cold thing, and it is a very cold profession if you are doing it well.... Really it is very clinical. It is like being a doctor. You are making an incision, you are taking out something not trying to do any damage, and then you are—well, I guess they have to saw themselves up after you've left. (Mitchell 65)

This cold, "clinical," and distanced approach, however, is constantly challenged by a different journalistic code of ethics, in which Sacco allows himself to be sympathetic to the people and the cause. Sacco admits that

[s]uddenly you just get involved. I need to put myself in the story now.... So to me being truthful about my role as a journalist, the filter that I am, the fact that I'm a Westerner in a foreign situation—all that is ethical. And to me, I won't say it is more ethical than the so called objective, but I think it is truer. It is more honest. (Mitchell 68)

By inserting himself in the spread, and thus in the entire story, Sacco acknowledges his subjective point of view in framing the narrative. The entire spread thus becomes a commentary on the journalistic profession. The reporter is no longer a distanced "third party" but a character in the tale. He allows himself to be consumed by the story he is creating. The "professional distance" disappears, exposed as dishonest.

The reader/viewer is not left indifferent either. The spread draws him or her in through the use of perspective. A broad white road opens before the reader/viewer, leading from the bottom edge of the page to the hotel. The reader/viewer is thus invited to join Sacco in his reporting quest, to enter the picture and thus the recounted story. The question that arises is “Will the reader/viewer follow?” Much as Sacco would like to engage his audience, the spread as a visual art form may convey an ambivalent message. As Jacques Rancière points out,

[f]ilm, video art, photography, installation and all forms of art can rework the frame of our perceptions none of them can avoid the aesthetic cut that separates outcomes from intentions... [because] there is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world; no direct road from intellectual awareness to political action. (82)

Indeed, as R.E.H. Gordon observes in relation to Rancière claims, “art’s capacity to make political change involves numerous minuscule instances in which a spectator’s gaze differs from that which is expected of them” (130). Though critical art may intend to change and activate the masses, the actual outcome of such artistic practices is difficult to predict. It is possible, Rancière concludes, that images created in order to discredit the indifference involved in watching and not participating in “the spectacle” may fail to be acknowledged as political and social manifestos. A call to action is misinterpreted by the viewer as pure aesthetics. After all, “there is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world” (Rancière 82). Sacco certainly attempts to engage the reader/viewer *via* aesthetics (visual language, including composition, perspective, expressive black-and-white drawing style). He openly acknowledges that the visual is supposed to “do all the work,” eliminating the verbal message. In an interview with W.J.T. Mitchell, Sacco thus comments on the role of the visual: “So I could have described everything I have told you in words. In fact I think in my script I actually did have words. But then part of the process of doing a comic is saying, okay, what words go out? When does a picture speak for itself? And I realized in this case, no words are necessary” (57). The graphic reporter relies only on the power of the image. He uses visual language to secure the reader/viewer’s participation, yet the results of such a strategy are unpredictable. Every reader/viewer needs to answer the question “Will I follow?” independently.

This notwithstanding, as can be seen in a complex play of the perspective, conventions of landscape painting, and war reporting which takes place in Sacco’s spread “the logic of visibility no longer arrives to supplement action,” to use Rancière’s words, but it arrives to “suspend it or duplicate it” (124). The image in itself constitutes a pause in the narrative (there is no “action” to speak of) but thanks to its composition, it also “duplicates” on a smaller scale the conflict at the heart of

*The Fixer*, namely how to find a voice that would honestly convey the experience of war.

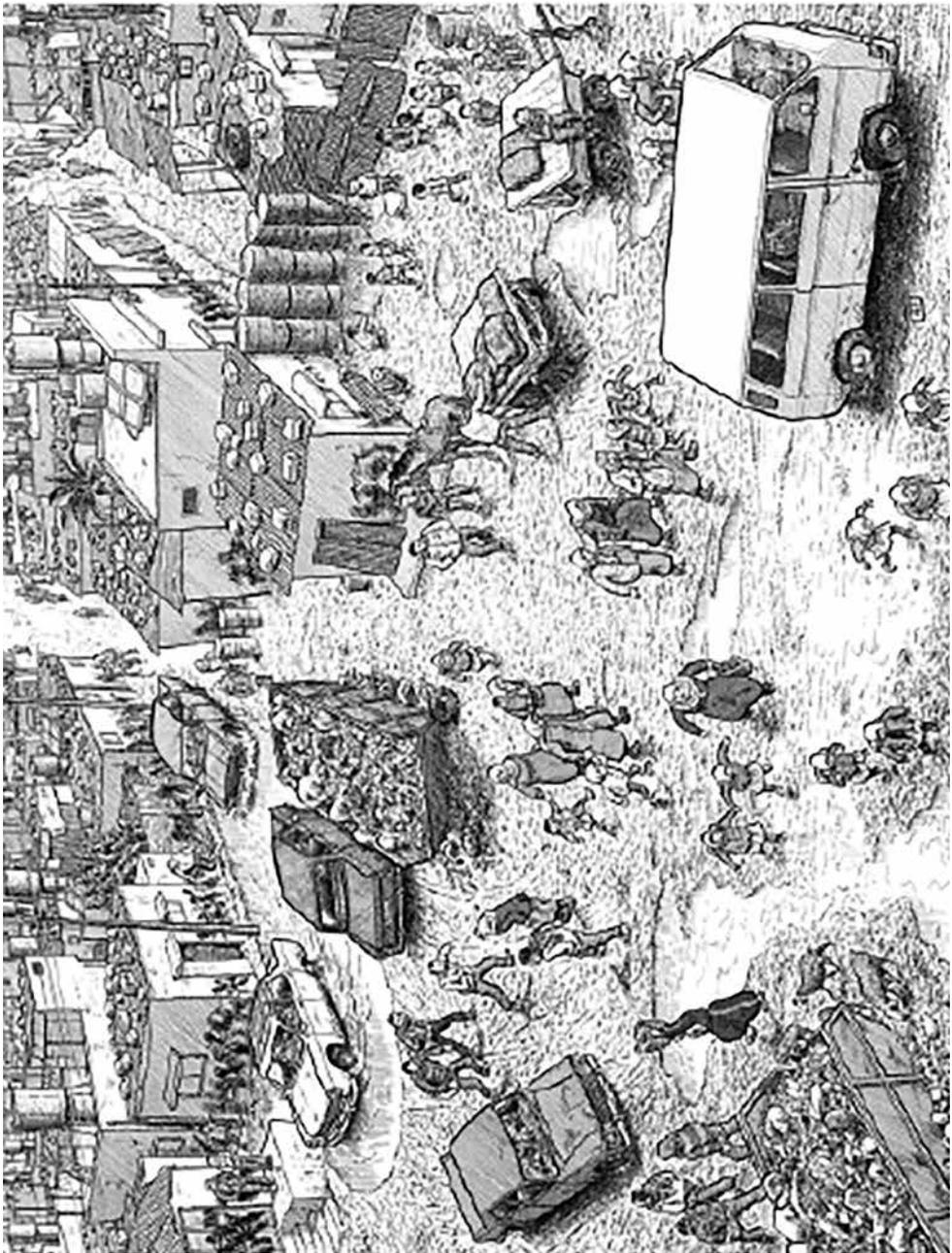
### **Between the Subjective and the Objective: Questioning Journalism Through the Bleed**

The final single-image form employed in the contemporary American graphic novel from comics is the so-called bleed. The bleed is an image that runs outside the border of the panel or the edges of the page. It introduces dynamism and dramatic tension to the story, but also problematizes the role of edges, borders, and limits. Indeed, the rectangle as a pictorial format, including the page in the graphic novel, “suggests the virtual extendability of pictorial space left, right, and above the stationary viewer” (Crowther 54). The bleed takes advantage of such a conceptualization of the format of the page, suggesting that the image spreads out beyond its edges. As Lan Dong (40) observes, the lack of the panel frame or a deliberate breach of limitations imposed by either the size of the panel or the page draws attention to the function framing plays in telling the story, i.e. it challenges the status of what is represented on the page and makes one wonder about what has been left out of the picture. “The effect of visual images literally being cut off at the edge of the physical page,” Dong (40) writes, “indicates what can be captured in words and visuals within the pages of the book” but also what failed to “make the cut.” In *Making Comics* Scott McCloud further develops the theory of the bleed, explaining that

[b]leeds... tend to open up a scene, not just because of increased panels sizes but also because they're no longer fully contained by the panel border and can, well, 'bleed' into our world or perhaps because we're conditioned by the panel-as-window experience and as if a window frame has passed beyond our peripheral vision; it usually means we're through it. (163-164)

Indeed, bleeds may play a fourfold role in the graphic narrative. They introduce dramatic tension, problematize framing, convey a sense of timelessness, and engage the reader/viewer in the recounted story. A bleed used by Joe Sacco in *Palestine* (146-147) (Figure 2), which depicts the author's experiences on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip in December 1991 and January 1992, exemplifies these aspects perfectly. At the same time, this image also problematizes the objective/subjective rift inherent to Sacco's graphic journalism.

The bleed presents an ordinary day in a Palestinian refugee camp, which Sacco visited in late 1991. The camp is bustling with activity, as people go about their business. Some children play in the streets, while other are on their way to school. A man is unpacking a horse-drawn cart, while cars drive by through the mud. The image is dynamic both because it depicts an active community and because it suggests that the scene portrayed is but one frame isolated from a larger social fabric extending beyond the page (even though the presence of the frame is not made



**Figure 2.** From *Palestine* by Joe Sacco, copyright © 1996 by Joe Sacco. Used by permission of Fantagraphics Books, Inc.

explicit here as it coincides with the edges of the page). The image implies that it is a snapshot of reality taken without much consideration and alteration. Such an implication is not without importance in the context of graphic journalism practiced by Sacco. The dynamic character of the bleed translates into the immediacy of the reported experience. As far as the problem of framing is concerned, the bleed's detailed portrayal of everyday life, including cars driving through puddles, two men arguing, people looking out through the doors of the buildings surrounding the small muddy square in the center, is an example of a "raw" journalistic material. It also implies other stories that did not make the cut. On the other hand, the drawing also manages to convey a sense of timelessness that opposes the immediacy of journalism. Without the margin and frames, the image functions as a gap in the wider narrative sequence of *Palestine*. The fourth aspect of the bleed, equivalent to breaking the fourth wall in the theater, is also present here, inasmuch as the dynamic character of the image suggests a vision of "real life," which draws the reader/viewer in.

Sacco problematizes the latter aspect by adopting a heightened perspective. The reader/viewer watches, or indeed considering the amount of details included, reads, the scene from above. Such a point of view is a marker of distance and dominance. Thus, the bleed becomes a metaphor for the possibilities and limitations inherent to reporting. Sacco has struggled with them throughout his entire career as a graphic journalist. As already noted above, he has especially been concerned with the tension between the search for immediacy and directness and the withdrawal and detachment characteristic for the profession. The reporter enters a community and experiences its problems but is also constantly aware of the fact that he or she may leave at any time. Sacco has problematized this issue most poignantly in *Safe Area Goražde*, saying that though he engaged with the locals through giving out gifts, conducting interviews, and paying home visits, he always knew he was able to leave the military zone and abandon the people with whom he bonded. "It'd been my turn to understand how much more than a few kilometers of road," Sacco observed, "separated me from them" (*Goražde* 67).

This notwithstanding, the high-eye level perspective, abundance of details, and numerous scenes from everyday life employed by Sacco in many of his drawings may also be inspired by another source. Indeed, Sacco's bleeds, including the one from *Palestine* and other also present in this work (175, 176, 217), as well as bleeds from *Safe Area Goražde* (14-15, 128) and *Footnotes in Gaza* (127), resemble the formal aspects of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting. While Sacco openly talks about his fascination with the Flemish Old Master (Marshall 45, Adams 128, Brandon 115), the link between the two artists should not be reduced to a stylistic trivia. On the contrary, it may be a starting point for a more nuanced analysis. In her examination of a two-page bleed from *Safe Area Goražde* (14-15), Hillary Chute observes that Sacco's image

conveys the attention to detail that we also see in Bruegel, and the observational perspective his paintings offer—in which, as Joseph Koerner writes in an

essay on Bruegel's ethnography, 'history itself... is the shaping force of nature.' This double spread is evocative of Bruegel's *The triumph of death* (1562), whose swarming composition... is similar. But its view of a wrecked landscape is a countervisual to *Triumph*. It is one in which beset people, in the presence of death, are not devoured by it but maintain daily life. (220)

Thus, as Chute points out, when one considers the subject matter of Sacco's bleed (the harsh realities of war, the suffering of the civilian population) and the subject matter of Bruegel's painting (the Dance of Death), it can be seen that the two images correspond to but also counter one another. The former opposes death and the latter depicts its domination. Apart from such a thematic correlation, the formal aspects of Bruegel's painting, as adapted or quoted by Sacco in his drawings, should also be analyzed from the point of view of visual storytelling and its relation with the contemporary American graphic novel. Just as Bruegel-the-painter cannot be separated from Bruegel-the-storyteller, Sacco-the-reporter is one with Sacco-the-artist.

Indeed, Bruegel introduces a tradition of visual storytelling different from the sequential tradition present in Pre-Columbian picture manuscripts, the Bayeux tapestry, Egyptian mural paintings, or the Medieval *Tortures of Saint Erasmus*, listed by McCloud (*Understanding Comics* 10-16) as forefathers of comics and graphic novels. An understanding of Bruegel's principles of composition may inform the study of single-image narratives in the graphic novel. As Rick Altman points out, Bruegel's use of perspective and grouping of figures in space "exemplifies the important differences separating multiple-focus images [which bleeds are as well—M.O.] from their single-focus or dual-focus counterparts" (197). Indeed, let us take a look at one of Bruegel's multiple-focus images in order to understand the principles of such a form of visual storytelling. In *Census at Bethlehem* (1566) (Figure 3), the viewer is simultaneously attracted and distracted by the painting's different overlapping scenes.

On the one hand, the viewer is able to comprehend the entire painting because of the high-eye-level perspective that has been employed—the viewer has the impression that he or she observes the village and the landscape from above. On the other hand, the viewer's gaze constantly wanders around, trying to absorb numerous smaller scenes and groupings of people. Altman observes that "[b]y rejecting the satisfaction of visual unity, Bruegel pushes us toward nonvisual organization of narrative space" (229). The artist relies more on fragmentation, or fractionalization of the painting, than on a coherent and unified presentation of events.

What is also "nonvisual," and consequently "non-narrative," about Bruegel is the manner in which he arranges the scene. Violating the most basic compositional patterns, Bruegel frequently places an episode that is of crucial importance for the narrative towards the edges of the painting and not in the center. Indeed, in *Census at Bethlehem*, Joseph and Mary are seen at the bottom of the pictorial field. In the very center of the painting the viewer may discern instead a single wheel which disengaged from a cart depicted above it. While it may seem like a minor compositional breach, the conscious decision on behalf of the painter to disregard



**Figure 3.** *Census at Bethlehem* (1566) by Pieter Bruegel The Elder. Oil on panel (116 x 164 cm). Public domain image at Wikipedia Commons.

the center leads to significant narrative consequences.

As Rudolf Arnheim observes in *The Power of the Center* (2-10), the geometrical center of the pictorial space, which is established in relation to the painting's frame, very often corresponds to its central theme, i.e. the most important element from the point of view of the story presented in the picture. It is motivated by the fact that the enclosed simple geometrical form of the pictorial field (such as a square, a rectangle, or a circle) inevitably draws the eye towards its middle. "Since every dynamic center has the tendency to distribute the forces of its field symmetrically around itself," Arnheim emphasizes, "its location will often coincide with that of the geometrical middle" (2). Bruegel, however, challenges the power of the center in his works and thus problematizes the principles of visual storytelling. The Old Master exploits "a teasing contradiction between an element kept deliberately small and its crucial importance for the story being presented" (Arnheim 75). In *Census at Bethlehem*, the central theme is pushed aside towards the bottom of the painting, while the geometrical center is occupied by a wheel, which is irrelevant from the point of view of the narrative. The viewer is thus forced to move his or her gaze around the painting, looking for its actual narrative center. Bruegel in fact achieves the effect of zooming-in without altering the size of the image or its respective elements. It is the active viewer who "zooms in" with his or her gaze and thus engages with the painting in the process of looking for the picture's thematic center.

The mechanics of how a single image narrates and engages the viewer, as problematized in Bruegel's paintings, is a powerful point of reference for Sacco in his works. The graphic journalist, similarly to Bruegel, utilizes fragmentation and explores tensions generated by abusing the power of the center. Another look at the bleed from *Palestine* (146-147) (Figure 2) confirms such a claim. Fragmentation, as noted above, is an obvious feature of this drawing. Sacco populates the two pages with numerous figures, each involved in his or her own action. "Pages like this have no words," Sacco observes, "but they are meant to be read slowly" (Mitchell 60). Similarly to Bruegel's painting, no spectacular scene is witnessed at the drawing's geometrical center, located at the intersection of the two main axes of the pictorial space.

The thematic center is located in the bottom right corner of the drawing. It is a white minivan about to break through the implicit frames of the drawing, equivalent to the outer edges of the two pages, and disappear from the bleed (thus exploring the bleed's dynamic potential). Joe Sacco is being driven through a refugee camp in the white vehicle, observing the surroundings. This time, the reader/viewer sees in him both the author and the narrator/character guiding the reader/viewer through the pages and towns of *Palestine*/Palestine. The reader/viewer is aware of this narrative and visual nuance because the dominant framework in which this bleed is set begins with Sacco getting into the car (*Palestine* 145) and closes with the image of him looking out of the window of the minivan (*Palestine* 148). Sacco purposefully removes himself from the center, granting the reader/viewer the space to visually "roam" the drawing, so that he or she may "zoom in" and "out" of individual scenes. The reader/viewer may thus appreciate narrative multiplicity present in the bleed and engage with the image.

At this point, the question of the frame resurfaces in connection with Sacco's play with the center. While the bleed tries to transgress the constrictions of the frame, insofar as it lacks margin or panel lines and expansively appropriates the page, it also reveals itself as nevertheless constricted by the format of the book. The frame establishes itself as a phenomenon that is not only virtual or conceptual but also very much physical. The very possibility of escaping the frame is questioned. The reader/viewer is caught in a loop, oscillating between the bleed's programmatic negation of frames and their inevitability, inscribed in the graphic novel's physicality. The very attempt to escape or challenge the frame inherent to the form and function of the bleed is further problematized by its positing in the overall structure of *Palestine*. As noted above, the bleed is arranged in a wider framework of two other drawings, which provide an opening and a closing for the entire scene.

The opening image (*Palestine* 145) functions as a "preliminary threshold which the reader/viewer passes through" (Matthews 26) in order to "enter" the bleed and thus the seemingly frameless world depicted on the following pages. It sets the scene and introduces the place Joe Sacco visits by means of images and numerous captions distributed densely throughout the page. The captions dryly and sardonically announce that

[s]ome of the world's blackest holes are out in the open for anyone to see.../ For instance, you can tour a Palestinian refugee camp in the Gaza Strip.../ You call UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees, Tel. 051-861195./ They'll set you up / drive you there themselves / admission is free.../ Probably they'll want you to add you to a group of Swedes or Japanese.../ but you'll want your refugee camp experience to be an intimate thing / insist they take you out alone / Tell them you want to take pictures, tell them you want to talk to refugees / when you want them to stop, let them know [forward slashes indicate division into captions—M.O.]. (*Palestine* 145)

Joe, posing as a disillusioned reporter, is driving in the white van through the muddy, busy and narrow streets. The page is divided into two rectangular panels. Their outer edges correspond to the edges of the page, while the boundary between them is not realized as a line but takes the form of the title of the chapter "Refugeeland." The point of view employed in both panels foreshadows the high-eye-level perspective employed in the bleed on the following two pages. Indeed, the perspective in the top panel represents the eye level of the reader/viewer. It rises slightly in the bottom panel, only to move still higher up in the bleed itself (*Palestine* 146-147) and narrow down in a rather dramatic manner on the following page (*Palestine* 148).

Indeed, page 148 constitutes a powerful counterpoint to the panoramic scene portrayed in the bleed. It shows the profile of Joe Sacco looking out of the window of the car. The page is divided into three rectangular panels. In the first panel at the top of the page the reader/viewer is presented with a frame within a frame. The outer frame is the frame of the panel, partially interblending with the edges of the page. The inner frame is the frame of the car window through which Sacco watches the refugee camp. The role of the window and framing is thus explored as distancing, divisive, and almost oppressive. Framing means that "what [one] sees in the picture [is] not... a part of the world in which he lives and acts, but... a statement about that world, at which he looks from the outside" (Arnheim 52). While the division between the world inside and outside the frame may seem a question of scale or an apt metaphor when applied to a landscape painting or an imaginary scene, it has profound consequences for a journalistic text.

Sacco balances between the amplified realistic character of detailed black-and-white (and often full-page) drawings and the repressed shameful sensation of being an outsider who will never be able to obtain, and consequently document, first-hand experience of the Palestinian people. He in fact has referred to the position into which he was forced as "unreality"—he felt that he was "on a safari" (Mitchell 57). The journalistic reportage is thus exposed as a kind of a simulacrum. Sacco attempts to create the effect of reality as he is unable to truly understand the situation of the people involved in the conflict. Sacco's detailed panoramic bleed, which was meant to give the reader/viewer a realistic portrayal of Palestine and its people, is involved in a play of double-readings. The bleed oscillates between the real and the imitative, the authentic and the altered, the frameless and the framed.

The frame and the act of framing shown and performed on page 148 also indicates Sacco's active role in building the story. While the panoramic bleed (*Palestine* 146-147), unbound and large-scale, downplays the presence and decisiveness of the author/narrator/character, insofar as it allows the reader/viewer to wander through the image freely, a sequence of framed images on page 148 openly introduces Sacco's personal and controlling perspective. He partakes in what Nicholas Mirzoeff refers to as "[c]lassifying, separating, and aestheticizing" (476) of the gaze. It is Sacco—the journalist/the narrator/the character who looks out of the window. His is the view, literally and metaphorically, with which the reader/viewer is presented. Sacco thus frames and simultaneously de-frames *Palestine* in a twofold manner. He divides the story into panels and sequences and then consciously undermines this structure with bleeds and spreads, problematizing the role and function of the frame in visual and verbal storytelling. The graphic journalist also frames the story by means of his political and ideological agenda and tries to de-frame it by including the voices of eyewitnesses or locals. The frame of the subjective and the absence thereof, implying the objective, clash. Ultimately, just as it is impossible to escape the pictorial frame, either understood as an explicit or implicit phenomenon, escaping the limits of the personal is also deemed unachievable.

Sacco ends "Refugeeland" with a one-page sequence with a subheading entitled "Edward Said" (*Palestine* 177). Mixing the profane with the political, Sacco shows himself taking a hot shower (a far cry from the harsh realities of the refugee camp) and subsequently discussing politics with his friend. Before going to bed, Joe picks up a book, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, commenting that

[t]he talk with Larry [Sacco's friend—M.O.] has sharpened my wits and I make it through a couple dozen pages of Said's dense prose.../I like Edward Said.../ He's a Palestinian-American, a professor at Columbia.../ His "The Question of Palestine" is one of the reasons I am here.../ Tomorrow I'm going to another camp, Jabalia.../ I'd rather not.../ I'd rather sit around the heater with people like Larry and read Edward Said... (*Palestine* 177).

By framing his vision in that of Said's Sacco retains "a certain internal coherence" (Derrida 69) but also demonstrates that there is no objective journalism and there is no account without ideology.

Indeed, as Joe Sacco's appropriation of the splash page, the spread, and the bleed demonstrates, a certain duality is inscribed in the profession of the graphic journalist. Sacco is torn between "running in both directions at the same time" (Mitchell 70). This division concerns not only the split between the writer and the visual chronicler, but also the rift between involvement and distance, subjectivism and objectivism intrinsic to the profession. Sacco adopts and adapts the splash page, the spread, and the bleed, exposing their reflective character. Originally used in superhero or adventure comics as visual "grabbers," the splash page, the spread, and the bleed are creatively transformed by Sacco. The splash page makes the reader/viewer reflect on the nature of the story he or she is reading. The

spread challenges fundamental principles of journalism. The bleed problematizes reporting as suspended between the objective and the subjective. As Sacco's work demonstrates, contemporary graphic novelists simultaneously draw on and reimagine comics conventions, trying to push the medium beyond the limits that have defined it for so long. Most importantly, however, as Art Spiegelman argues, Joe Sacco in his works exposes "[t]he phony objectivity that comes with a camera.... To write a comics journalism report you're already making an acknowledgment of biases and an urgency that communicates another level of information" (qtd. in Williams 53). Rather than asking the reader/viewer to accept his version uncritically, the graphic reporter constructs a narrative that encourages interpretation and reflection.

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Steffen Wöll

## Exceptional Spaces: Pop-Cultural Debris and the Spatial (Re)Construction of American Exceptionalism in Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the cosmic setting of Alfonso Cuarón's movie *Gravity*, taking into account its fictional population with the themes, tropes, myths, and symbols that have regularly been identified as exemplary for the composition of a uniquely American personal and national character. Making use of a deconstructive approach and a methodology that is informed by the theories of spatial turn scholarship in the humanities, the paper zooms in at the sociocultural dynamics, aesthetics, mise-en-scène, and key motifs of Cuarón's representation of space in the movie, arguing that this representation in fact draws on, endorses, and positions itself firmly within the epistemological framework of American exceptionalism, which becomes visible mainly through the movie's relationship to geography, technocracy, and popular culture.

**Keywords:** Alfonso Cuarón, *Gravity*, space, American exceptionalism, popular culture

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### “An Airborne Life”: Introduction

One day the stars will be as familiar to each man as the landmarks, the curves, and the hills on the road that leads to his door, and one day that will be an airborne life.

Beryl Markham, *West with the Night*

For many American audiences Space has become a field of endless prospects, a real yet for the vast majority inaccessible thus fictitious domain.<sup>1</sup> Frequently, Space defies a clear distinction between scientific realism and purely fictional imaginings within the vertiginous array of virtually endless cosmic permutations (Cartwright 287).<sup>2</sup> In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre reflects upon the intangible ontological quality of the universe, which “one can neither conceive of [having] a beginning (an origin) nor yet do without such an idea” (22). Edward Soja's concept of thirdspace describes space as a conciliatory realm that brings together “the subjectivity and

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1 In order to delimit it from its geographical, socio-cultural, or other meanings, the term space is capitalized in this paper where it refers to outer space, namely “the physical universe (excluding celestial objects) beyond the earth's atmosphere, consisting of near vacuum with small amounts of gas and dust” (“Space”).

2 A prominent example for this is Ronald Reagan's 1983 Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), also known as the ‘Star Wars’ program, which proposed the usage of Space-based antiballistic missiles systems as a defense from Soviet nuclear aggression (Weisman).

objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body,... everyday life and unending history” (57). In literature, Space has become a laboratory proper for authors to experiment with, criticize, and survey the validity of terrestrial ethics, politics, and ideologies. From the imaginative spheres populated by the fictions of grand visionaries Jules Verne and H.G. Wells to the Golden Age of science fiction with authors such as Isaac Asimov (*I, Robot*) and Robert A. Heinlein (*Starship Troopers*), the cosmos and its potential alien inhabitants have worked as catalysts for the pressing issues of their times.

Space thus came to be seen as a *tabula rasa* ready to be inscribed with amazing stories, but also as a resonating chamber for those voices and agendas that emphasize the unique qualities of a coherent American identity. The sublime nature of the cosmic frontier and the individuals who dare to venture there hint at its exceptional status within the American national framework of transcendental and identity-shaping landscapes. Likewise, the NASA Space program evolved into a gauge for international prestige and ideological paragon of American values and character during the space race of the Cold War era. In the field of pop-cultural entertainment an ongoing space craze engendered a plethora of successful Hollywood productions, for instance *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Star Wars*, or *Alien* that quickly acquired a cult following. Because their plots often unfold in the deep Space of galaxies far away from the coarse realities of earth, these movies employ fictional and pseudo-scientific elements more liberally than for instance Alfonso Cuarón’s *Gravity* (2013), which attempts to visualize more readily imaginable scenarios.

Praised by critics for its visual aesthetics, zero-G cinematography, and 3-D special effects (Hornaday; Seitz; Travers; Turan), the film features NASA astronauts Dr. Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock) and Matthew “Matt” Kowalski (George Clooney) attempting to repair a malfunctioning telescope. Disaster strikes when a debris storm caused by a discarded Russian satellite damages the astronauts’ shuttle beyond repair.<sup>3</sup> Lost in Space and cut off from communication with Houston, their struggle for survival begins. As its depiction in *Gravity* demonstrates, while it might be “a disorientatingly spaceless and timeless abyss” (Sage 2) and thus a virgin territory for earthly reasoning, Space has been and continues to be instilled and “humanized” with meaning in the form of political, sociocultural, and religious agendas as well as those myths and symbols that some American studies scholars have laid out as exemplary for the American character. The goal of this paper is to examine several of the movie’s motifs and key scenes within the transcendental nexus of American exceptionalism by employing a deconstructive approach that focuses on Cuarón’s use of spatial aesthetics, *mise-en-scène*, as well as key motifs and symbols. Based

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3 At this point, the script transgresses the line of implied scientific realism and enters science-fiction territory: A high-speed accident like this is in fact impossible because “[a]ll objects in the same orbit move at the same speed, so a collision between them is no more likely than if all of the cars on a highway were moving at exactly 60 mph. The gap between any two would never widen or narrow at all” (Kluger).

on these evaluations, I argue that the representation of Space in *Gravity* draws on, endorses, and positions itself within the ideology of an exceptional American identity, which is shaped primarily by its relationship to geography, technocracy, and popular culture.

### **“Because It Is There”: Exceptional Geographies**

Many years ago the great British explorer George Mallory, who was to die on Mount Everest, was asked why did he want to climb it. He said, ‘Because it is there.’ Well, space is there, and we’re going to climb it.

John F. Kennedy, “Address on the Nation’s Space Effort”

The “triumph” over the North American physical space during the westward expansion of the nineteenth century and the important role of geography for the formation of a national identity together laid the foundation for what Henry Luce in 1941 prophetically termed the “American Century” (cf. Keller). In the same vein, the cosmic endeavor also functions through this “uniquely” American mode by adding both substance and cohesion to the notion of an exceptional national character. However, this is not accomplished merely through the de facto exploration of and control over a spatial extend of territory. Conversely, apart from imperial or hegemonic aspirations, spatial territory is first taken into possession through human settlement and subsequently co-opted into a preexisting ideological or spiritual superstructure. Space for the myth of American identity then occupies a dual function: first, its relationship to space *is* unique because it is not merely the territorial repository of but also the prerequisite for identity formation; second, this idiosyncrasy also *makes* unique because it transcends the formulaic dynamics between human civilization and natural environment, which in its essence describes the unilateral humanization of a habitat. A formerly barren and hence meaningless space in terms of civilization is transformed into a place—a state, region, or city—via its anthropocentric re-inscription as an object “which people have made meaningful” (Cresswell 7).

Although by no means exempt from this core dynamic, the American myth of Manifest Destiny exceeds this lineal mode of operation by assigning agential quality to the environment itself. Within this paradigm, space becomes more than a necessary source of macroeconomic sustenance and individual prosperity—a mere people’s enclosing, bordered *lebensraum* as it was incumbent in the European political geography. Instead, in the process of its exploration, the supposedly untouched American wilderness itself became an agent engaged in reciprocal action with its inhabitants by vanquishing their ethnic and cultural differences through common hardships and homogenizing their character through the shared experience of endurance in unfamiliar and hostile surroundings. Hence, “[t]he rapid expansion of the US from coast to coast, the immensity of its railroad system, the scale of its bridges, and the productivity of its factories, all became sublime tropes for the new nation” (Nye 321).

Therefore, the relationship of people with different and sometimes adverse sociocultural and sectarian backgrounds blends together via their movement through and emplacement in a geography that functioned as a democratizing accelerator, resulting in “a foundational understanding of the US as formed by the Americanization of (European) migrants” (Madsen 369). This exalted geographical setting then supposedly acted as a hotbed for the development of distinctly American “conventions, customs, techniques [and] transformations such as metonyms, tropes, and metaphors that are intrinsic elements in the constitution, continuity, and the change of people’s identity as a people of certain locations or spatial spheres” (Schlottner 259).<sup>4</sup> In “Little Gidding,” T. S. Eliot, often named as one of the “American Century’s” most exceptional writers, gives poetic expression to this notion which is rooted in the desire to include all humanly accessible spaces in the modernist quest of attaining a coherent identity, and consequently the actualization of the cosmos as a valid object for the national impulse to expand its physical—and through this process also its mental—geography (Sage 2):

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
Through the unknown, unremembered gate  
When the last of earth left to discover  
Is that which was the beginning.

In *Passing Strange and Wonderful: Aesthetics, Nature, and Culture*, Chinese geographer Yi-Fu Tuan traces this peculiar allocation of nature with its religious, ethic, poetic, and aesthetic dimensions back to its eighteenth and nineteenth century roots. Using the exalted spatial and legal status of national parks as a pointer for the adamant contemporary allotment of space with mythical and foundational qualities, he understands “open space and free land [as] a source of spiritual and democratic values, including liberty, simplicity and equality” (204). Hence, the aesthetics of space as well as its transformations and correlative impact on its inhabitants are not only one single aspect, but actually the core of Americanness as a whole. This might not least stem from what Tuan calls “simplicity,” namely a sense of inherent pastoral grandeur and universally approachable delight in the continent’s landscapes that is comprehensible across all societal strata. In fact, the American frontier landscapes provided a “definable, recognizable and repeatable aesthetic framework [and] stage upon which an exceptional... version of American identity could be performed”

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4 Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 “frontier thesis” describes the American character as being defined by “coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom” (qtd. in Tindall and Shi 740-41).

(Sage 25). The same idea holds true for the cosmic landscape as it is presented in the movie *Gravity*, whose simplistic yet spectacular visual style is equally—if not more—stunning to behold and its straight-forward plot acknowledgeable by the broadest of audiences.

The narratives that emerge naturally from the encounters that take place within this realm then comprise the core themes of spatial exceptionalism. They often illustrate a spatio-temporal antagonism by depicting the clashes between civilization and wilderness (*Leatherstocking Tales*) or democracy and totalitarianism (*Moby-Dick*). Their explicitly violent quality is an integral component of these confrontations and is not only inherent in many American founding myths from the Revolutionary War to the westward expansion and Civil War but also in *Gravity*'s aesthetic of constant destruction and fragmentation within a life-threatening environment. The derivations and repercussions of these pivotal and ongoing struggles are subsequently condensed and sublimated into a distinctly American mindset. At its core, this mentality is characterized by its understanding of socio-spatial performance as an egalitarian concept, capable of transcending class distinctions and distilling a set of unparalleled features. The universe is an ideal setting and metaphor to convey this paradigm of Americanness because it functions as an unbroken physical manifestation of said virtues and therefore as the positivistic-scientific verification of their verisimilitude. In this understanding, the cosmos itself becomes Americanized, that is to say deeply egalitarian and ruggedly individualistic; its hardships and perils affect everyone who dares to enter it, regardless of their race or gender. Consequently, astronauts are depicted as simultaneously collaborative and autonomous bodies who must suffer the consequences of their own mistakes, and therefore genuinely self-reliant agents. The directives from mission control do not curtail this uninterrupted sense of independence since they cannot actually be enforced from the earthbound command center in Houston. In the movie, Space stations and Space ships are truly sovereign, self-governing bodies whose isolation and claustrophobic lack of room both promote the proliferation of democratic structures and proclivity to flat hierarchies. Thus, they both signify two central dimensions of American exceptionalism, which Amy Kaplan identifies as “uniqueness and universality” (qtd. in Reichardt 449), whereas the principal values of democracy are pluralized in order to attach themselves to any available physical and cultural spaces. As Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor explains, “the world as a whole... is following American precedent” (54).

*Gravity* also aligns itself with the notion of American society as a multicultural melting pot, which becomes apparent in the different ethnic backgrounds of its protagonists as implied by their last names, i.e. Stone (Anglo-Saxon), Kowalski (Eastern European), and Shariff (Middle Eastern). Yet their interactions and struggles with the surrounding hostile geography melts down their ethnic and religious differences in order to produce something unique: an American identity. The opening credits state the intentionally incorrect: “Life in space is impossible.” In fact, as implied by the succeeding display of astronauts floating in Space, the conditions for this possibility are outlined as the ontological status of being exceptional as well as the epistemologically

enabled performance of this exceptionality. In other words, both *being* and *acting* American. The movie's final sequence in particular implies the possibility of new exceptional spaces to be attained. As Stone manages to escape from the sinking rescue capsule to reach the muddy shores of a sublimely picturesque landscape, the movie "hints at some massive cosmic rebirth; a sense that these people are the first or last human beings in the universe" (Bredshaw). Interestingly, at this crucial point in its dramaturgy *Gravity* mixes secular with religious symbolism. On the one hand is the Darwinist notion of evolution symbolized through human life emerging from the water. On the other hand, however, stands the metaphor of Stone embracing the wet clay as the source material of biblical creation *ex nihilo*, hence the metaphysical generation of life from the earth itself. Against this interpretive background, the cosmos turns into a new frontier for the American exceptionalist aspiration, ready to be shaped and molded by human ingenuity, yet also to itself act as a creative and character shaping force. Within this framework, Stone and Kowalski are figuratively portrayed as yeoman settlers in Space, surrounded by the very wilderness that forges the traits of their unique identity. Encircled between the freezing emptiness of outer Space and the incinerating heat of unprotected orbital re-entry, they are forced to negotiate and improve the conditions of their existence solely through self-reliance and the performance of Americanness.

### **"A Thing of Trophies": Technocratic Exceptionalism**

As Fraser MacDonald aptly notes in his essay "Anti-*Astropolitik*—Outer Space and the Orbit of Geography," any attempt to map out "a geography of outer space is a logical extension of earlier geographies of imperial exploration" (596). However, while it may be true that under geopolitical aspects "the move into space has its origins in older imperial enterprises" (MacDonald 596), I will refrain—for reasons of space, ironically—from discussing these aspects in greater depth. Rather, the following analysis considers *Gravity* mainly within the fabric of those exceptional-transcendental geographies laid out in the previous chapter.

Indeed, whereas "2001, *Solaris*, and *Contact* used the premise of outer space to explore larger philosophical questions... *Gravity* [puts] focus on the perils, dangers, promise, and gratification of space exploration" (Hameed). With its orbital setting, vivid illustration of and focus on techno-scientific structures and their relations to human existence, the movie magnifies the paradigm of American geographical transcendence by drawing on technocracy as both a generator of and metaphor for exceptional meaning.<sup>5</sup> A core text of the myth-and-symbol school, Leo Marx's 1964 *The Machine in the Garden* provides a model for this concept as

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5 I do not use the term technocracy in its strict meaning as the "[g]overnment or control by an elite of technical experts" ("technocracy") where "questions of ethics, values and emotional state are replaced with technical, and economic, calculations of efficiency and cost-effectiveness" (Sage 61). Instead, I understand it in a more fluid sense as the conglomeration of man-made technological structures and skills used to enable, maintain, and control human existence in Space.

it “presented the American experience through the conflicts between the pastoral ideal and the proliferation of technology” (Umberger). In fact, a brief comparison between Melville’s *Pequod* and Cuarón’s depiction of the International Space Station (ISS) reveals both vessels as exactly those transcendental and democratizing ‘machines in the garden’ through which said Marxian dichotomy can produce “nationalistic triumphs of the technological sublime” (Nye 325). Both are no ordinary ships, but in fact rather unique vessels: They are patchwork structures, palimpsests inscribed and charged with multiple histories, and held together by their metaphorical contents. The *Pequod* mirrors the ISS’s battered yet sturdy looks as her “masts—cut somewhere on the coast of Japan, where her original ones were lost overboard in a gale—... stood stiffly up like the spines of the three old kings of Cologne” (Melville 59). Just as the ISS is filled with the lucky charms of oddly superstitious astronauts, the *Pequod* also “was as a thing of trophies,” emanating an air of improvisation that is animated by arcane and ideological motives, vesting both structures with the divine nimbus of “[a] noble craft, but somehow a most melancholy” (Melville 59). In both vessels, unfamiliar spaces are populated with symbols that function to uphold the identitarian unity of their inhabitants. For instance, during the moment of her greatest desperation, Stone draws new hope from an Orthodox Saint Christopher icon she finds inside the Russian Soyuz module, and which reconnects her with the meaningfulness of man-made objects, shielding her against the dark nothingness of deep space. The fact that she is not religious and—as she later confides during a strange conversation with a Chinese radio operator—“I’ve never prayed in my life” become irrelevant here: The main protagonist is safe as long she can adhere to something that elicits an emotional response, namely an artifact whose melancholy value is able to transcend the Marxian divergence between the machine and the garden.

Moreover, the technocratic substructures and scientific preconditions for the American astronautics program also work towards the paradigm of an exceptional geography. In his review of K. Maria D. Lane’s *Geographies of Mars*, Roger Launius remarks how the establishment of astronomical observatories on remote mountaintops in the second half of the nineteenth century with its “sense of adventure and hardship... raised the status of those who worked in those places. In essence, these activities were hard and, therefore, those who engaged in them were dedicated scientific explorers and their conclusions were to be embraced.” Lane continues to argue that “a metropolitan-versus-mountain dichotomy provided the critical means of differentiating among the credibility of observatories, astronomers, and hypotheses. The higher, the more remote, the more rugged, and the more sublime, the better” (95). The same correlation between hostile environment, credibility, and sublime exaltation is visible in the joint effort of *Gravity*’s astronauts to subsist, survive, and populate Space with meaningful structures that delineate their exceptional performance. The most obvious instance of this symbolic population is a prolonged sequence that shows the ISS entangled in a damaged parachute of a Soyuz escape capsule, highly reminiscent of the Stars and Stripes banner. Moreover, the astronauts’

initial mission to carry out repairs on the Hubble Space Telescope (HST) exemplifies the above-mentioned reciprocity even more strikingly as the device itself becomes emblematic for the sublime qualities of cosmic technology. Since its launch into orbit in 1990, the HST has functioned as a literal *deus ex machina*. Medical researchers, for instance, have adapted the know-how used originally to detect a malfunction in the HST's photo-optical system (which produced only blurry images) and applied it to the field of mammography, therefore "leading to significant advances in the early detection of breast cancer. Countless women are alive today because of efforts to fix a design flaw in the Hubble Space Telescope" (Tyson).<sup>6</sup>

In *Gravity*, anthropocentric significance is also generated as Space is populated (or, from an environmentalist perspective, contaminated) with the technological artifacts of human civilization. While waste materials, burned out rocket stages, and derelict pieces of outdated machinery drift into Space, they also take with them the anticipation of being discovered and hence to overcome earthbound parochialism and to reach out to more advanced civilizations who might be able to answer humanity's most haunting questions, open up new and meaningful horizons of knowledge and power, or even fulfill modernity's repressed desires of an afterlife. Hence, although Kowalski's slow departure into the darkness of outer Space superficially implies his certain death in the freezing vacuum, it also connotes a highly idiosyncratic ascription of meaning. Even though his individual existence and human agency are doomed to end as he either succumbs to hypothermia or suffocates, his body is ascribed with new and possibly even greater symbolic value because it is reclassified as a cultural artifact and "ambassador" of Americanness, and hence humanity as a whole. Peacefully entering the spatio-temporal infinity of the cosmic *terra incognita*, Kowalski thus achieves twofold immortality: Firstly, the vacuum protects his organic integrity against the terrestrial certainty of decay, thus affixing to his—male, white, and American—features a status of representative epistemic universality and archetypal Foucauldian discursive power. Much like the nobility's mummified remains of ancient Egyptian civilization serve as the centerpieces of their scientific and public imagination, Kowalski's frozen hull will be regarded as representative for humanity as a whole by its possibly alien finders. Secondly, with his lily-white suit conveying innocence and placidity, he appears as a shining light in an ocean of darkness, fleeing the dismal confounds of the Old World and thus "representing the US as an exception to the rule of European normalization" (Pease 265). Similar to the last unspoiled humans in Cormack McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*, his natural task has become to "carry the fire" (234), or to actually become the fire himself. His post-mortem mission therefore is to keep alive what Abraham Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature" and in this way provide an example for the rest to follow: a glittering city upon a hill that materializes the

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6 In a 2009 speech, Barack Obama remarked that the "Apollo program produced technologies that have improved kidney dialysis and water purification systems; sensors to test for hazardous gasses; energy-saving building materials [and] fire-resistant fabrics used by firefighters and soldiers."

“unifying element [of] the [American] cult of freedom” (Ricard 15).

Finally, Kowalski's calm and collected attitude in the prospect of an agonizing death in fact hints at his intuitive awareness of this augmentation of representational power through death and symbolic cosmic rebirth via this final performance of American exceptionalism. A paragon of personal transcendence, his fearlessness therefore embraces both the Pilgrim's emancipating voyage into an unknown New World and the Puritan credo of the quest into uncharted wilderness as a means of spiritual redemption. Therefore, *Gravity's* representation of American technocracy ultimately constitutes a fallback to and celestial affirmation of those singular character traits that appoint “a universal sense of freedom as being part and parcel of what it is to be American: a future without limits [as] *the* distinguishing trait of American identity” (Sage 13, original emphasis). In Cuarón's movie, the universe in its most verbatim definition therefore works as the truly universal empty canvas on which exceptional tales are painted with a broad palette of possible colors.

### **“Neil Armstrong Bakes Pizza”: The Exceptional Culture**

The democratic quality of physical space as an agent of exceptionalism has produced both the geographical place America and the collective conception of a distinctly American popular culture, engendering an identity that becomes visible “in the grid pattern imposed everywhere on the landscape, or in the idea of inter-changeable parts that can be found in factories, fast-food restaurants,... in skyscrapers, in the poetry of Walt Whitman, and in the structure of jazz” (Nye 323). Today, a plethora of voices contest an essential American character as white and male-centric and hence marginalizing women as well as African Americans and other minorities (cf. Alsultany; Halttunen). As Kirsten Silva Gruesz contends, “‘America’ has generally been used as a term of consolidation, homogenization, and unification, not a term that invites recognition of difference, dissonance, and plurality” (20). But irrespective of these valid points of criticism, it should at least be possible to assert with some certainty that “the centrality of the debate about American distinctiveness... may in itself be a key component of American identity” (Kean 2).

In fact, American popular culture draws some of its singularity from the inclination to contrast itself against and view highbrow culture as a symptom of the Old World's corruption, social dislocations, and aristocratic elitism. Still, pop icons such as Elvis Presley or Superman occupy positions that seem no less exceptional than Shakespearean characters or the demigods of Greek mythology. Nonetheless, the key difference between them is apparent in their peculiar double status. On the one hand, they are exempted from everyday experience; a spotlight is put on them, which demarcates them from pedestrian reality. On the other hand, they are not raised above the limits of their own personhood and usually not endowed with mystical qualities, hence never fully detached from being “one of us.” By staying grounded in the egalitarian status quo, “stars” and other supposedly exceptional figures are actually no superior exceptions—or even an implicit

critique—of democratic and mass-cultural indifference, but in fact their promotion and simultaneous confirmation of Middle American values. Hence, “The King” was never elevated into divine rank but attributed merely a secular title, and his majesty suffered a quite prosaic death caused by obesity and drug abuse just like the lowest of his “subalterns” could. Likewise, despite his herculean powers Superman must spend the bulk of his days performing a run-of-the-mill office job disguised as the painfully pedestrian Clark Kent in order to cloak his exceptional identity. What follows from this is that pop icons are equally mimetic of the extraordinary as they are of the ordinary, i.e. everyday democratic processes and institutions. In *Gravity*, Stone’s elevated position as a NASA astronaut is similarly rectified and democratized when she relates the “pointless” death of her four-year-old daughter who slipped and hit her head while playing tag.

Many myth-and-symbol texts in American studies have emphasized the role of both popular culture and geography for American identity formation, most notably Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land* and Richard Slotkin’s frontier trilogy. Although pointed out as frequently championing high culture, lacking methodological coherence, as well as promoting “platonic” ideas and “a crude Cartesian view of mind” (Kuklick 437), these texts also worked on the deconstruction of the popular/mass versus high culture dichotomy. In her 1989 keynote address, then ASA president Linda K. Kerber observed that “the Myth and Symbol writers broadened the definition of what qualified as art, and devoted to the imagery of ‘second-rate’ literature the attention which the New Critics reserved for ‘high’ art.... [They understood] that Emerson’s essays must share the shelves with *Our Nig* and Campbell’s soup cans” (423-424). In the same vein, H. N. Smith’s book underpins its assumption of America as a “society [that] has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward” (4) with the “readings of major figures of intellectual and literary history such as Thomas Jefferson, James Fenimore Cooper, Walt Whitman, and others, but also through analysis of dime novels and other forms of popular and mass culture” (Streeby 434).<sup>7</sup> Even Marxist and postmodernist Fredric Jameson, an outspoken critic of popular culture, “later realized [that] the products of popular culture could serve utopian functions.... Amusements could be understood not simply as forms of false consciousness, but as a psychic release from the world” (Nye 327).

If widely shared consumption patterns of geographic key experiences, dissociation of high culture, and egalitarianism make up the groundwork of American popular culture, *Gravity*’s depiction of Space firmly embeds itself within this epistemic habitat. Regardless of their unique position outside of earthly constraints, astronauts are by no means exempt from the principles laid out above, because,

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7 However, Smith contended that the “unabashed and systematic use of [mass cultural] formulas strips from the writing every vestige of the interest usually sought in works of the imagination.” As a consequence, the “individual writer abandons his own personality and identifies himself with the reveries of his readers,” suppressing any spark of stylistic uniqueness and instead assuming “the character of automatic writing” (101).

as Darren Jorgensen explicates with reference to the characterization of the heroic figures of Apollo 11:

The August 1969 *Life* Special Issue, released to commemorate the landing, wants to produce sympathetic accounts of the astronauts. It is filled with glossy, high color photographs of the astronauts not only mastering outer space, but their domestic spaces as well. Neil Armstrong bakes pizza, Buzz Aldrin jogs through the suburbs, and Mike Collins prunes his garden. (qtd. in Sage 160)

The astronauts in *Gravity* also appear as ordinary citizens with their personal and quite mundane qualms. For instance, throughout the opening scene Kowalski and Stone make small talk, joke and fool around with Houston mission control while all-American country music plays in the background. Later, when the two survivors make their way to the ISS after the fatal debris storm, Kowalski complains about his wife taking off with her lawyer in his (Kowalski's) '74 Pontiac GTO, a quintessentially car for American pop culture.

Still, the astronauts are vested with special training, unique abilities, and what art historian Albert Boime calls the "magisterial gaze," referring to the empowering top-down visual trajectory that gives them definatory power over the perception of both earth and Space (cf. Sage 21). The "magisterial gaze" is complemented by the "Apollonian gaze," which results from the possibility to photograph earth from Space "that had been dreamed about since the age of Cicero" (MacDonald 597-598) and that the film effectively simulated through its cinematography. Like the HST's "gorgeous images," Cuarón makes "Americans feel [like] participants in cosmic discovery" (Tyson). While this exceptional panorama for them is established as entirely normal and only mentioned *en passant*, its elaborate simulation for movie audiences clearly represents the dramaturgic, aesthetic, and to a degree also narrative focus of *Gravity*. To amplify the sense of immersion even more, Cuarón makes use of long shots to "slowly immerse audiences into [the] environment" in order to make viewers "feel as if they are a third character that is floating with our other two characters in space" (Murphy). Thus, as viewers descend into the 3-D enhanced Baudrillardian simulation of this unequalled spatial vista in combination with its simulated weightlessness, they are empowered and encouraged to themselves assume the "magisterial gaze," hence recreating the sublime spectacle of a prodigiously American space. As a consequence, audiences perceive the blue planet in its entirety, while personal problems suddenly appear petty and societal issues pale in the face of this shiver-inducing prospect. The possible future reality of widespread, affordable Space travel is already anticipated by its own simulacrum, resulting in a "simulation [that] threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false'" (Baudrillard 168). In light of the poststructuralist inclination to emphasize the constructiveness of human place-making, *Gravity's* representation of Space may in fact be engaged in the process of "disneyfication" as its screenplay is being "presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest [i.e., a coherent, exceptional American identity] is real" (Baudrillard 172; Halttunen 5).

This simulated sense of escapist ecstasy is best captured in the words of Kurt Vonnegut, who observed that “Earth is a pretty blue and pink and white pearl in the pictures NASA sent me.... Life is said to be horrible down there in many places, but it looked like the Garden of Eden to me” (qtd. in Klinkowitz 109). Likewise, after the 1957 Sputnik launch political theorist Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* observed that humanity’s endeavor into the depths of Space might indeed effect a “repudiation of the earth who was the Mother of all living things under the sky” (2). A telling dialog between the astronauts in *Gravity* underlines this notion of escaping into exceptional spaces. When Kowalski asks Stone, “[s]o, what do you like about being up here?” she replies, “[t]he silence,” thus amplifying the notion of escaping from a planet whose social order is perceived as noisy, crowded, and chaotic. In the context of the monosyllabic and image-centric style of the film, this intimated lamentation translates into an abbreviated performance of another device said to be emblematic of an exceptional American identity, namely the Puritan Jeremiad. At its core, the subtext of Stone’s answer in fact implies a laconic bemoaning of the transition from the post-World War II serenity and sense of national coherence to the confusing disarray of the postindustrial United States in the era of globalization.<sup>8</sup> “The silence” therefore suggests an attempt to recover in the universe what is already lost in planetary terms, and to explore and populate novel spaces where highly idealized concepts and imaginations may be revitalized and strike new roots. *Gravity*’s commercial success and critical acclaim both suggest that its homogenizing re-rooting of exceptionalist sentiments has indeed struck a common chord in America’s cultural landscape.

### **“Off Structure and Drifting”: Recovering the Exceptional**

Ultimately, the astronauts’ brief dialog cited above presents their journey as a literal flight from a perplexing globalist order that emerged after the downfall of the Berlin Wall and that took down with it the easily intelligible Manichean divisions of the Cold War, thus heralding “the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (Fukuyama 1). Within this environment, transnational (al-Qaeda) and territorial (ISIS) terrorist organizations and widespread opposition against American geopolitics and culture together with the post 9/11 Homeland Security State rendered visible what Paul Giles defined as “vectors that threaten to push the nation further and further away from the representative center of its own imagined community” (58). Over the last decades, these “vectors” have facilitated an inward turn and renewed interest in depictions of an “exceptionalist meta-narrative,” which promises to resurrect and stabilize time-honored values, unpack unifying traits, and therefore “recover a lost national origin [that] organized the national subject’s quest in the form of a sequence of purposive events” (Pease 265).<sup>9</sup>

8 Marilyn Young points out that “[t]he Cold War enshrined World War II as the ‘good war,’ a sacred icon of national virtue [and] the pursuit of world justice” (286).

9 Such reassuring narratives may depict fictional events like *Gravity* or draw from

This ideological fragmentation—apparent in the movie's frequent use of floating debris and disorienting perspectives—in the wake of the ideological blocs' downfall becomes evident in the movie's illustration of Space not as an exclusively American but multinational and multilingual domain. As already mentioned, *Gravity* was directed by Alfonso Cuarón who, together with his son Jonás, is also responsible for the film's screenplay. Born in Mexico City, Cuarón worked his way up from a job as a technician in Mexican television to directing films like *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004) and *Children of Men* (2006).<sup>10</sup> In addition to the transnational background of its auteur, *Gravity* moreover is a co-production of Esperanto Filmoj, a California based company owned by Cuarón, and the British Heyday Films studio. On the surface, this transnational makeup regarding the production and artistic direction of the film seems to call into question its interpretation as a vehicle of American exceptionalism. However, the opposite is the case; the estimation of the nation as a carrier of exceptional values is by no means a sentiment that is exclusive to those who possess US citizenship, but a decisively borderless concept. In fact, it could even be argued that today some components of American exceptionalism such as “the land of the free” hold even more sway for inhabitants of countries that may be lacking personal and/or religious freedoms and who actually see the US as a kind of city upon a hill, or even a modern variant of Cockaigne when it comes to economic possibilities. As a result, transnationalism and the globalized export of ideas have elicited quite a fascinating inverse development, in which domestic calls for exceptionalism seem to become ever more hushed, whereas the concept itself becomes borderless and is discussed, assumed, and appropriated in transnational contexts.

This conceptual borderlessness also resonates in the challenges that the astronauts face in the movie. Stone, for example, is only able to escape the doomed ISS by learning to command a Russian Space module while wearing a Russian Space suit. During the movie's climax, her survival and successful return to earth is possible only because she finds shelter in a Chinese rescue capsule. Additionally, the techno-scientific and verbal disarray resulting from the transnational quality of Space is also evident in Stone's desperate attempts to decipher and make sense of control panels of foreign space vessels that are labeled in Cyrillic and Chinese letters. Unable to understand what the letters mean, she succeeds only because the panels turn out to be exact replicas of each other, which works as a tongue-in-cheek gibe at globalization and mass production, yet also hints at egalitarianism and universalism as American core values. It comes as no surprise that some of the Cold War's systemic antitheses are also recovered in *Gravity*'s plot, implying a revival of the forlorn coherence of an era in which the US was “accustomed to seeing itself as the *de facto* center of the world—the military superpower, the largest economy, and the moral arbiter to boot” (Dimock 2; original emphasis). The process of recovering

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documentary and (semi)historical sources, for example in productions like *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) or *American Sniper* (2014).

10 Cuarón was the first Latin American to receive an Oscar in the category Best Director (for *Gravity*).

this notion of exceptionalism is picturesquely exemplified by the movie's opening sequence. Here, the orbital storm of satellite debris corresponds to a hail of projectiles intruding the US from the territory of its erstwhile "threatening socialist totalitarian Russian Other" (Pease 266). Although it might also originate from some belligerent Native American tribe, it is in fact caused by (willful?) negligence on the part of the Russians who thus re-establish their well-worn role as the shadowy antagonists against whom American values become clearly recognizable. Catherine Hall explains this process, noting that "[w]e can understand the nation only by defining what is not part of it, for identity depends on the outside, on the marking both of its positive presence and content of its negative and excluded parts" (9).<sup>11</sup> Hence, Russia is once again portrayed as—maybe not ideologically motivated but probably as a result of post-Cold War fragmentation and disarray—disturbing the peaceful and egalitarian American Space when it destroys its own (spy?) satellite, even though it may be acting upon its geopolitical "right of disposal." With this action and the ensuing chain reaction, the Russians directly threaten the technological integrity of the US, which today rests mainly on the efficient functioning of social networks. As Kowalski dryly remarks: "Half of North America just lost their Facebook."

Additionally, Stone's struggle for survival in Space also aligns itself as a quest in the tradition of captain Ahab's or Charles Marlow's epic and perilous journeys into the peripheral spheres of mundane reality and beyond the quotidian experiences of their times. The voyages of these exceptional literary figures therefore turn into what Edward Said in his essay "Introduction to *Moby-Dick*" identifies as "investigations of the largely unknown limits of their worlds" (358), which evoke "discourses of American specialness [and] the salutary effect as well as the destructiveness of the American world presence" (364).<sup>12</sup> Although detached from any obvious highbrow ambitions, Cuarón's protagonists nevertheless occupy such an extraordinary position as spatial *grenzgänger*s. In fact, the movie's drama emerges primarily from its characters' unique and ill-fated status as being caught between the poles of two variables. On one side is the ostensibly safe haven of earth, whose stunning 3-D vistas populate the silver screen. But the blue planet's comforting familiarity is—during the most dramatic scenes literally as well as symbolically—clouded by an increasingly uncanny defamiliarization. Because by surmounting the planet's gravitational pull, the astronauts have entered a realm that "falls outside of geography's disciplined passion to describe and explain concrete

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11 According to Stuart Hall's interpretive cultural framework, meaning is produced through the difference visualized by this "binary form of representation" (229, original emphasis). But there also exists a power relation between the opposite pairs that marks one of them as dominant, for instance "white/black, men/women" (235, original emphasis), or *America/Russia* in *Gravity*.

12 In his last published book *Freud and the Non-European* (2003), postcolonial theorist Edward Said also recognizes a permanent cultural formative power of exceptional authors whose texts "brush up unstintingly against historical constraints [and who] we keep with us, generation after generation" (27).

spaces that are mappable” (Sage 1). Drifting in the borderlands between terrestrial commensurability and the inconceivable vastness of deep Space, Stone and Kowalski are unable to find purchase on either of the two domains, effectively turning them into trailblazers of a largely unmapped and hence wholly imagined cartography—an effective *terra nullius* or no mans land. Exempted from the ostensibly universal and shared macro-reality of everyday personal and public experiences, the film’s protagonists transcend the humanist-positivist reach of terrestrial epistemological and ontological integration. As they gain access to a new world of difference, fluctuation, and unfamiliar variables they also expose themselves to a new quality of Otherness and categorical in-betweenness. A dilemma commonly associated with multiethnic identities, the characters’ quandaries in this case result from a “monospatial” instead of a “monoracial cultural logic” (Alsultany 143). Hence, in the tradition of other liminal characters like Ahab, Marlow, or Natty Bumppo, their exceptional personalities violate the paradigm of stable meaning emerging from the difference found in universally valid binary patterns of representation. This makes them the targets of systemic retaliation for their transgressions and might explain Cuarón’s inclination to produce a de facto disaster movie that constantly attempts to kill off its own heroes.

At the same time, this very ill-defined position of the astronauts ultimately enables them to perform exceptionally and thereby recover the cosmos as a space of American exceptionalism. When Stone is subjected to the life-threatening limbo between near earth and deep Space, she realizes that the hollow realm of the latter corresponds to desolation and death, exemplified by her distraught emergency call to Houston, “I am off structure and I’m drifting.” In fact, throughout the movie she can constantly be seen trying to hold on to the remaining intact structures of her spacecraft, the HST, and ISS. Floating and spinning uncontrollably, her primary incentive has become to embrace the leftover functionality of techno-scientific artifacts according to their exceptional-technocratic policy, break free from her entanglement in the lines of the parachute, and therefore re-orient herself within the coordinate system of American exceptionalism. Against this background it becomes clear that the astronauts’ connectedness to fellow humans as well as man-made structures that are both infused with history and positivist meaning is crucial not only for their own survival but also their exceptional status. Hence, Stone relies on conjunctive tethers to avoid the lethal meaninglessness of outer Space and remains in the earth’s orbital vicinity throughout the movie.

Kowalski aptly condenses this concept by laconically declaring: “Pretty scary shit being untethered up here, isn’t it?” For him, however, this very detachment turns out to be ultimately fatal. Using a jetpack prototype, his cosmic existence is condemned *ab initio* since he is—in spite of his exceptional mobility and spectacular aesthetic performance—disconnected from the mythical symbols and artifacts of the American cosmic geography. His dire fate is the epitome of the already mentioned spatio-temporal antagonism and results, in accordance with the fierce frontier logic, in his demise. After Kowalski’s disappearance into the void, Stone finally reaches the

transient safety of the ISS, using her last reserves of oxygen. In one continuous shot, seemingly achieved with a free-floating camera, she shuts the airlock tight, emerges from her bulky space suit, closes her eyes and floats weightlessly curled into a fetal position. Her tether encircles her like an umbilical cord that symbolically reconnects the astronaut to stable meaning, reminding her of the singularity of her situation and in this way recovering the coherence of her personal and national identity. Unlike her untethered companion, she will survive the disaster.

### “Man’s Destiny of Tomorrow”: Conclusion

I’d like to just (say) what I believe history will record. That America’s challenge of today has forged man’s destiny of tomorrow.

Eugene Cernan, “EVA-3 Close-out”<sup>13</sup>

What remains is to remark firstly that this rather compact attempt to examine the cosmos as a generator and agent of American exceptionalism and its pop-cultural representation has nevertheless lead to some noteworthy insights. Most importantly, it has demonstrated how contemporary films like *Gravity* may utilize Space to endorse and position themselves in relation to American exceptionalism, shaping and revitalizing it through its relationship to geography, technocracy, and popular culture. It also brings with it the realization that the academic task of unraveling some ‘true core’ of the American character may have forfeited its credibility or even its *raison d’être* with the demise of the myth-and-symbol school and structuralist approaches in general. However, while the exceptionalist impulse today is mostly superseded by other topics in the reverberant halls of poststructuralist and transnational academia, it still exerts a fundamental impact on broad levels of American culture and society. Even though it might not integrate nicely with most research agendas, exceptionalism cannot simply be written off as a quirky form of patriotism or reduced to an idiosyncrasy of geopolitical ambitions of an American empire. Instead, more focus has to be put on the environments, manifestations, and forces that embrace exceptionalism as a powerful agent of identity formation. Interdisciplinary methods must be developed and put to use in order to pervade the deeply entrenched historical, socio-cultural, economic, and ideological strata of a phenomenon whose obstinacy and transcendental properties cannot effectively be explained with empirical and positivistic methodologies. The overall importance of such inquiries accrues not from attempts to resurrect the exceptionalist nexus as a monolithic framework for American studies, but instead from its appreciation as an object of renewed scholarly interest and investigation.

Inherent hopes of retracing the space age’s grandeur are eminent in fictional scenarios as laid out by Alfonso Cuarón’s *Gravity* or Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar*

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13 Cernan, the commander of Apollo 17, was the last person to stand on the lunar surface during his mission’s final extravehicular activity (EVA) in December 1972 (radio transmission qtd. in Jones).

(2014), which extends the purview of exceptionalism into the depths of outer Space. But real life expectations for cosmic identity formation are also far from lost in spite of the retirement of the space shuttle program in 2011, a more inwardly oriented exceptionalism of the Trump era, and demands to tend to amassing terrestrial issues before conquering the universe. As Neil deGrasse Tyson in his essay “The Case for Space” proposes, with merely “a penny on the tax dollar... the country could reclaim its preeminence in a field that shaped its twentieth-century ascendancy [and] [t]he United States will once again witness how space ambitions can shape the destiny of nations.” At the moment, however, as foretold by many science fiction authors, the cosmic future seems to belong to privately owned and operated aerospace manufacturers and space transport services like SpaceX that conquer gravity solely through the exceptional effectivity of American marketing and capitalism.

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# REVIEW ESSAY

*Mirosław Aleksander Miernik*

## **Capitalism as a Cultural System: In Memory of Joyce Appleby**

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**Abstract:** This essay discusses Joyce Appleby's idea that capitalism, apart from being an economic system, also is a cultural one. Her earlier work, which included the intellectual history of capitalism, stressed the the impact of early American thought on the emerging national identity of the United States, particularly in the context of free enterprise, individualism and the marketplace. After a brief discussion of Appleby's early ideas, the article goes on to assess the concept of capitalism as a cultural system, tracing its potential usefulness in the study both of American culture and of the discourses pertaining to this economic system and the culture it is associated with.

**Keywords:** Joyce Appleby, capitalism, consumerism, individualism, American identity

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There are several problems that make the study of capitalism difficult, regardless of the field from which one approaches the topic. First of all, the issue is often glaringly politicized. In many cases, it is not difficult to guess the author's political preferences when reading such a book or article. Some authors are conscious of this, and inform the reader of their political or ideological stance at the very beginning of their works, which helps one take into account their possible bias. Moving away from politics, the second issue concerns other ideological factors, owing to which publications often are overviews of their authors' beliefs about the moral qualities of the marketplace, or lack thereof, rather than scholarly analyses. This includes opinions pertaining to the drawbacks of capitalism, such as its focus on material goods, and the belief that it fosters political apathy, as well as more celebratory voices, which see it as the ultimate tool for achieving personal satisfaction. Finally, and most significantly in this context, a major portion of the writing on capitalism portrays it as a rigid and unchanging construct. This projects a false image in which a larger part of the globe is rendered homogenous through the workings of this economic system, without acknowledging its many regional variants, which include revised approaches to such issues as universal healthcare or market regulation. These problems are acknowledged, yet there is no agreement on what causes them.

Joyce Appleby, who passed away at the age of 87 on December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2016, offered an interesting perspective: capitalism is not only an economic system; it also is a cultural one. The thesis, made in her penultimate book, *The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism*, may, at first, seem trite and not at all innovative. After all, there have been studies of “the culture of capitalism” in the past. Nonetheless, the seemingly minor change from “the culture of capitalism” to “capitalism as a cultural system” carries the implication that culture under this economic system is not a reaction to it, or mindless conformity enforced by it, but its inherent, negotiated part. This idea is often missing from many analyses of the subject, which tend to consider culture and capitalism as opposing forces, or, like Marxism, tend to view consumer culture under capitalism as banal, exploitive, and disempowering the people.<sup>1</sup> This article will look at Appleby’s work on capitalism, particularly its significance for American national identity. It will also and show how her approach can prove beneficial for the understanding of the cultural dynamics between production and consumption. Finally, I will also try to shed light on how her approach can provide insight pertaining to the various academic discourses on the subject.

Since her first book, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth Century England*, Appleby focused on the various historical and intellectual currents that informed capitalism in its early formative stages, along with the intergenerational variance in how people approached this topic. Many scholars found the work reinvigorating, as it offered new perspectives on early capitalism, and looked at the issue from a different standpoint than previous studies did. Although it took into consideration the philosophical undercurrents of liberalism, found in the work of such thinkers as John Locke, it also considered more practical aspects on the basis of the work of such authors as Edward Misselden and Thomas Mun.

Her following book, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* looked further into the topic, this time specifically at the case of the U.S. Appleby’s discussion of the cultural currents that led to the demise of Federalism and the rise of a Jeffersonian Republican framework draws on the then-recent redefinition of the concept of liberty and personal freedom, which was understood as the right to participate in the political life of a community (15-17). Yet, it had other meanings, too: it was also understood as the historic rights of an individual or a group of individuals to certain titles or assets, a notion that American colonists strongly opposed (17-19). She also took into account the intellectual history of the concept as developed by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke (19-23).<sup>2</sup>

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1 There are exceptions to this, most notably in the field of anthropology. It also should be noted that Marxism, despite its suspicions pertaining to the cultural aspect of capitalism, allowed many to approach the issue of popular culture with a better understanding, the classic example being Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

2 This also highlights another of Appleby’s interest, namely the role of history, and the development of this field. She wrote two books on the topic, *A Relentless Past: History and the American Public* and *Telling the Truth about History*, a collaboration with Lynn

Appleby shows the complex influences that characterized the colonists' point of view in light of their reaction to such events as the Quartering Act or such ideas as the aforementioned thinkers' revolutionary belief that the sovereign's authority was not sacrosanct. She sees such situations as the grounds which led thinkers and statesmen like Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson to further develop the way that liberalism was understood, which had a formative role in the way Americans would understand free enterprise.

Appleby continued her examination of the interplay of philosophy, politics, and culture in the context of the early U.S. in her later work.<sup>3</sup> *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* was written in a similar vein, investigating the influence of socio-political theory of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century had on the developing ideology of colonists-cum-citizens. The book notices the perseverance of the struggle "between the heirs and the disinherited", that takes root in the American revolutionary tradition. Americans are conscious of this, and the U.S. Constitution, along with the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence are common referents for both sides in such conflicts (222-224). Although this clearly suggests the importance of these texts and the ideological traditions they represent in American culture, it also points to the problem of their understanding in the context of changing cultural circumstances. It is noteworthy how often the issue of interpreting these documents remains a focal point in the arguments "between the heirs and the disinherited."

This heritage of American ideals is further explored in *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans*, in which Appleby focused on the first native-born citizens of the United States. The book undertakes the somewhat neglected issue of how a generation lacking the colonial or revolutionary experience reacted to a new order and new ways of thinking that were the results of that experience. Appleby writes about their precarious position, but also notes that they were conscious of their role as a transitory generation more frequently than one would expect (240). She maps the ways in which the ideals of the revolution congealed onto a complex identity, which rejected the Federalist party on the one hand, but negotiated Jefferson's Republicanism on the other (52-55, 57). The role that ideas of freedom, individuality, and private enterprise, played in the formation of a new culture is emphasized, although such narratives often contrasted with the stark reality. Although some of the risks proved beneficial, many first-generation Americans struggled with bankruptcy, defaulted on their credit, and were affected

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Hunt and Margaret Jacob. The former book discussed the impact the development of history had on national identity, particularly in light of the changes in the second half of the twentieth century. The latter was an analysis of history as an intellectual field from times of the Enlightenment to the end of the twentieth century, in which she scrutinizes the impact, benefits and drawbacks of the various paradigms, mostly through the focal point of newer approaches, including poststructuralism and postmodernism.

3 Appleby also was interested in the life of Thomas Jefferson. She wrote a short book on him, and co-edited a volume of his political writings.

by various economic crises. Other contradictions beckon at the topics Appleby previously discussed in *Liberalism and Republicanism*, such as an ostensible devotion to the ideals of freedom that some Americans had no problems reconciling with chattel slavery. It also shows how deeply enterprise and freedom became encultured into the backbone of American culture.

Taking into consideration the criticism of capitalism as an eroding force, the idea that it is a cultural system may raise eyebrows. Many believe it perpetuates greed, exploitation, and vanity. Furthermore, it often is accused of leading to a deterioration of traditional values, while its promotion of individualism and the privatization of life have been accused of, among other things, effectively dissolving the communities. It is noteworthy that, despite political overtones, such criticism appears on both sides of the political spectrum. This is even visible in the field of economics, where some scholars see capitalism as opposed to an authentic and organic culture. One need only think of Juliet B. Schor's work, particularly her books *The Overworked American* and *The Overspent American*, in which she shows American capitalism as a systemic trap which led to the development of work-spend cycles, which pressure people to work more in order to spend more, but also to an increase of private debt. Such criticism is not a new phenomenon, and can easily bring to mind older traditions, for example the work of Thorstein Veblen. However, even earlier iterations are not difficult to find. How can such a phenomenon be deemed a culture?

Out of all people, it was Theodore Adorno—by no means a friend of capitalism—who criticized Veblen's attacks on conspicuous consumption as not understanding the importance of culture. Although Adorno himself often remains attacked for his perceived elitism and a dismissal of the popular, he agrees with Veblen that “[c]ulture... today has assumed the character of advertising,” but rails against the American economist's idea that it always was such a phenomenon (79). Adorno's own criticism, however, reflects the tendency of dismissing newer developments in culture as the results of the detrimental effects of commodification. Gary Cross, drawing upon G. Stedman Jones, sums this up succinctly: “the ‘authentic’ popular culture of one period is the commercialism of an earlier era” (4). This partially is the result of an underappreciation of how goods are used, and how their use may influence producers.<sup>4</sup> Although often neglected, the uses of goods

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4 Cultural studies are a notable exception, particularly in relation to their focus on the strain between the way consumer goods can be seen as culturally empowering on the one hand, but also reinforcing the hegemonic status quo on the other (see, e.g., Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, John Clarke's “Dupes and Guerillas: The Dialectics of Consumption” or John Fiske's “Shopping for Pleasure: Malls, Power, and Resistance”). Mark Gottdiener's essay “Hegemony and Mass Culture: A Socio-semiotic Approach” offers an interesting elaboration on this topic from a somewhat different perspective. Additional insight, his time from an anthropological point of view, can be found in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai. However, only two texts, and only partially, focus on a modern capitalism.

and their cultural life are crucial to understanding capitalism, regardless how one qualifies this economic system. It is through the act of consumption that a mass-produced object may turn into a beloved token of childhood, a reminder of a close person, or an expression of a profound emotion. Even in what many hold to be its worst impulses, capitalism can lead to the development of new cultural phenomena, which in some cases may even facilitate social change, in spite of the fairly common view that such developments are futile. One can think about 1980s children's cartoons, of which the chief—if not the only—purpose was to sell toys. Some of the children who nagged their parents for new toys during trips to supermarkets are now adult collectors of the same dolls and action figures that originally were imagined as a highway to their parents' pockets. This includes both those produced by major corporations, as well as small, third party initiatives catering specifically for these *de facto* connoisseur markets. They even have the capacity to challenge social norms, as illustrated by Bronies, adult male collectors of toys associated with the *My Little Pony* franchise, traditionally marketed towards girls. It is additionally noteworthy how often the struggle for civil rights was focused on access to consumed goods and services (e.g. Livingston 89, 99; Greenberg 241-243; Weems 316-323). Others point out how the capitalist marketplace facilitated the creation of a negotiated American identity, crucial in the process of establishing immigrant communities (Heinze 19-27). This shows that capitalist consumer culture is a field in which a struggle for enfranchisement can be carried out.

Appleby's suggestion that recognizing capitalism as a cultural system allows one to better understand both those who criticize it, as well as those who praise it, and to see these two points of view as different sides of the same coin rather than contradictory approaches. Appleby ultimately sees capitalism not as a rigid, unmalleable construct, but as a flexible one, in which change is not only possible, but almost certain. As such, it is a living and organic structure, rather than just a series of economic and financial formulas and assumptions. It is a cultural system that evolves, which changes with every generation (ch. 1), and acknowledges that people can alter their consumption patterns owing to their experience (ch. 13).

Many of the problems with the criticisms of capitalism are associated with the fact that many critics assume that they exist outside this system, or that their consumer patterns represent proper and valid choices, in contrast to those of others. This is ironic, as they very often actually hold a privileged position in the capitalist hierarchy, and, as economists, scholars, experts and pundits, they can be considered workers of ideological state apparatuses. James B. Twitchell notices how many critics of capitalism in the academia fail to see themselves as occupying a privileged position in society (*Living It Up* 275-279), and do not take into account their own materialism, not realizing that choosing a Volvo over a BMW, or purchasing books in large quantities, can easily be qualified as such (*Lead Us into Temptation* 22-24; 35-37; 47-49). Tim di Muzio illustrates this with the case of a Chicago professor who lamented a possible increase in income taxes, claiming that he was not at all wealthy, and could not afford to pay the proposed rates. However, his annual income

of \$250,000 actually classified him as a member of the top 0.04% of global income earners (21-22). The problem in such cases is the tendency to use one's immediate environment as a point of reference. This beckons toward an ideological reading, in which such a setting would become normative and naturalized, casting other social groups as inferior, without taste and knowledge, characterized by passivity and proneness to manipulation at the hands of capitalists and business owners, all of which often are common criticisms of capitalism.

Seeing capitalism as a true cultural system allows one to better understand such criticism. It reminds us that such qualifications are levied from within that culture, along with its doxa and hierarchy of cultural capital. It is for this reason that the critics are refuted on the grounds that they dismiss or do not understand certain cultural tastes. Although the recognition of voices both criticizing as well as celebrating capitalism does not revolutionize discourse pertaining to this topic, it reminds us that a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon requires one to take into account various perspectives with their contexts. This issue, as glib as it may sound, is a common problem found in the writings of those who dismiss authors they disagree with as either dupes of capitalism, or as intellectually myopic moralists. Examples would include authors such as Grant McCracken, James Twitchell, Thorstein Veblen, Vance Packard, Jean Baudrillard, Theodore Adorno, Frederic Jameson, among others.

The recognition of capitalism as a culture may also provide more information on issues that are otherwise difficult to answer, such as the peculiar dynamics found in the shifting ideologies related to the market, particularly in times of crisis. Appleby did not believe that such changes would be rapid or revolutionary, and she stated that such situations as the 2008 crisis and the subsequent Great Recession are more than likely to repeat in the future (ch. 13). However, she was cautiously optimistic about this issue. Her narrative suggests that the redefined norms pertaining to the amount of acceptable market regulation, the relationships of big business and legislators, etc. are not the results of careful economic consideration, but of the cultural trauma caused by such downturns. History shows that this is not unprecedented. After the crash of 1929 the support for government regulation grew greatly, and many of these changes lasted for over a generation. The approach only changed after the 1970s, as a result of new problems, such as stagflation and the fuel crisis, which took support away from Keynesian policies. This was a factor that led to a massive wave of deregulation in the subsequent years, which many see as contributing heavily to the most recent financial crisis (e.g. Geisst 410-413, 433-436, 446). Americans are now again rethinking their approach to the market, and the topic has become more prominent in culture. The Occupy movement, although it seems to have all but disappeared, gave Americans new nomenclature with the 99% (Di Muzio 198-199). The accessibility of the American Dream became a widely-discussed issue, and class division in the U.S. started receiving more attention. Literature also started paying more heed to these issues, and one can name such novels as Philipp Meyer's *American Rust*, Adam Haslett's *Union Atlantic* or William Gibson's *The*

*Peripheral* as examples. Some writers tried to understand the wealthiest members of American society, which can be illustrated by such novels as Sophie McManus's *The Unfortunates* and Jonathan Dee's *The Privileges*.

The view of capitalism as a cultural system also provides insight into the peculiarities of the most recent elections. The economic downturn of 2007-2012 very likely contributed to a general unwillingness of Americans to endorse candidates seen as accommodating for big business. This may help understand how Donald Trump's assurances that he was self-funded enticed many conservative voters to choose him over other candidates the Republican party considered for nomination. This also explains why the younger generations—those who at the moment tend to believe that they will not be capable of attaining a higher economic status than their parents—embraced Bernie Sanders, and shunned away from Hilary Clinton, who was often accused of being a representative of the forces that contributed to the growing inequality in the U.S., as well as the most recent recession.

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Joyce Oldham Appleby, born on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1929, died December 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016, was a distinguished American historian. She was the former president of the Organization of American Historians, the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic, and the American Historical Association. She also was Harold Vyvyan Harmsworth Professor of American History, and a Guggenheim fellow.

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## REVIEWS

**Zbigniew Lewicki, *Igrzyska demokracji. Amerykańska kultura wyborcza* [Democracy Games: American Electoral Culture]. Warszawa: Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 2016. 221 pages.**

After the last presidential election in America, the eyes of all people are turned towards the “City upon a Hill” more than ever, albeit for a different reason than in Winthrop’s times. Donald Trump’s presidential victory may not have come as an immense surprise given the populist turn in world politics; still, the fact that it is the USA that has just gained an unprepared and unpredictable leader is an outcome whose seriousness we are yet to appreciate. Given this new political context, Zbigniew Lewicki’s book seems to be a very good choice for those who want to understand the American electoral system that has just elected Trump.

The book’s comprehensive scope makes it a valuable reading both for Polish general audience, having only basic understanding of the American political system, and for those working within American studies who wish for an engaging, synthetic and vivid review of the electoral culture. Lewicki is interested not only in the present situation, but also in its historical development, which explains the intricacies (and sometimes apparent absurdities) of American politics. The reader will learn not only about presidential elections, but, more generally, about the right to vote and stand for election, the organization of elections, electoral campaigns, as well as state and judicial elections. The latter ones may be particularly interesting for the Polish audience, since the custom of electing judges and prosecutors in general elections is unique for America (with the exception of parts of Switzerland and Japanese Supreme Court, as Lewicki notes on page 188). Another chapter which may be very helpful for the Polish reader is one concerning the Electoral College; the book explains the historical reasons for its formation and draws attention to the possibility of a candidate’s winning the popular vote but losing the presidential election—a consequence of the College’s existence perhaps most exotic in the eyes of Europeans, not accustomed to the federal system of representation.

What makes the book particularly enjoyable are numerous anecdotes that pepper the historically and politically-oriented text. Thus we learn for example that Abraham Lincoln was called by his political opponents “a horrid looking wretch... sooty and scoundrelly in aspect, a cross between the nutmeg dealer, the horse swapper, and the night man, a creature ‘fit evidently for petty treason, small stratagems and all sorts of spoils’” (Boller 107), or that since both of Harry Truman’s grandfathers

had names starting with an “s,” in order to satisfy them both the future president’s parents decided to give the boy only “S.” as the middle name (Lewicki 113). The anecdotes are sometimes rather loosely connected to the main argument, but they prevent the text from acquiring features of a dry schoolbook. Additionally, Lewicki provides quite recent examples of political controversies, referring for instance to the 2000 presidential election in Florida, or the 2016 Clinton vs. Trump election, which makes the book more relevant for contemporary readers.

Interestingly, *Igrzyska demokracji* was finished in July 2016, that is several months before the results of the 2016 election. However, Lewicki’s diagnosis of the political situation is surprisingly valid even after Trump’s victory became known. First of all, the book stresses a strong possibility of Trump’s victory, correctly foretelling what has indeed happened. Second, the analysis of the presidential campaign and both candidates’ positions even now to a large extent explains Trump’s victory. The chapter on 2016, even though short, is probably the selling point of the book in the present situation. Contrary to many political commentators who wrote before the election’s results, Lewicki does not make light of Trump, pointing at the candidate’s use of controversial language and lack of political correctness differentiating him from political elites, his popularity among Latinos (despite his radical views on illegal immigration and the wall at the border with Mexico), as well as negative attitude of most Americans towards both Clinton and Trump.

The fact that the book has been written in Polish may suggest that its intended audience is predominantly the general Polish reader, not necessarily fluent in English. However, *Igrzyska* is an interesting and enjoyable read also for Americanists, with a potential of being used as one of suggested textbooks for students. A lack of index makes it bothersome to go back to specific fragments, but overall the book is useful and reader-friendly.

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Justyna Fruzińska  
University of Łódź

**Maureen Tuthill. *Health and Sickness in the Early American Novel: Social Affection and Eighteenth-Century Medicine*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 253 pages.**

Intersectionality is a key term in the Palgrave Macmillan series Palgrave Studies in Literature, Science and Medicine. Maureen Tuthill’s contribution to the series, *Health and Sickness in the Early American Novel*, is a study of several American novels from the years 1787-1808 which examines how they represent diseases and medical practices in the context of the medical and political discourses of that time.

The body of work the author analyzes includes Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, Charles Brocken Brown's "yellow fever novels," and Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive*. These literary works are examined in light of ideas derived from William Buchan's *Domestic Medicine* and the medical tracts of Benjamin Rush, and political works written by Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, in an attempt to map out socially significant issues connected with medicine at the turn of the eighteenth century. Finally, the last analytical tool used in the book is the application of Foucauldian theories on medicine and power.

Tuthill's study examines how representations of medical and political discourses in literature often manifest themselves by means of tension between the individual and the community. Her analysis is divided into six chapters, although each pair of them clearly makes a common point: the first two examine the disciplinary practices of withholding medical intervention performed on a female body and refusal to seek medical help as a practice of dissent. The following two chapters discuss novels describing the yellow fever epidemic, and how they represent the notion of self-determined health. Later, the author explores the rise of the professional doctor, and how this change implicitly excludes the poor; the idea is elaborated in the last chapter, which focuses on Afro-American healing practices in relation to the position of the doctor figure, and a short epilogue discussing Native American healing practices.

Key tools in Tuthill's effort to historicize her reading are popular medical publications from the period. According to William Buchan, health was perceived in terms of personal responsibility and individual achievement, and thus as a private matter. The community may take some of this responsibility in acts of healing, but only up to a point and on the condition that the sick person meets social requirements. From this viewpoint, the eponymous character of Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* is an individual who fails to follow the rules of society, and that causes her illness and stops the community from helping her. Tuthill disagrees with common readings of the novel, which interpret the protagonist's sickness as a metaphor for her desire, and fail to consider its very nature to be a key element of the narrative. Referring to material feminism, she considers Charlotte's circumstances to be an effect of complex cultural and biological factors. Then, she exemplifies how Buchan's and Rush's medical thought is visible in the novel, for instance in her fainting: "[Fainting] could be caused, Buchan writes, by sudden transitions from cold to heat, 'great fatigue,' or 'excessive weakness'.... The causes of fainting that Buchan lists are almost identical to Charlotte's physical and mental states in Rowson's novel" (29). Understanding such episodes as material and bodily events, rather than metaphors, draws attention to the factors which have put her in that position. The illness is a bodily manifestation of her social alienation, and, at the same time, progresses because of the very isolation. Tuthill compares Charlotte to two other women in the novel, both in good health, which represents their affinity with the community, and their self-sufficiency. Through this comparison, the novel appears to be a criticism of friendship in the American society, which implies the need for self-sustenance.

Read this way, *Charlotte Temple* is a novel which dramatizes disconnection from the community, its bodily consequences, and self-centeredness as an American trait.

Tuthill pays attention to sickness as a real event. In her reasoning, the bodily fact of ailment informs and relates to other positionalities of the character, but it does so through the actual, carefully reconstructed connections that specify the situation of a sick person at the time, rather than through arbitrary meanings of illness imposed by the contemporary reader. This approach may seem counterintuitive at first, as, despite its focus on the bodily reality of sickness, the study does still discuss its numerous metaphors (such as the abovementioned lack of connection with the community), but it does involve the historic interpretations in order to inform the position of a sick character in a particular culture, rather than to ascribe any definitive meaning to the malady itself. The medical and political discourses Tuthill includes in her reasoning in an attempt to historicize her readings prove satisfactory in explaining the historic views on illness and its position in the predominant ideologies. However, too little space seems to be devoted to the discursive character of her study this method provokes. The author clearly posits her analysis in relation to pre-existing modes of thinking about early American novels, where sickness was mainly read as a metaphor, but scarcely does she refer to particular critical works on the subject, and when it happens, it does so in quite a narrow manner. Thus, to a reader unfamiliar with discussions of these particular novels, Tuthill may seem to be the only audible side of a meaningful conversation, where the other side is voiceless; I am convinced that a more comprehensive look into established critical analyses of these novels would benefit the study greatly.

The next chapter includes a discussion, where Tuthill shows how the Eliza from Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* is, again, ill due to her social transgression. This time the character is a member of her community, which uses medical intervention and withholding it as a corrective practice. Eliza's eventual demise is a result of her resistance and insistence on personal freedom, which breaches the status quo. This American collective consciousness is informed by Hamilton's *The Federalist* and Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which discuss the republic as an able body comprising healthy individuals, and transgression in terms of degeneracy that can be infectious. The community responds to Eliza's dissent with a corrective practice masked as a medical intervention, and, after a failure, it discontinues treatment in order to prevent the body politic from contamination.

Having mapped out the limitations of communal healing, Tuthill discusses self-determined health as an inherently American notion, because "for the pursuit of political liberty to make sense, early Americans had to believe that they could control their own biological realities" (82). Thus, self-interest is the predominant mode of thinking about medical intervention. In her analysis of Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* and *Ormond*, Tuthill discusses the reality of epidemic, which necessitates a paradigm of self-preservation. Brown emphasizes limits of communal healing and the necessity to control a humanitarian impulse. These ideas make way for the particular manner in which the figure of the doctor appears in the early

American novel. At the turn of the eighteenth century, the doctor represents a new, more scientific approach to medicine, which is an element alien to the community. His emergence is exemplified by Tuthill in the story of Doctor Updike Underhill's rise to respectability in Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive*. The author analyzes the protagonist as a profoundly egocentric individual, whose motivations are the respect he commands and financial rewards. He wishes to separate himself from the communities he heals, and perceive the patients as clients. This way, although Tuthill never states this explicitly, her analysis demonstrates how the novels of this period show the formative stages of the medical gaze.

The gaze of both doctor and author is, for obvious reasons, colorblind. The last chapter discusses how black bodies and their medical realities are hidden from the reader. On the rare occasions when they are not, they reinforce the idea of healing being imposed on those who belong; communal healing on the one hand takes the form of a doctor's medical intervention, when the slave owner calls him in order to preserve his slave (health thus becomes not only a commodity, but someone else's commodity; a slave's failing health is the owner's loss) and on the other is present as traditional practices preserved within slave communities. In an attempt to diversify her viewpoint, Tuthill ends book with an epilogue discussing shortly Native American healing practices, and examining how white Americans were inspired by them, but refused to give credit to their sources.

Tuthill fails to end her work on a high note, as the epilogue is hasty and perfunctory. While representations of black sickness are studied with commendable care for the particular position of a slave, the author's hurried dealing with the Native Americans seems downright tokenistic. It also highlights the main problem with this study: when the epilogue focuses on the analysis of an additional matter instead of concluding the whole argument, and when such a conclusion is nowhere to be found, it becomes clear how disjointed the monograph is as a whole. As a result, *Health and Sickness in the Early American Novel* seems to be content with proposing a method and demonstrating how it can be applied. Tuthill rarely makes authoritative statements about representations of healing practices in early American literature, and thus the study may at times seem to struggle with holding onto any general idea. Nevertheless, it is certainly an excellent exercise in historic reconstruction, as it carefully takes into account various medical and political stances on the issues discussed, proving how this method may help in unlocking meanings otherwise lost. Perhaps this strong foundation would have been better utilized, if it had posited itself more decidedly in relation to other critical readings. Nevertheless, the greatest achievement of the monograph is that it creates a space for debate, because Tuthill shows that the critical works on these novels all too often omit the bodily reality of sickness in literature in favor of the metaphoric possibilities, and demonstrates why in many cases such a search for hidden meanings may limit rather than broaden the literal reading.

Jarosław Milewski  
University of Łódź

**Katja Kanzler. *The Kitchen and the Factory: Spaces of Women's Work and the Negotiation of Social Difference in Antebellum American Literature*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter Heidelberg, 2016. 273 pages.**

The title of Katja Kanzler's 2016 monograph, *The Kitchen and the Factory: Spaces of Women's Work and the Negotiation of Social Difference in Antebellum American Literature*, is largely self-explanatory: the full words included in it could double as keywords summing up the essence of the publication. In her study, the German scholar examines a large body of writings, both fiction and non-fiction, published in the United States before the American Civil War. While the extensive scope of her research is confirmed by the impressively long bibliographical list of primary sources, Kanzler focuses on what she refers to as the "spaces of feminine labor" (10), that is the two locations pointed out in the book's main title. In the author's own words, "the significance of kitchen and factory" (259) is that of "sites of history and of writing, sites whose 'modern' formations saw their beginning in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century" (259). Thoroughly discussed though it is, "spatiality" is therefore far from being an end in itself, since Kanzler takes it as her starting point, enabling her to formulate theses and draw conclusions of a textual, cultural, social and political nature. The result is an interdisciplinary scholarly work which inscribes itself into several fields of knowledge: American literary, cultural and social studies, but also—or perhaps first of all—gender or, to be more precise, women's studies as well as ethnic studies.

The body of Kanzler's book is composed of three main chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion whose brevity may have been motivated by the author's understandable desire not to repeat herself in an exhaustive work in which a customary restatement of the key points may in fact be superfluous. The first of the chapters is a theoretical one, which, so to speak, sketches the background of the research undertaken by the monographer and deals with what she herself refers to as the "conceptual and interpretive impulses" (16) behind her own work. The two subsequent chapters are concerned with the kitchen and the factory respectively. Since all three chapters are long—the latter two consisting of a hundred pages each—it is no wonder they are split into subchapters, which in turn are usually subdivided into shorter segments. Though such a format may seem complicated, it is, as the author herself explains, justified by the wide range of writings which the monograph covers. "[T]he diversity of material" (14) is reflected in the various generic categories the writings in question fall into: Kanzler "trace[s] the kitchen in domestic novels from the North and from the South, in pro- and antislavery fiction, in slave narratives, in cookbooks and domestic advice manuals" (14), while "[t]he factories [she] discuss[es] find themselves in travelogues, sensation novels, in essays and short stories written by factory workers and by elite writers" (14). In addition to "genre or text type" (15), the monographer distinguishes two further categories which constitute her "principle[s] of organization" (15): "perspectives and frames" (15), both of them inextricably linked with the concept of spatiality, central to Kanzler's work.

Space being the pivot of her research, the monographer thoroughly delves into its symbolism and metaphorical dimension. Crucial to *The Kitchen and the Factory* are gender, racial and class issues, as is the notion of social injustice. This is particularly important in the context of the ideals underlying American democracy and the realities of a country “priding itself on its alleged egalitarianism” (257) and “the nation’s self-fashioning as classless” (257). Equally important is the fact that Kanzler closely investigates the various roles played by women in the two locations around which her monograph revolves, one of which—“the space of the family home” (21)—is traditionally perceived as par excellence feminine. The German scholar is also careful not to ignore the metaliterary dimension of the texts she examines, in keeping with her observation that “the kitchen and the factory enable specific reflections on the nature and role of writing” (257) seen “as a form of productivity and self-expression” (257). One particularly engaging issue that Kanzler deals with is the significance of the act of writing, especially to women. These are, of course, just a few of the many compelling aspects of the material under discussion in her book.

*The Kitchen and the Factory* is a clearly and thoroughly thought-out, arranged, written and documented study. In examining the texts which constitute the object of her research, Kanzler keeps a sense of proportion, paying attention to both content and form. Her analysis and interpretation of the works in question are both informative and inspirational. The author of the monograph is meticulous enough in her attention to detail, but never does she lose sight of the big picture. The arguments she puts forward and the conclusions she arrives at are logical, as is the whole text of her book, clear, coherent and comprehensible but not at the cost of being oversimplified.

The scope of Kanzler’s scholarship is indeed broad. She draws on a wide range of works in a double sense. Her primary sources, which include—in addition to well-known classics such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—a large body of literary and non-literary texts unheard-of even by Americanists, are numerous. This is also the case with the critical writings by various scholars and theoreticians Kanzler relies on, again making for a broad spectrum of theories which form the basis of her own findings. All this leads to her monograph being comprehensive and multidimensional. In *The Kitchen and the Factory*, intended as an exploration of, among other things, the “meanings of gender, class, and race” (28), Kanzler, who opens her book with an overview of the current state of research on the subject, ventures into territory which, despite the growing popularity of women’s and ethnic studies, remains largely uncharted. The monograph’s conclusion suggests the anticipatory character of the concerns voiced in the writings Kanzler investigates by briefly referring to tendencies which marked American literature in the second half of the nineteenth century and which are reflected in the bibliography of the subject. By doing so, not only does the monographer prove—once again—the importance of her research, but she also signals its open-ended nature, which is, inevitably and hopefully, that of all scholarly work.

Alicja Piechucka  
University of Łódź

**Joe B. Fulton. *Mark Twain Under Fire: Reception and Reputation, Criticism and Controversy, 1851-2015*. Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2016. 312 pages.**

Joe B. Fulton, author of three previous books on Mark Twain, has written an excellently researched study of Mark Twain's reception among critics and literary scholars, since the first critical comments until today (or, more precisely, 2015). The book is an absolute must-read for every Twainian, but I'd recommend it to anyone with scholarly interest in American cultural and literary history since the evolution of Twain criticism is emblematic of the larger currents in the history of American taste, ideology, and of course literary criticism. What enhances the value of Fulton's study is its transnational dimension, as the book does not restrict itself to following the trends in Twain's reception in the English-speaking countries but makes in-depth comments on his reputation in continental Europe (mainly France and Germany), the Soviet Union and in Asia, demonstrating the truly global status of Mark Twain's reception (and the many political uses to which his writings were put).

Besides a brief introduction and rather laconic conclusions (and, to be sure, a bulky bibliography), the book consists of five long chapters dealing with Twain criticism in chronological order. The first chapter traces the trajectory of Twain's reputation in the writer's lifetime (i.e. until 1910), ending in the loud encomia heaped upon the "Lincoln of American literature" in the wake of awarding him an honorary doctorate of letters by Oxford University (1907). That appreciation did not come easy, though, as for a long time Twain was paying "the penalty of laughter," being relegated by some genteel critics to the ranks of such literary comedians as Artemus Ward or Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby. It took Twain a long uphill struggle for respectability to earn the praise of William Lyon Phelps in *The North American Review* (1907) putting Twain's "prose epics" in one rank with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Of course, not everybody agreed. Yet, as demonstrated by Fulton, many of America's greatest literary arbiters and scholars (Howells, Phelps, James Russell Lowell, Brander Matthews, William Trent, Barrett Wendell), ultimately came out in praise of the most "American" of all writers.

It was inevitable, perhaps, for the writer's reputation to decline somewhat after achieving such a high summit by 1910, especially because of inevitable evolution of literary tastes and ideological influences on the critics. The second chapter of Fulton's book, covering the period between 1910 and 1950 recounts the famous controversy stirred by Van Wyck Brooks's *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (1920) pointing to Twain's "deep malady of the soul," precipitated by the allegedly oppressive and suffocating influences of Twain's circle of family and friends, the "debilitating" influences of the American frontier, religion, and generally the crassness of the Gilded Age. Those influences conspired, claimed Brooks, in making Twain the artist a victim of the contemporary bourgeois culture and profit-oriented publishing business. While Brooks's opinion set the paradigm for Twain's reputation

among America's left wing intellectuals of the period, some came to his defense, both at home and abroad—including voices from abroad, demonstrating the uses Twain could be put to: a good friend of Germans (as pointed out by the University of Berlin professor and at the same time Nazi propagandist professor Friedrich Schönemann, in Fulton's opinion author of "one of the most important books on Mark Twain to appear in any language until after the World War"). The defense of Twain was also undertaken by Soviet critics, who saw in him a champion of labor, critic of capitalism, imperialism, and—not least important—of Russian tsar. Twain, along with Jack London and Upton Sinclair, was among the most popular American writers published in the Soviet Union before 1941, and often compared to an American Gogol or Czekhow.

In America, Brooks was trenchantly attacked by Bernard DeVoto, the second editor of Mark Twain's papers (after Alfred Bigelow Paine). DeVoto was defending Twain from a nationalistic position, seeing him as a "true" American representing the spirit of the frontier, and victim of undeserved attacks by anti-American Left. In Fuller's estimate, in the debate between Brooks and DeVoto, which dominated Twain scholarship in the decades between his death in 1910 and 1950, it was DeVoto who won, along with more positive estimate of main influences on Mark Twain's work.

The issue of Mark Twain's reception during the Cold War dominates the book's third chapter, covering the period from 1950 to 1970, and it is here that Fulton's international perspective becomes especially visible (and precious). As amply demonstrated by Fulton, in this period Twain's reputation becomes more than ever politicized, switching between a Soviet icon (with American Marxist critics like Morris Mendelson and Philip Foner largely following in the footsteps of the Soviet critics—Fulton bluntly calls them "the tools of the Soviet propaganda") and an American hero, as perceived through the lenses of both New Criticism (fitting Mark Twain into the great tradition of the picaresque) and the myth criticism best represented by Henry Nash Smith. Much of the Twainian scholarship in that period, as demonstrated in detail by Fulton, was preoccupied with the question of (in) completeness and legitimacy of subsequent editions of Twain's work, including the controversy over Charles Neider's edition of Twain's autobiography and *The Mysterious Stranger* manuscripts, along with Twain's religious iconoclasm marking the *Letters from the Earth* (published at last in 1962, having been long withheld from publication by Clara Clemens Samossoud).

The last two chapters cover the Twain scholarship since the 1970s, with Hamlin Hill's seminal book *Mark Twain: God's Fool* (1973) setting the agenda for Twain studies for a long time to come. Hill painted a "dark" portrait of Twain—particularly of his last years, including his insecurity, his often abusive treatment of his family, and even his alleged pedophilia. In Fulton's view, Hill's influential study in a way marked a return to Brooks's criticism, as well as to the psychology-oriented focus on the writer. Among the most important preoccupations of Twain critics in the late twentieth century, as demonstrated by Fulton, were the gender-studies

approaches, Twain's anti-imperialism and, perhaps most importantly, the issue of race, and racism—with views on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* ranging from “the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written” (John H. Wallace) to Shelley Fisher Fishkin's controversial attempt to reclaim Twain for the American cultural left (*Was Huck Black*, 1993).

The tendency to harness Twain to one's political agenda has further intensified since the 90s, argues Fulton in the last chapter with a revealing title: “Mark Twain as a Partisan in the Culture Wars, 1990s to 2015,” where he demonstrates his own increasing discomfort with some of the more radical new “takes” on Twain, using this opportunity to question the value of some of the new approaches to the study of literature: “(t)he danger (not really a danger because so few people read these ardent exercises in liberalism) with American studies generally and with New Historicism, cultural studies, and more recently, Transnational Studies, is a political activism coupled with diletantism.” Fulton ends his sweeping synthesis of Mark Twain's reception with calls for well-balanced approaches drawing on source studies and a thorough grounding in the history of Twain scholarship, as well as with a reassurance about unflagging popular interest in Twain which “dwarfs the interest in any other American writer.” Which all Twainians—domestic and global—may only wish is, and will long remain, true.

Piotr Skurowski

University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw

**Anna Hartnell. *Rewriting Exodus: American Futures from Du Bois to Obama*. London: Pluto Press, 2011. 283 pages.**

Anna Hartnell's study examines the rewritings of the Exodus narrative in the works of five African American thinkers: W.E.B Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Toni Morrison, and Barack Obama. The Judeo-Christian biblical story of Moses and his people has been central for the construction of American identity since the colonial days, and the idea of a chosen nation and escape from subjugation has long informed the myths of American freedom and exceptionalism. In turn, African American renditions of the story have deconstructed its hegemonic version, rigorously critiquing the American ideal and exposing the US as the land of slavery and oppression. Hartnell argues that scholars have frequently overlooked the ways in which these investments in religious discourse and the religious meanings of race have been central to the most radical strands of African American dissent. She contextualizes her rhetorical analysis of different recasting of the Exodus trope by positioning it in relation to contemporary conflicts in the Middle East.

The structurally circular study opens with an examination of Barack Obama, and the following chapters illuminate his intellectual debt to the earlier black thinkers and the black Exodus tradition. Hartnell shows how the rhetorical construction of Obama's political identity challenges the binary lines of thought and polar divisions into accommodationism and separatism, racial and national loyalties,

American exceptionalism and the black Exodus narrative. Drawing on the black jeremiad paradigm, which privileges the moment of liberation over the assumption of the chosen nation's power, he manages to rewrite hegemonic exceptionalism into a protest and reform narrative. Hartnell claims that Obama's rhetorical identification with the oppressed is indebted to his experience at Trinity United Church of Christ and its black liberation theology, and she demonstrates how he combines allusions to the tradition of black messianism, Zionism, and the Civil Rights narrative to navigate the tensions among the black, Jewish, and Muslim worlds. In her rhetorical analysis, she does not neglect the structural conditions, in which Obama, as a representative of the state, has pragmatically more limited possibilities for explicit criticism of American state memory and hegemonic mythology.

In the second chapter, Hartnell revisits one of the most canonical texts of African American literature, W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, and one of the most influential concepts in black thought, double consciousness. Focusing on the Hegelian master/slave dialectic, an oft-cited intertext for Du Bois's seminal notion, she shows how its appropriation reveals the Exodus tropes of "Egyptland" and "Canaan" as well as other religious dimensions in his texts. Hartnell contends that religious meanings of the concept of race enable the critical impact of his condemnation of white supremacy, slavery, and colonialism. In his radical vision of the future, he metaphorically identifies the dark races as God's chosen people, and simultaneously voices his support for the Zionist movement and Jewish statehood. Moreover, both Hebraism and Zionism deeply inform his vision of Pan-Africanism, and accordingly, his teleological thinking about black liberation parallels the Jewish vision of the unredeemed world rather than Christian eternal salvation.

In her reading of Martin Luther King, Hartnell uncovers a more radical politics than is traditionally associated with his popular image, and she again sees this as inherently related to his privileging of the Exodus narrative over the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the resultant atonement. Just as in the case of Du Bois's appropriations of the Judeo-Christian bible, she points to the central significance of Jewishness in King's thought, and uses it to elucidate his championing of the black-Jewish alliance, political support for the state of Israel, and understanding of the Six-Day War of 1967 as an anti-colonial struggle. Significantly, contrary to the traditional view of the Civil Rights Movement's embrace of American exceptionalism, Hartnell argues that King's recasting of Exodus enables him to express transnational identifications with the oppressed and colonized.

In contrast to the previous thinkers, Malcolm X, influenced by the Nation of Islam and its identification with the African civilization rather than the Hebrew slaves, reclaims a black Egypt in his appropriation of the Exodus narrative. Hartnell examines this rhetorical shift to explain the break of the black-Jewish alliance in the 1960s. Malcolm X's critique of Europeanized Christianity does not leave any hope for its recovery, and he proposes the indigenously African Islam as the only viable alternative. According to Hartnell, his subsequent falling out with the Nation of Islam and travels the Middle East and Africa enabled Malcolm X to give the trope of

Egypt a Pan-African dimension but also made the oppositions between the Islam and Judeo-Christian world or white and black races less polarized and more ambivalent.

The last chapter of Hartnell's book uses Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998) to comment on the male thinkers and their rewritings of the bible. In her novel, Morrison explicitly recasts the Exodus narrative and reveals its necessarily reactionary character. She juxtaposes the Promised Land in the form of an all-black town with the inclusive space of the old convent inhabited by women. As the Ruby's black community starts to embrace the notion of racial separatism and bourgeois prosperity gospel, it surrenders to the logic of oppression it was founded to resist. In Hartnell's complex reading, the novel's representation of the settlement is a critical commentary on American and Israeli state violence as well as on the Civil Rights and the Black Power movement. Yet she avoids conflating these distinct phenomena and points to marked distinctions among them. As Hartnell shows, the novel offers an interesting feminist revision of patriarchal Afrocentrism and Black Nationalism: it foregrounds the significance of African heritage, and at the same time problematizes the idealization of black Egypt. She argues that despite the novel's vehement criticism of religious dogmatism, it retains hope for "the redemptive possibilities of the black experience, including its religious traditions" (208), and thus parallels the rewritings of the Exodus narrative of Du Bois, King, Malcolm X and Obama.

In her coda to the study, Hartnell analyzes the residual traces of the black Exodus myth in post-Katrina discourse, in which unhomey/Unheimlich images and tropes of slavery question the status of the US as a promised land. She discusses how Obama's campaign repetitively referred to the hurricane and used New Orleans as a symbol of rebirth and renewal, yet his post-election actions as a representative of a world superpower departed from the rhetoric of redemptive hope.

Hartnell's reading of the towering figures of the African American tradition manages to meaningfully add to a large body of writing devoted to them, and her tracing of their rewritings of the black Exodus narrative enables her to broaden our understanding of these iconic thinkers. In her theoretically sophisticated analysis, she manages to combine insights from methodologies as diverse as postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and religious studies, and pay attention to the political complexities of the US, the Middle East, and Africa, to which the black Exodus narratives speak. The book is an important addition to African American studies.

Anna Pochmara  
University of Warsaw

**Peter Swirski. *American Crime Fiction: A Cultural History of Nobrow Literature as Art*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 222 pages.**

Nelson DeMille is a multiple *New York Times* bestseller who specializes in several popular genres that frequently rub shoulders with each other: crime fiction, police mystery, action thriller, and military adventure. There is a high probability, however, that few if any academics have ever heard of him, not because he is a bad writer

but because most academics rarely go slumming in the popular (not to say lower) strata of the book world in search of good literature. *American Crime Fiction* sets out to correct this omission, along dozens of others. It does it with stylistic grace and intellectual erudition, not to mention irrepressible wit and humor, that bring to mind the cultural journalism of early Mark Twain and the historical panorama of classic TimeLife reportages.

Beginning with his bestselling study *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* (2005), which is graced with a handsome endorsement from the late doyen of popular culture studies, Ray B. Browne (who declared that this book single-handedly made all previous popular culture studies moot), Peter Swirski has made a career of investigating the cultural “badlands” where high art and mass culture meet, often to surprising and innovative effects. The case in point is one of the twin literary subjects of Chapter 6 of *American Crime Fiction*, Nelson DeMille (the other is the chronicler of the Jazz Age and author of *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald). As Swirski tells the story, in the middle of a busy career as a writer of capable yet undistinguished police procedurals, DeMille did something few expected of him, and even less of the type of literature that he represents for the highbrows: popular, entertaining, and easy to read. As becomes apparent from the personal interviews that Swirski conducted with DeMille, which add an additional layer of interest in the story, driven by a lifelong fascination with *The Great Gatsby* and by the fecund history of Long Island on which *Gatsby* is set (and where DeMille grew up and currently resides), the ambitious writer decided to write a “ultimate nobrow novel” (158), a crossover between F. Scott Fitzgerald’s timeless classic and Mario Puzo’s timeless genre classic *The Godfather*.

The dimension of the project can be measured not just by the fact that a genre entertainer adopted as his model a canonical American novel which, as Swirski tells us, was even staged recently as a six-hour marathon stage performance hailed by the *New York Times* as the “most remarkable achievement in theater not only of this year but also of this decade” (158). DeMille attempted something arguably much harder still, which is to combine the American themes and tragic tonality of *The Great Gatsby* with those of an equally famous blockbuster in a pulp-fiction/mass-culture mode. This blockbuster is none other than *The Godfather* (the original novel, not the Academy Award winning film) which, as we learn from *American Crime Fiction*, comes with its own distinguished pedigree: “thirty-plus million copies sold, translations into all the major, many minor, and some languages that most people have never even heard of, and Hollywood adaptations so iconic that real-life mafiosi would reportedly imitate what they saw on the big-screen” (158). It takes chutzpah, or as Hemingway might have said it cojones, to combine the canon with the mass market, but this is exactly what DeMille attempted and apparently accomplished according to Swirski, who devotes the concluding chapter to *The Great Gatsby* reincarnated as *The Gold Coast*.

Swirski’s terms for this mélange of highbrow and lowbrow cultures is “artertainment” (23), a typically playful portmanteau coinage which encapsulates

the coming together of two different traditions, literary registers, and aesthetic traditions. Art, as he points out in the opening chapter entitled “Nobrow” (another portmanteau neologism), has been traditionally maintained by the highbrows to be free of the vices of the lowbrows. Mass audiences, on the other hand, were too busy buying and consuming what they liked to argue their case for their kind of culture and the kind of aesthetics. Swirski’s forte in *American Crime Fiction*, as in his previous bestselling studies, such as *Ars Americana*, *Ars Politica* (2010), *American Utopia and Social Engineering* (2011), and *American Political Fictions* (2015), is to explore this highly politicized region of contemporary culture where the artistic highs meet the artistic lows (and not by accident either).

Author of several award-winning studies of American literature and culture, and in his spare time the world expert on the bestselling Polish author and futurologist Stanislaw Lem, Swirski is not only a flat-out good writer (as proclaimed by none other than Nelson DeMille on his website), but that rare type of academic whose intellectual clarity is matched by intellectual curiosity, both of which take him to places not very many American Studies scholars ever visit. Going by the titles of his previous books, Swirski has written on computer literature, philosophy of mind, evolution, social studies, urban studies, game theory, philosophy of science, literature and science, and analytic aesthetic, not to mention more mundane subjects such as American history, politics, (rap) music, cinema, television, journalism, and last but not least popular fiction and popular culture.

Against the background of this intellectual cornucopia, *American Crime Fiction* is more focused, is this is the correct way to describe crime fiction, a genre which sells, as Swirski reminds us, a quarter of all books sold in the United States and probably around the world. Facing up to the problem of representativeness, Swirski proposes to focus on writers who have come to personify the American variety of crime fiction. Interestingly, next to the hard-boiled classics such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, Swirski discusses William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway who, as he makes apparent, have also written hard-boiled fiction, albeit with different degrees of success. It is also interesting to see a long discussion on John Grisham who has come to personify the genre of legal fiction. Although Swirski is not blind to the contributions Grisham made to the genre or to the cause of disseminating the fundamentals of legal knowledge among Americans at large, he does not pull punches when discussing Grisham’s stylistics, which more often than not come down to “wooden prose, replete with verbal splinters” (52).

In addition to these crime fiction giants, *American Crime Fiction* brings up literally dozens of others, giving a rich texture and historical depth to this panoramic study which, as the subtitle prompts, aims to become *A Cultural History of Nobrow Literature as Art*. True to the subtitle, American history provides the background to every book and every writer discussed in any detail, with fascinating information on Al Capone, the infamous syndicated gangsters known as the Group of Seven, Enron, the Ford Pinto trial, the history of the American police forces, the history of policewomen on the force, and even the story behind the discovery of the so-called Mafia Ten Commandments.

The only thing that mars this otherwise outstanding study comes at the very end. The publisher Palgrave Macmillan seems to have botched the index, which is at times a bit inconsistent in format and in one instance downright puzzling (what does the note on page 211 about “n” referring to notes refer to?). Barring this odd reference to what does not appear in the index, which in most likelihood will be of relevance only to bibliophiles, this is a valuable addition American Studies and American cultural studies. As for why, here is the final paragraph of *American Crime Fiction*:

In the second decade of the third millennium, even as homicide in America rides a low tide, crime at large rides high, still a shortcut to this or that dreamer’s American Dream. Drug prohibition still funnels users toward dealers and still fuels death. In 2008 drug overdoses in the United States overtook car crashes as the main cause of accidental death. And if you get tired of statistics, there is always crime fiction waiting in the wings to satisfy the atavistic need coiled at the base of every reader’s thalamus to vicariously experience the primal crime of passion, power, or revenge and to witness the dispensation of legal—or at least poetic—justice. (183)

L. Atkins  
University of Hong Kong

**Marek Paryż, ed. *Bitnicy* [The Beat Writers]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2016. 305 pages.**

The transnational legend of the Beat Generation as American culture’s chief revolutionaries and outlaws has always found strong resonance in Poland, where their counter-cultural thrust had a profound influence on literature, in particular during the Cold War period. In his most recent study of transnationalism and Cold War poetry, Justin Quinn argues that it was particularly Allen Ginsberg, who in his travels, interests and friendships served as a “conduit from one side of the Iron Curtain” (8) to the other: “Instead of going through Paris or some other world literature metropolis, Ginsberg occupied a locus of global conflict—the seam that ran between East and West—and wrote poetry in that zone (‘Kral Majales’ was written on the plane to London after his expulsion from Czechoslovakia) and about that zone” (Quinn, 8). Ginsberg’s active involvement in the Prague Spring of 1965 has certainly increased his popularity on both sides of the Atlantic, greatly fostering his reception in Poland. As observed further by Quinn, in Eastern Europe, “Ginsberg’s own difficulties with authorities of various kinds in the US—medical, educational, legal—also become an allegory of the artist under communism” (87). Quite recently, this legend as well as the unique status of Beat writers in Poland, especially Kerouac and Ginsberg, has been revived by two monumental and meticulously annotated volumes of Ginsberg’s letters (Jack Kerouac i Allen Ginsberg: *Listy* [2012]; Ginsberg: *Listy* [2014], Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, trans. Krzysztof Majer). The

correspondence spans the whole period of Ginsberg's fascinating career, providing a rich and nuanced insight into the growth of the poet and his legend within the cultural, social and political context of his time. Furthermore, a comprehensive, panoramic and transnational perspective on the development of the countercultural movements of the 60s is offered by Jerzy Jarniewicz in *All You Need is Love: Sceny z życia kontrkultury* (Kraków: Znak, 2016), which embraces music, literature, performance and the visual arts. This revisionary trend has been confirmed by the publication of the book under my consideration: the collection of essays edited by Marek Paryż and published in the popular series "Mistrzowie literatury amerykańskiej" [Masters of American Literature].

*Bitnicy* addresses the general audience but at the same time goes beyond canonical figures, texts and anecdotes, offering a much broader and more diversified portrait of the generation's artistic output. The fifteen texts authored by Polish Americanists focus on the more recent revisions and supplementations of the historical, cultural and literary contexts informing the legacy and writings of the eponymous movement. The scope of the presented studies is generously inclusive, as it embraces refreshing insights into the lesser-known beginnings of the Beat Generation (e.g. Marek Paryż's essay, which chronicles the earlier history of the group, and Tadeusz Pióro's piece on the early writings of William Burroughs), the contexts for its consolidation (e.g. Mirosław Miernik's insights into the significance of the hipster subculture and jargon for the shaping of the group's identity, mythology and language) and interesting studies of the group's cultural and social diversity (e.g. Ewa Łuczak's article on the relationship between the Beats and African American poetry, or Marek Paryż's and Alicja Piechucka's essays on the women writers of the generation). The collection's thematic and critical richness stems also from the inclusion of diverse genres and media—the articles refer to novels, poems, journals, memoirs, autobiographies, letters (e.g. Jerzy Durczak's article "Listy i mity" on the epistolary exchange between Kerouac and Ginsberg) and films (e.g. Tomasz Sawczuk's overview of mainstream cultural and cinematic representations). An intriguing bonus is an insert of black-and-white panels from Marianna Strychowska and Łukasz Muniowski's graphic narrative based on the life of Jack Kerouac.

All of the collected articles show that there is much more to the Generation than the canonized Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs and Corso, echoing the latter's famous protestation that "four people do not a generation make." The usual roster is thus supplemented by individual portraits of the poets and writers who have earned less eminent positions within the group or were more loosely associated with it, but who have nevertheless contributed to the development of the Beat mythology, diversifying the group's social make-up and the styles of counter-cultural expression. Marek Paryż's essay on John Clellon Holmes's *roman à clef* *Go* (1952), considered the first Beat novel, and Paweł Marcinkiewicz's discussion of Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* (1967) uncover a complex dynamic between the core members and their less acclaimed colleagues, indicating also trajectories of retrospective perceptions of literary coteries. Since they were always relegated

to the second tier of the Beat landscape, those writers' relation to Beat leaders and ideals were more vexed, resulting also in greater anxiety of influence, and, as in the case of Brautigan, a desire to expand the founders' aesthetic frameworks. With a somewhat similar intention of diversifying the Beat circle, Andrzej Pietrasz focuses on Lawrence Ferlinghetti, not as the first publisher of *Howl* or the editor who fostered the publication of the Beats' poetry but as a poet in his own right. While the latter shared the Beats' indictment of American consumerism and their skepticism towards the idealistic vision of America, he created an original artistic idiom, enriched by his leftist views, fascination with Buddhism and engagement with abstract and surrealist art. The above mentioned essays clearly attempt to redress critical neglect of those figures, enlarging our definition as well as understanding of the Beat network. This is especially true as regards the women writers of the generation, here discussed in two essays by Alicja Piechucka and Marek Paryż.

As noted by Corso in response to a question about the absence of women in their midst: "There were women, they were there, I knew them, their families put them in institutions, they were given the electric shock. In the 50s if you were male you could be a rebel, but if you were female, your families locked you up. There were the cases, I knew them, some day someone will write about them" (qtd. in Knight, 141). Naturally, such attempts have been made, e.g. in Brenda Knight's book-study *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists, and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution* (1996), Richard Peabody's *A Different Beat: Writings By Women of the Beat Generation* (1997), Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace's edited collection *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing of the Beat Generation* (2002), and more recent essays: "Gender Performance in the Literature of the Female Beats" by Gillian Thomson (2011) and "On the Road Without a Map: Women of the Beat Writers" by Jean Stefancic (2013). In Poland, however, the women writers of the Beat Generation are basically unknown and have only recently begun to appear in translation (e.g. Jędrzej Polak's translation of Diane di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik* [2013]). It is thus a pity that the collection features only two essays on the female Beats: Marek Paryż's piece on di Prima and Alicja Piechucka's presentation of Joyce Johnson. Both sketches are valuable and engaging, although very selective, which prevents their authors from painting a more comprehensive picture of the movement's gender dynamics. Perhaps a well-placed overview essay of gender concerns in the Beat circle would solve the problem, especially given the conspicuous absence of such recognized talents as Anne Waldman, Joanne Kyger, Hettie Jones, Janine Pommy Vega, or Sandra Hochman, whose poetic voices stand on their own rather than as "minor characters" in the Beat landscape, thus meriting a context- and form-oriented discussion analogous to that received by the male writers in the collection.

This, however, does not diminish the value of the two essays included in the book: the articles differ considerably in terms of approach, but they work well in tandem, exemplifying various positions of the female Beats within the period's cultural site. Piechucka's sketch on Johnson's memoir *Minor Characters* offers very interesting insights into the diverse social roles played by the women in the Beat

movement. The argument is structured along then dominant gender codes (mother, wife, and lover), but it lacks contexts broader than the autobiographical or a clear critical perspective which could problematize the women's (and Johnson's own) contribution to the movement. For example, it would be interesting to discuss the primacy of memoir in the writings by the Beat women and the issue of gender performativity (cf. Thomson). The scholar works primarily with the source text, which is both an advantage and a certain limitation—the reader receives a more sustained and vivid portrait of Johnson but the lack of the current scholarship on the subject is rather poignant and ultimately narrows down the author's conclusions. Regrettably, the thematic sections' quirky subtitles adopted from Polish literature and popular culture obscure rather than clarify the author's observations, weakening the argument about the literary and cultural significance of Johnson's text (also through their slightly dismissive and flimsy tone).

While Piechucka's findings confirm the ancillary position of women in the Beat circle and present their artistic identities as incomplete projects, dependent on their male contemporaries and partners, Paryż's study of di Prima attempts to counteract this popular dismissive reception of the Beat women's creative work. Namely, it uses the memoir to trace its author's search for greater aesthetic independence and her need to carve an identity for herself within the predominantly male "gang" which tended to marginalize, dismiss and objectify women members. Focusing on di Prima's use of pornographic conventions and the self-reflexive character of the memoir, Paryż persuasively shows how the poet probes and stretches normative perceptions of sexual, familial and gender relations, to make visible women's desires and limitations and to challenge the masculine dominance over artistic innovation.

A similar desire to remedy important omissions in the Beat popular canon can be found in Ewa Łuczak's essay on the relationship between the movement and African-American poetry. As shown also in other texts in the volume, although African American culture provided the Beats with a language as well as certain formal and social paradigms, black writers are rarely discussed in connection with the movement's literary scene. The critic singles out one of the most prominent members of Black Beat—Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones. As noted by the author, the poet went through various stylistic and ideological incarnations, moving from a Beat-inflected confessionalism towards a black-nationalist orientation. Łuczak convincingly examines the seeds of that transformation evolving from his early volume *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1960). As is evident in the stylistic and thematic focus of those early poems, Baraka was initially attracted to the Beat aesthetic, expressive of disillusionment with mainstream culture and its conformity, but soon he radicalized his views and found the self-centered, bohemian and apolitical mode of the Beats insufficient. In her close reading of the poems, Łuczak reveals the tension between the Beat individualist spirit and Baraka's budding activist ethic which led to his later vision of poetry as a form of political intervention. The article is very interesting and I regret that the author has limited her findings to Baraka,

leaving out other poets who rebelled against the Beat interracial bohemia, (e.g. the jazz-surrealists Bob Kaufman and Ted Joans) as a broader and more comprehensive investigation of the Black Beat poets would deepen our understanding of the Beat's political commitments.

Apart from the above attempts to remap as well as enlarge the social and aesthetic landscape of the Beat movement, the volume also complexifies the popular reception of the group's key members. A very good example of this tendency is Krzysztof Majer's well-researched and informative essay which examines Jack Kerouac's French-Canadian origins, tracing the poet's counter-cultural status and original idiom to the subversive thrust of the Quebecois literature and ideology. As persuasively argued by Majer, who follows the recent francophone reception of the author in Canada, Kerouac's vision of literature could have been shaped by his split cultural identity, the core of which is informed by the tension between the Quebecois obsession with memory and the past, and the American urge to "make it new."

Another take on the two "Kings" of the Generation—Kerouac and Ginsberg—can be found in the essay by Jerzy Durczak, devoted to their epistolary exchange. The letters prove a rich and illuminating source of the Beat leaders' opinions, dreams, anxieties and aesthetic quarrels, and the juicy fragments cited in the study create an appetite for a more detailed analysis of the collection. As interestingly shown by the scholar, the popular image of the poets as restless spiritual questers, illuminated hipsters, liberal thinkers and social rebels fighting for the freedom of expression does not find its confirmation in the letters which, somewhat surprisingly, often reveal the less bohemian and more conservative views.

Justyna Kociatkiewicz's rereading of *On the Road* has a similar function in the volume—using bebop as a formal and political paradigm for the study of Kerouac's "spontaneous prose," the author critically interrogates the ideological underpinnings of the narrative, demonstrating a contrast between, on the one hand, the loose, improvisational form and its attendant ideals of freedom, inclusiveness, democracy, and openness, and, on the other, the often racist and misogynist content of the narrator's outpourings. In the analysis, Dean Moriarty—the novel's exemplary bohemian figure—proves a rather careless and narcissistic man, focused mostly on his own disillusionment and confusion, and incapable of seeing the suffering of others on the way to his self-discovery. The reading moves the usual focus from the autobiographical to the formal and social contexts, tapping into the most current scholarship which evidences the group's imbrication in the era's social norms and political codes. The juxtaposition of the novel's jazz form with its solipsistic concerns enlarges our understanding of the Beats' superficial relation to the hipster language and ethos as well as the limits to their identification with the worldviews of disenfranchised cultures and social groups.

Kerouac is also the subject of Łukasz Muniowski's article on Jack Duluoż—the writer's alter ego, whose development is depicted in a cycle of lesser-known novels, including *Visions of Gerard*, *Doctor Sax*, *Vanity of Duluoż*, *The Town and the City*, *Lonesome Traveller*, *Tristessa*, *Satori in Paris*, *Maggie Cassidy*, *Dharma*

*Bums* and *Big Sur*. Muniowski discusses the latter three in greater detail, focusing on the topic of self-creation, the resonance of the Beat ethos and the trajectory of the writer's formal growth. The article extends the popular reception of Kerouac which rarely goes beyond the legend of *On the Road*, but it also examines the writer's life struggle with the aura of the "King of the Beats," which ultimately proved a heavy and destructive burden for his literary ambitions and later writing.

An interesting revisionist view of the Beat canon is offered by Jacek Gutorow, who examines Allen Ginsberg's early poetry, usually dismissed by critics, and discusses it as an important and formally imaginative foundation for the development of his mature style. The essay focuses on the poem "Siesta in Xbalba," written during Ginsberg's 1954 sojourn in Mexico. Gutorow offers an astute, broadly contextualized, and meticulously argued study, not only very sympathetic to the poet's early development—certainly encouraging one to seek more connections between the early and later Ginsberg—but also revealing the poet's creative absorption of and dialogue with modernist aesthetic practice, especially T. S. Eliot's understanding of tradition and his mythic method.

Given the above, the collection is an engaging, diversified and informative read, although individual essays can be slightly uneven. With the notoriously eccentric and scandalous careers of the Beats, there is always a danger of overemphasizing the autobiographical element in critical studies, and some of the articles in the volume are not entirely free of that bias. The collection could have also benefited from more synthetic overviews of the movement's gender, ethnic and racial dynamics. However, the general picture of the Beats which emerges from the study is multi-dimensional, rich in contexts, and of potential interest to both the general and more specialized reader. The value of both the individual studies and the overview articles is that, while showcasing certain (often less-celebrated) figures of the group, they relate to larger social, aesthetic and cultural concerns that are involved in the Beat history and writings, outlining the grounds and directions for further, more detailed investigations of the movement's enduring legacy.

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Paulina Ambroży

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

**Philip Loeffler. *Pluralist Desires: Contemporary Historical Fiction and the End of the Cold War*. Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2015. 182 pages.**

The title of Loeffler's book is very promising as it implies a discussion of a literary genre in a time of upheaval that has undermined forty five years of precarious world balance. The starting point of Loeffler's argument is Spielberg's movie *Saving Private Ryan* which, the author claims, may serve as an example of a replacement of "the idea of historical truth with that of historical experience" (1), that is of an attempt "to privatize history" (5), a tendency characterizing the cultural production of the post-Cold War period. The focus on the individual experience of the historical, on "writing of history as a private, idiosyncratic form of self-creation" (6) and a search for meaning "in a time when meaning seems absent" (10) will be the basis for Loeffler's in-depth analyses of selected novels by Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth and Richard Powers. At this point one may ask if there is such a thing as "historical truth" and if so whether to expect it of historical fiction, whose purpose has always been the presentation of individual experience within a larger historical context, and if writing has not always served as a means of self-creation and of orchestration of external (and internal) turmoil.

The introductory Chapter One ("The Uses of History: From Nineteenth-Century Historicism to Twenty-First Century Pluralism") might provide answers to these questions, yet it proves more puzzling than clarifying: peppered with erudite references to numerous philosophers, including Darwin, Hegel, Marx, James, Nietzsche, Hartman and de Man, the argument dismantles the major points of the title's promise. Thus the author first deflects the validity of his own presentation of the tradition of plurality (26), and then undermines the logic of his choice of literary texts to be discussed as they "have occurred in tandem with, but by no means in reaction to, the end of the Cold War" (29). The reader is left with an unpleasant feeling that the catch phrases of the title are glued onto a not-quite-coherent whole. Indeed the reading of the subsequent chapters seems to confirm this feeling: there

is no apparent link between the four analyses Loeffler offers apart from what he has already pinpointed as his arbitrary construction—the texts were published after 1989 and they refer to American history. In other words, *Pluralist Desires* is simply a collection of four essays on four contemporary American writers, arbitrarily put together under nice-sounding but vague generalities. The lack of definitions that would regulate and unify the argument is perhaps the reviewer's major reservation. As it is, Loeffler makes use of various concepts he delineates in the introduction to structure subsequent chapters, but the connection between the particular analyses remains unclear.

Chapter Two, devoted primarily to Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, attempts at covering major points in the critical discussion of the novel including the relationship between baseball and the Cold War, the failure of postmodernism "as a meaningful theory pool of the 1970s and 1980s" (46), and the means of "self-creation that will define life after the Cold War" (47). Yet instead of taking into account the totality of DeLillo's text to suggest the directions such self-creation may take, Loeffler moves on to discuss *Mao II* and *Cosmopolis* which, even if they fit this point of the author's argument, have no claim to be historical novels. It is also unclear why he chooses to attribute to DeLillo a "quite specific interest in historical writing" (59) when *Underworld* is DeLillo's only historical novel to date. Perhaps a definition of the term "historical novel" would dispel readerly reservations, but no such definition is offered.

The discussion of Morrison's work in Chapter Three is better sustained and more coherent, even if the thesis makes it unclear what the word "history" means when used in the phrase "historical novel" as a genre and in the phrase "historical experience" of Morrison's protagonists. A picky reader would also point out that Morrison's earlier novels, published before the end of the Cold War, display the same characteristics that Loeffler discusses, while *Beloved* and *A Mercy* seem to fall into a familiar Morrison paradigm of re-telling Afro-American history in an Afro-American manner.

Chapters Four and Five are much more interesting in that they deal with slightly less critically popular texts (Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* trilogy and Richard Powers' *Plowing the Dark*), which gives Loeffler space for his own interpretation and argumentation. Yet again, neither the notion of "pluralist desires" nor of the "historical novel" seems to play a particular role in the discussion. In both chapters Loeffler refers to the Nietzschean notion of "plastic power," the artistic talent of a good historian to organize the chaos of history, but it is unclear whether this power is to be attributed to the writers themselves or to the (artistic) characters they create. And again, Loeffler unwittingly indicates his problem in defining the historical novel when in one paragraph he seems to use three terms—"contemporary novel," "contemporary historical novel," and the novel as a genre (127)—as if these were fully synonymous.

The very brief "Epilogue" which serves in the place of conclusions repeats the reservations set in the opening chapter of the book concerning the historical and

cultural importance of 1989 as a caesura. Interestingly, avoiding a restatement of a common point of his argument, Loeffler uses the phrase “the larger idea behind that project” (144), in a way confirming the reader’s feeling that there is no clearly stated thesis that would circumscribe and structure his discussion. In effect, one may ask to what kind of audience Loeffler’s book is addressed—a question that gains more and more importance in the field of humanities. An uninitiated reader will find Loeffler’s text too inaccessible with its references to philosophy and high-brow literary criticism; a student will struggle with its convoluted style marked by heavy reliance on litotes, as well as its meandering between critical terminology and the simplifying use of “we” denoting the totality of (reading) community; a fellow academician, lured by the title, may bemoan the vagueness of the discussion and its lack of actual novelty. For all its proclaimed ambitions, *Pluralist Desires* seems yet another book necessitated by the bureaucratic requirements of academic promotion.

Justyna Kociatkiewicz  
University of Wrocław

**Małgorzata Rutkowska. *Koty, psy i ludzie. Zwierzęta domowe w literaturze amerykańskiej* [Cats, Dogs, and People: Pets in American Literature]. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2016. 228 pages.**

Małgorzata Rutkowska’s book about pets in American literature is part of the outburst of interest in animal studies, which has taken the American humanities by storm and which is clearly making its way to Poland. Within literary criticism, the animal studies perspective has opened the possibility of novel and fascinating readings of well-known literary texts. The sheer enthusiasm of animal studies scholars reminds one of the early days of feminist criticism, as critics take on Melville’s and Hemingway’s oeuvres using a new critical lens. However, this is not what Rutkowska does. Her enthusiasm is equally strong, yet her goal is to analyze non-canonical fiction, usually considered minor literature. The lynchpin of the texts she is interested in is the foregrounding of the figure of the domestic animal; either as the narrator (animal autobiographies) or as the main subject of the book (contemporary pet memoirs). The author also takes on the challenge of simultaneously presenting and analyzing American texts that have largely not been translated into Polish for the Polish reader. The Polish title of the book is somewhat misleading: Rutkowska writes not only about cats and dogs but also about other pets: including a turtle and a pig. The problem is, of course, largely linguistic: the lack of an exact equivalent of the word pet in Polish is itself worthy of academic analysis. Rutkowska’s probing of the wild/domestic boundary also requires incorporating texts that feature wild animals. In fact, the main thesis of the book is that the entire tradition of the “pet memoir” is a form of resistance to the cult of wilderness in American fiction.

The gist of the first chapter is devoted to a discussion of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pet autobiographies, that is stories and novels written from

the perspective of the animal. The emergence of this genre is tied with the rise of the animal rights and anti-vivisection movements and the books, inspired by Ann Sewell's *Black Beauty*, were written with the overt intention of evoking sympathy for the plight of abused animals. The author interestingly points out how these stories utilize the conventions developed in women's sentimental fiction and best known to the average reader from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Even Mark Twain, in "A Dog's Tale" (1903), employs the strongest sentimental motif of maternal loss—with a twist: the mother who loses her child to cruel vivisection is a female dog—to argue against cruelty to animals. Rutkowska's analysis is steeped in a thorough exploration of the role of class and gender in these stories: the sentimental is, after all, a typically feminine convention and the anti-vivisectionist movement is a movement of white middle-class women.

Chapter Two takes on contemporary texts narrated by "learned animals" and it is here that the species under discussion exceed cats and dogs: one of the texts is narrated by a pig and another by a turtle. However, this shift allows the author to employ a postcolonial reading of the condition of the pet animal using an example—that of the turtle—that drives the point more clearly than if the argument had been attempted on the example of a dog. Rutkowska also makes a much-needed genealogical connection between the sentimental narratives of the nineteenth century and the contemporary texts. While the modern narratives use the same technical device of the animal narrator and show the narrator's alienation from the "natural world," the animal narrator's point of view reflects a posthumanist sensibility: the animals are often scathingly critical of their human's behavior and of anthropocentrism in general. Chapter Three begins with an analysis of what he by now become a canonical work for animal studies scholars: Virginia Woolf's *Flush* (1933). However, the turn to British literature is necessary for an analysis of three contemporary American novels, which are narrated by dogs. Paul Auster's *Timbuktu* is probably the best known of these. Rutkowska reads these contemporary novels as directly engaging Woolf's *Flush* through their focus on the animals' internal emotional lives. These stories, as Rutkowska argues, are stories of interspecies love. They are also rooted in a posthumanist sensibility but their overt goal is not a critique of anthropocentrism but an analysis of the potential for the transcendence of rigid species boundaries offered by human-canine relationships. A similar point is made in Chapter Four, which discusses so-called pet memoirs: texts narrated by humans but focused on the bond between the human and the canine. Rutkowska contextualizes the emergence of this genre within the memoir boom, visible in (not only) American literature since the 1980s. The popularity of the genre of the pet memoir is such that Rutkowska actually suggests a potential typology, dividing the books she analyzes into three sub-genres: memoirs of life with naughty, disobedient (but lovable!) dogs, ethological observations of life with dogs and memoirs of pet loss. All of these books reflect the shifting place of pets within the American household: their growing emotional significance for their guardians, their incorporation into the definition of family and the potential for the redefinition of kin that such relationships offer.

Here, the author attempts to theorize these changes using, among other concepts, Haraway's by now well-known term: "companion species."

Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* (2008) and *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) also form the theoretical framework of the last chapter, which deals specifically with texts that focus on the pitfalls and potential of interspecies communication. Significantly, the texts analyzed in this chapter focus on the narrator's attempts to consciously shape their relationships with their dogs in ways that are not based on an inseparable mix of dominance and affection. The narrators—the texts under discussion are again memoirs—turn to ethology and behavioral science in an attempt to comprehend their non-human partners; often stepping outside of their comfort zone, finding themselves involved in activities that they would not have undertaken if they did not have a pet. Communication here is seen as a two-way endeavor: Rutkowska argues that these memoirs transcend the easy anthropomorphism of nineteenth-century animal narratives and reflect the complexity of the current debates on the status of animals.

Rutkowska's book is a fascinating account of the changing representations of companion animals in American literature. It does have a weak point: I would like to see the author fill in the space between Chapters One and Two. The hundred-year-long leap is explained away in two sentences and can basically be summarized as: "pets disappear from high literature in the twentieth century and become the province of children's stories." It is true that within animal studies modernism is often analyzed in relation to the disappearance of the animal—this is Steve Baker's argument in *Postmodern Animal* (2000)—but this disappearance requires a more detailed explanation even if the author, understandably, does not wish to engage juvenile fiction. In fact, even if the nineteenth-century texts discussed in Chapter One were written for an adult audience, they were obviously produced with a didactic (even political) purpose in mind, just like the mid-twentieth-century children's literature that is omitted by Rutkowska, including *Old Yeller*, *Big Red*, etc.

To conclude, Rutkowska's book is a valuable contribution to reflection on the role of animals in American literature. What also makes this book truly exceptional is Rutkowska's incorporation of both American and Polish animal studies scholarship. While the casual references to Polish fiction, popular science and theoretical writings may make it more difficult for the author to publish the book on the American market—which I believe she most certainly should—the strategy not only allows her to achieve a truly intercultural perspective but also to position herself within the Polish animal studies community: not as an outsider, whose knowledge of American literature and theoretical perspectives sets her in the position of an expert, but as a member of the growing Polish animal studies community, someone familiar with the discussions and texts taking place not only in the US. At the same time the book of course does serve its role of familiarizing the Polish reader with American literature and does it in a very reader-friendly manner.

Justyna Włodarczyk  
University of Warsaw

**Mita Banerjee, ed. *Comparative Indigenous Studies*. Heilderberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2016. 383 pages.**

“Water Is Life” was a central motto of a series of peaceful protests organized in 2016 by the Standing Rock Sioux tribe against the North Dakota Access Pipeline project that posed threat to the community’s drinking water and to their sacred burial grounds. Having garnered international media attention, over the months the grassroots movement grew to a global solidarity campaign for the protection of human and environmental rights. Despite international criticism, in January 2017 president Donald Trump granted permission to build the oil pipelines. Although the Sioux continue their battle in court, the globally recognized movement has attested to the power of international tribal solidarity that stems from indigenous people’s mutual recognition and understanding of their complex power relations with the nation-states across the globe. Most importantly, the movement has proved against the myth of the “vanishing Indian,” becoming a celebration of what Ojibwa writer and critic Gerald Vizenor defines as tribal “survivance”—“an active sense of native presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion” (“Aesthetics” 1).

The celebration of indigenous survivance across the globe and the acknowledgement of international indigenous connections are at the heart of *Comparative Indigenous Studies*, a collection of critical essays edited by Mita Banerjee. The seventeen texts that represent such fields of study as the humanities and social sciences, law, cultural and literary studies, economics, and medicine create an interdisciplinary and transnational dialogue about indigenous cultures representing the Americas, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. As the editor states, the idea for the volume is to provide a global comparative framework for indigenous studies that will foster a better understanding of the complex socio-political, historical, and cultural processes that indigenous people across the globe have been part of. The wide-ranging discussions that stem from the collection not only testify to the continuous presence of indigenous people within the borders of modern nation-states but also stress the importance of tribal voices in the global debates about the state of modern societies.

Drawing on the already well-established as well as recent scholarly research, the contributors to the collection stress the need for more tribal voices in this field of indigenous studies. Prioritizing indigenous scholarship, Banerjee states, is a crucial step in overcoming the discursive violence that, similarly to Edward Said’s “orientalism,” explores and defines indigeneity while simultaneously ignoring or minimalizing Native voices in the academic debate. Composed of articles by non-Native scholars, the anthology is meant as a self-reflective “deconstruction of whiteness” with the essays “set out to interrogate spaces (historical, cultural, institutional) from which Native presences have been excluded and erased” (11).

As Banerjee aptly posits, although ambitious in its goals, the idea of comparative indigenous studies can nevertheless pose considerable risks. Referring to Chadwick Allen’s critical work *Transindigenous: Methodologies for a Global Native Literary Studies*, the critic maintains that the global comparative framework

may lead to overgeneralizations and misinterpretations of indigenous experiences, consequently to further perpetuation of the above mentioned discursive violence. What is then crucial in scholarly discourses is to maintain the right balance between the amount of attention given to the tribal-specific problems and to the notion of an indigenous internationalism.

Such balance indubitably characterizes the volume which represents a well-researched and innovative analysis, addressing indigenous issues on both tribal and international level. Although the topics of the essays vary, Native people's struggles for self-determination remain the central theme of the collection. It is well exemplified in Michael Bachman's essay on Gerald Vizenor's use of theatrical discourse. As the critic demonstrates, when seen as a performative act, Vizenor's postindian offers a powerful critique of the simulations of Indianness ascribed to indigenous people by the settler nation-states across the globe. The question of indigenous identity formation is also presented in Jan Kusber's essay in which he discusses Siberia as a space of complex socio-political and cultural power relations that have impacted the situation of Siberian autochthons and their relationships with the people who migrated to the region.

A number of essays discuss literary and visual arts as tools of indigenous criticism of western (neo)colonial forces. René Dietrich analyzes N. Scott Momaday's life-writing text *The Way to Rainy Mountain* as a tribal critique of settler colonial biopolitics while Mita Banerjee uses indigenous literature and film to offer a transnational perspective on the destructive forces of the white man's "civilizing missions" in Canada, Australia, and the US. Drawing on Canadian Native literature, Sabine Kim addresses the problem of commoditization of Canadian First Nations' cultural objects, pointing to transnational indigenous connections that have allowed tribal people to achieve more control over the process of international tribal commodity exchange. Independent film as a tool of indigenous struggles for human rights and environmental justice is the topic of Sabine Meyer's essay. In her work the critic analyzes the role of Joe Berlinger's film *Crude: The Real Price of Oil* (2009) in the process of documenting the Ecuadorian indigenes' legal battle against the American oil company Texaco's exploitation of the Amazonian lands.

The problem regarding the protection of human and environmental rights is also undertaken by Eva Riempp who presents a comparative study of the ecological and social consequences of gold mining in South America, and their impact on the situation of tribal communities of Guyana and the indigenous and Maroon groups in Suriname. In her study of the indigenous groups living on the West Coast of Mexico, Leslie Korn focuses on the communities' struggles to preserve their traditional lifestyles, especially the rights to protect and cultivate their knowledge concerning the traditional ways of healing.

Indigenous (re)envisioning the world through art is the topic of four articles included in the volume. Hsinya Huang's fascinating analysis of "the Pacific" presents it as a contact zone and method that illuminates the complex relationship between the human and the non-human. Focusing on the selected indigenous literary

works from the regions of Taiwan, North American west coast, and New Zealand/Aoteora, Huang puts them in a trans-Pacific/trans-indigenous context to offer an oceanic poetics shared across the region. Anton Escher analyzes *Powwow Highway* (dir. Jonathan Wacks, 1989) as a dream film that refers to the indigenous tradition of visionary quests for a sense of self. Drawing on the Cheyenne traditional tribal thought, the movie, according to Escher, can be interpreted as a modern vision of the symbolic rebirth of the Cheyenne tribe. Dieter Dörr's in-depth study of the history of Cheyenne displacement provides a very useful background to the above mentioned cinematic production. In her article Katja Sarkowsky demonstrates how contemporary Native writers use their work to reclaim the Atlantic region as the "Red Atlantic" inscribing it as part of Native tribal modernity. As Sarkowsky argues, rewriting colonial history, indigenous writers not only challenge the Western dominant narratives of "discovery" but also question the notion of "modernity" as a Euro-American concept. Frank Schulze-Engler's critical analysis focuses on Native Canadian, Aboriginal Australian, and Maori fiction to illuminate the role of transcultural memory in the process of reclaiming indigenous people's presence in the national narratives about World War I and II.

Although casinos have always been part of Indian stereotypes, their role in the reshaping of the economic situation of contemporary tribal communities has not been fully discussed in the academic world yet. A case study of the Harrah's Cherokee Casino Resort, undertaken by Franz Rothlauf, Claus-Peter H. Ernst, and Rafaél Rivera, offers an interesting look at the problem. Analyzing four factors, i.e., land, labor, capital, and knowledge, the authors study the mechanisms of tribal gaming business to determine the reasons behind tribal casinos' economic success, or lack thereof. A short article by Elke Wagner, in which the author analyzes the use of the mass media by the modern-day reservation inhabitants, can serve as a valuable addition to the topic of tribal casinos. Finally, Ulrich Breuer's critical look at Karl May's *Winnetou* trilogy as an alternative model to the educational discourse of German high culture represents a very interesting example of deconstructing "the white man's Indian." Breuer's work is an insightful critique of May's simulations of the Indian that continue to shape German popular culture.

Without a doubt *Comparative Indigenous Studies* is a collection of original, in-depth, and invigorating analyses that foster a new understanding of indigenous studies by expanding tribal-specific scholarship with new "globally Indigenous fields of inquiry" (Allen xiv). An interdisciplinary dialog created by the contributors offers the possibilities of new, much broader critical approaches to the problems discussed in the volume. Such a dialog also has the potential to stimulate a much needed process of "indigenizing" various academic fields which have not yet paid enough attention to Native voices. Consequently, comparative indigenous studies can become a platform for indigenous people to voice their concerns and to participate in public academic, socio-political, and cultural debates. It can help indigenous communities form and strengthen international and intertribal relations which in turn can enable various Native groups to maintain control over the process

of self-determination. Finally, the role of comparative indigenous studies is also to voice criticism of western scholarship and its impact on the state of contemporary indigenous world. Such critical reflection, implies Banerjee, is necessary so that indigenous studies can develop properly and be part of the process of reconciling/healing that indigenous people ask for.

Since the volume is thoroughly referenced, with an impressive amount of indigenous critical works, it will be of great asset to scholars interested or working in the field of indigenous studies. What is missing in the anthology though is a list of short biographical notes on the contributors. The information on which academic centers engage in the development of indigenous studies would be very useful. One more shortcoming is the lack of consistency in the formatting style of the volume. These two shortcomings do not however affect the quality of the scholarship represented in the collection.

Bringing together scholars from diverse fields of inquiry, *Comparative Indigenous Studies* is an example of a dialog which goal is not only to foster a better understanding of indigenous people but also to celebrate their presence across the globe. Acknowledging and supporting tribal survivance, the volume cultivates what Rudolfo Anaya describes as “the flowering of the human spirit, not its exploitation” (383).

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Ewelina Bańka

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

**Beata Zawadka, ed. *Performing South: The U.S. South as Transmedial Message*.  
Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2015.  
246 pages.**

The collection of the eleven essays of which the volume reviewed here consists is, as the editor admits in the introduction, “an extension of presentations and talks given on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary meeting of the Southern Studies Forum” (15) held in Szczecin in September 2013. The articles, grouped in three sections titled: “(Post)Spiritual Performances,” “(Post)Gender Performances,” and “(Post)Cultural Performances,” respectively, focus on various performative aspects of southern culture. What their authors suggest—and prove viable—is applicability of some of the theories of performance studies to the analyses of a whole range of southern

social phenomena, including those finding their reflection in southern literature.

The opening essay of the first section, “Remembering Colleagues, Remembering Friends, Remembering Peter Nicolaisen and Noel Polk,” authored by Agnieszka Salska, commemorates the two late Southern Studies scholars whom the author knew personally. Salska has written a poignant essay, referring both to personality traits and academic achievements of the two, paying most attention to the way they contributed to the development of Southern Studies. A large section of the article focuses on that part of Polk’s seminal 1997 publication *Outside the Southern Myth*, related closely to the theme of “Performing South,” where Polk is trying, among other things, to answer the question about the extent to which the southern myth has become a reality shaping people’s attitudes and responses.

John Andreas Fuchs’ article “The Church Performing in the South: From Catholicism to Evangelical Catholicism,” which appears second, is a condensed history of Catholicism in the U.S., which started out in the South and developed into American Catholicism, whose distinctive features, as well as their gradual development since the seventeenth century, are the subject of analysis by Fuchs. The essay is highly informative, and focuses mainly on the Southern/American Catholic church, which in the recent decades has experienced a significant increase in the number of parishioners, mainly due to economic migration from the rustbelt, as well as a steady influx of Hispanic immigrants. However, as the author stresses, Southern Catholicism can be perceived as quite remote from the traditional one: evangelical Catholics, consoling Catholicism with American beliefs, stand here to illustrate the point. The article has an impressive—and potentially helpful—bibliography as well as suggestions for further reading, which is its additional asset.

The remaining nine articles contain analyses of selected literary works. Marcel Arbeit’s “Performances Religious and Secular in Chris Fuhrman’s *Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys*” opens with brief characteristics of Catholicism in the South to provide a wider context for the discussion of the novel set in 1974 Savannah. Following Ronald L. Grimes’ definition of performances as “pretending or playing a role” and rituals as “doing or accomplishing” (34), Arbeit discusses religious, artistic, racial and private performances and rituals which the novel’s teenage characters participate in or create themselves. Fuhrman’s novel, in Arbeit’s interpretation, suggests that the ability to distinguish between “role playing and serious doing” (78), i.e. between performance and ritual, is a “sign of maturation” that the protagonist does not reveal.

Gilèle Sigal in “Drama and Trauma in Elizabeth Madox Roberts’ *My Heart and My Flesh*,” before providing a detailed analysis of Roberts’ novel, refers to the author’s overall literary output, stating that in her novels “the South becomes a stage” (81), to paraphrase Shakespeare’s line from *As You Like It*. Bearing that in mind, Sigal discusses *My Heart and My Flesh*, published in 1927, focusing first on the deconstruction the main character undergoes, and the way in which the novel reflects “the whole tormented history of the South” (88) in the troubled relationships and entanglements between the characters, to finish with the recovery found through the healing power of nature and community life, with which the novel ends.

Susana María Jiménez Placer in “Performing Southern Womanhood in Katherine Anne Porter’s Miranda stories” selects two stories by Porter—“Old Mortality” and “The Old Order”—to discuss the destructive effects of “discursive excesses” (107), i.e. of the observable gap between the Southern discourse and Southern reality, on the life of the female characters: Miranda’s grandmother and—most of all—Aunt Amy. In the world of Miranda’s family the official discourse is constructed by the myth of the Old South, within which Amy had a clearly assigned role, which she contested, wanting not to perform, but to live.

Irina Kudriavtseva in “Homo Performans in Erskine Caldwell’s Short Stories” borrows from Victor Turner the Latin term used in the title to analyze functions of performance in selected short stories by Caldwell. She refers, among others, to the performative character of social gatherings and to the southern need “for public display of power and status” (124). The author analyzes briefly numerous short stories coming from the 1996 collection *The Stories of Erskine Caldwell*, providing evidence for Caldwell’s use of performance-oriented strategies of narration, characterization and plot-building.

Emmeline Gross in “The Masquerade of Masculinity in *Gone with the Wind*. Per(e)forming Men Through Emotions” examines the way in which Margaret Mitchell’s novel explores the subject of performance of both femininity and masculinity, as well as its centrality to the narrative. Dwelling upon the opposition between “sincere expression of self/individuality and debased/calculated performance/deceit” (138) the author focuses first on Scarlet’s performance of extreme femininity aimed at hiding the real self, and then proceeds to discuss what she calls the “fictionality of masculinity” as illustrated by Ashley, Rhett or Gerald O’Hara, and the clothes/uniforms/“costumes” they wear. The performative aspect of southern masculinity, the theatricality of it, seem to deny “an authentic access to manhood” (152) and prevent going beyond the apparent superficial manifestations.

In “Performing Ethnicities, Performing Regions: The Crossroads of Time, History and Culture in Alfred Uhry’s *The Last Night of Ballyhoo*” John Wharton Lowe analyses Uhry’s play written for the celebration of the opening of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, which seems to be a reflection upon the ways in which Jewish immigrants of the first and second generation tend to perform regional modes and mannerisms. Although Lowe refers briefly to the history of the Jewish diaspora in the South, he focuses mainly on the way in which the play set at the moment of the overlap between three festive events: the 1939 Atlanta premiere of *Gone With the Wind*, the celebration of Ballyhoo, and Christmas explores the carnivalization of Atlanta culture through the prism of ethnically specific experience. Having classified the play as “a comedy of redemption,” the author argues that the well-being of the main characters, all of them Jewish, depends heavily on their ability to remain “true to their heritage,” rather than elect “southernness as their new identity” (175).

Another play by the same author is analysed in Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis’ “Come Dine With Me. Or Not: Performing Racial Relations in the Domestic Sphere in Alfred Uhry’s *Driving Miss Daisy*,” in which the dining rituals and spaces

reflect, as the author suggests, racial tensions and hierarchy in the segregated South. Niewiadomska-Flis stresses the spatial—and social—separateness of the kitchen and the dining room areas and presents how the evolution of Daisy and her African-American chauffer Hoke's relationship is reflected in the way in which the two characters encroach (or not) on each other's dining territory or interfere in the eating habits.

“‘Manners Are Not Intelligent. They’re Just Automatic.’ Performing the South in Elizabeth Spencer’s *For Lease or Sale*” is Gerald Preher’s essay devoted to Spencer’s only play, first staged in 1989. Preher places Spencer’s text within the tradition of the Southern Gothic, but refers also to the way in which the play deals with the southern myth and focuses on the symbolic role the Glens’ house plays. The final part of the article is devoted to Edward Glenn, one of the main characters, known also from Spencer’s fiction, and leads the author to the conclusion that Edward evolves throughout the play into a southern gentleman. The play, set in the Mississippi Delta, shows the South on the verge of change (the bulldozers demolishing the neighborhood provide background noises throughout the play), with the survival of the region being seemingly dependent upon the preservation of southern manners—on the South’s capability to perform itself.

Carmen Rueda-Ramos’ essay which closes the collection is titled “Staging Southern Culture: Liminality and Cultural Performance in Donald Davidson’s *The Big Ballad Jamboree*.” The author chose for her analysis Davidson’s only novel, which, despite being written in the mid-1950s, was published posthumously in 1996. Although *The Big Ballad Jamboree* is not considered to be the Agrarian poet’s major achievement, it provides exciting material for an analysis of the white culture of the mountain South. Davidson uses music—the old folk ballads and hillbilly music popularized by the radio—as the medium through which he shows the changes taking place in southern culture at the end of the 1940s, and Rueda-Ramos in her essay discusses the representation of the conflicting forces of the Old and the New South. The musical shift from the folk ballads to hillbilly music marks not only the shift from private to public performance, but also reflects the changes the society formerly faithful to the Agrarian values underwent.

Rueda-Ramos opens her considerations over Davidson’s novel with the statement that “The South has a long tradition of staging its culture” (217). I would consider this sentence to be the best summary of what the essays in the anthology discuss; i.e. the long-observed and documented performative potential of the Southern culture, and the Southern society’s urge to use it. The variety of literary texts and topics discussed work to the volume’s advantage, as it becomes an inspiring collection for all those interested in looking at Southern society through the lens of performative studies.

Elżbieta Rokosz-Piejko  
University of Rzeszów

## Contributors

**Kornelia Boczkowska** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Studies in Culture at the Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan. She holds a Ph.D. in English with a specialization in American culture studies. She has published on American Cosmism, space art and avant-garde cinema in the context of visual, cultural and film studies. She is the author of *The Impact of American and Russian Cosmism on the Representation of Space Exploration in 20<sup>th</sup> Century American and Soviet Space Art* (2016). Her current research is on narrative and visual conventions in the representation of landscape and travelogue forms in American experimental film. [kboczkowska@wa.amu.edu.pl]

**Jerzy Durczak** is Professor of American Literature at the Department of American Literature and Culture, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, a former President of the Polish Association for American Studies, and a Senior Fulbright Fellow. His research interests include postwar American prose, American autobiography and American photography. [jurek.durczak@gmail.com]

**Julia Fiedorczuk** is Associate Professor of American Literature at the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw, and a poet, fiction-writer, and translator. She has published several volumes of poetry, two short story collections and two novels (most recently, the Nike-nominated *Nieważkość [Weightless]*, 2015). She is a co-author (with Gerardo Beltrán) of a tri-lingual essay on poetry and ecology (*Ekopoetyka/Ecopoética/Ecopoetics*, 2016). Her work has been translated into nineteen languages. [hedgehogpower@gmail.com]

**Edyta Frelik** is Assistant Professor in the Department of American Studies at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin. She is the winner of the 2013 Terra Foundation for American Art International Essay Prize, awarded by the Terra Foundation and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, for her article “Ad Reinhardt: Painter-as-Writer” and a co-recipient of 2014 Terra Foundation for American Art Academic Program Grant. In 2016 she published *Painter’s Word: Thomas Hart Benton, Marsden Hartley and Ad Reinhardt as Writers*. [edyta.frelik@gmail.com]

**Mirosław Aleksander Miernik** is Assistant Professor at the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw. His professional interests include everyday life in the USA in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, subcultural studies, and consumer culture. In the past he also carried out research on the works of Frederick Rolfe, with a focus on the interplay between fiction and autobiographical elements. [m.a.miernik@uw.edu.pl]

**Malgorzata Olsza** holds a Ph.D. from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and teaches at the Department of American Literature AMU. Her research interests include graphic novels, contemporary American art, and Modernist American Literature. Her Ph.D. thesis was devoted to the poetics of the contemporary American graphic novel. She received the Polish Association for American Studies' Annual Award for the Best American Studies M.A. Thesis Written at a Polish University (2013). [molsza@wa.amu.edu.pl]

**Jacek Partyka** is Assistant Professor in the Institute of Modern Languages at the University of Białystok. His academic interests focus on intertextuality, American Holocaust fiction, and twentieth-century American poetry. He has recently co-edited two volumes of papers: *American Wild Zones. Space, Experience, Consciousness* (2016), and *Dwelling in Days Foregone. Nostalgia in American Literature and Culture* (2016), and is currently working on a book project on the use of court documentation in the works of Charles Reznikoff. [j.partyka@uwb.edu.pl]

**Alicja Piechucka** is Assistant Professor in the Unit of American Literature at the University of Łódź. Her doctoral thesis was on T. S. Eliot's poetry. Her academic interests include American modernist poetry and contemporary American prose. Much of her research focuses on comparative studies of American and French literature. She is also interested in the visual arts and American visual culture. She teaches, among others, courses in American literature and American painting. A literary critic, she has been a regular contributor to *Nowe Książki* and *Tygiel Kultury*. [alicja.piechucka@uni.lodz.pl]

**Małgorzata Rutkowska** works as Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Maria Curie Skłodowska University in Lublin where she teaches courses in American Literature and Animal Studies. She has written articles on British and American travel writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, animal symbolism and representations of the human-animal bond in literature. Her recent book *Psy, koty i ludzie. Zwierzęta domowe w literaturze amerykańskiej* [Cats, Dogs and People: Domestic Animals in American Literature] came out in 2016. [ma.rutkowska@gmail.com]

**Karolina Słotwińska-Pelka** graduated from the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw, where she is now teaching Practical English and working on her PhD. Her research focuses on genre theory and the politics of epidemics in American fiction after 2000. Her interests include modern American science fiction, zombie studies, posthumanism, biopolitics and race studies. She has contributed to a collection of essays *Po humanizmie* (2015) and *Polish Journal for American Studies*. [kslotwinska88@wp.pl]

**Ewa Ścibior** is a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw. Her research focuses on the evolution of the images of drag queens in American literature, film and television. [scibior.e@gmail.com]

**Jędrzej Tazbir** is a PhD candidate at the Department of American Literature, University of Łódź, writing a dissertation on the depiction of war's impact on artistic consciousness in American literature. His research interests include also the application of philosophy and religious studies to literary criticism. He is the laureate of the PAAS Award for the Best MA Thesis for 2016. [tazbir0@autograf.pl]

**Justyna Wierzchowska** is Assistant Professor at the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw. She is the author of *The Absolute and the Cold War: Discourses of Abstract Expressionism* (2011), editor with Ewa B. Luczak and Joanna Ziarkowska of *In Other Words: Dialogizing Postcoloniality, Race, and Ethnicity* (2012), and author of numerous academic articles published in Poland and abroad. Her research centers on relational and affective dimensions of subjectivity that are manifested in contemporary European and American art and popular culture. She teaches courses in philosophy, American art history, art theory, feminist art, and cultural studies. [j.wierzchowska@uw.edu.pl]

**Marek Wilczyński** is Professor of American Literature and American Studies at the University of Gdańsk and University of Warsaw (American Studies Center), author of *The Phantom and the Abyss: American Gothic Fiction and the Aesthetics of the Sublime* (1999) and many essays on American and Polish literature and co-author of *Historia literatury amerykańskiej XX wieku* [The History of Twentieth-Century American Literature] (2004). He specializes in the nineteenth-century culture and literature of New England. [marek.wilczynski@ug.edu.pl]

**Steffen Wöll** received his MA from Leipzig University. His research interests include historical imaginations and representations of national and cultural metanarratives, the literary construction of agency and Otherness, as well as religious and subcultural radicalism in the U.S. He is currently employed as a fellow at a Leipzig research center that examines processes of spatialization from various interdisciplinary perspectives and pursuing a PhD with the working title "Globe, Region, and Periphery: The Spatialization of the American West in Antebellum U.S. Literature." [steffen.woell@gmail.com]

