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Special Issue

Latinx Stories in the 21st Century
Edited by Ewa Antoszek



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INSTITUTE OF ENGLISH STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

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Latinx Stories in the 21st Century

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Warsaw 2024

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Table of Contents

ARTICLES

Special Issue

Latinx Stories in the 21st Century Edited by Ewa Antoszek

Ewa Antoszek

Introduction: What Is a Latinx Story in the 21st Century?..... 7

Esther Álvarez-López

Empathic Imagining and Solidarity in Latinx Transnational Migration Narratives..... 11

Cristina Martín Hernández

Of Borders and Bridges: Re-Imagining Hospitable Encounters Through a Feminist Border Perspective in Julia Álvarez's *Afterlife* 29

Ewa Antoszek

Crossing Multiple Borders: Reyna Grande's *A Dream Called Home. A Memoir* 51

Réka M. Cristian

Healing Processes in Aurora Levins Morales's *Remedios* and *Medicine Stories* 69

Grażyna Zygałło

"In Search of Their Mothers": The Ancestor in Cherrie Moraga's Memoir *Native Country of the Heart* 83

Ewa Łuczak

Domesticana rasquache: Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* 91

Richard D. Reitsma

A Queer Romance, Queering the National Romance: LatinX Narratives of Belonging from *The Squatter and the Don* to *Red, White, and Royal Blue* 103

Małgorzata Martynuska

Food and Crime in Raquel V. Reyes' Culinary Mystery *Mango, Mambo, and Murder: A Caribbean Kitchen Mystery* (2022) 121

Andrea O'Reilly Herrera

Curating *cubanía* Through the Lens of Visual Culture 139

Grzegorz Welizarowicz

Calafia and Ramona in the Garden of Freeways: Carlos Morton's *Los dorados* as the Wasteland of Memory and Alethic Frontier 151

Oleksandr Pronkevich	
“Theater on the Border” or Here Comes <i>Quixote Nuevo</i>	171

VARIA

Kastor Ornowski	
“Something queer in the cellar”: Reading H. P. Lovecraft’s Pickman Through a Queer Gothic Lens	181

Klara Szmańko	
Representation of Whiteness and Blackness in Maxine Hong Kingston’s <i>The Woman Warrior</i>	201

Izabella Kimak	
You Are What You Eat: Narrating Ethnic Identity Through Food in Polish Chicagoan Writing	211

Maja Piskadło	
“All That Is Good Is Nasty!”: Parliament-Funkadelic and the Grooving Bodies of Afrofuturistic Citizens	223

Atalie Gerhard	
(Anti-)Liberational Feminism in the Neo-Westerns <i>Harriet</i> (2019) versus <i>Terror on the Prairie</i> (2022)	241

REVIEW ESSAY

Grzegorz Welizarowicz	
A Dispatch from California: <i>Blackbox</i> at UC Riverside, Fall Season 2023	255

REVIEWS

Henry James, <i>Watch and Ward</i> , edited by Pierre A. Walker and Jay S. Spina (Mirosława Buchholtz)	265
--	-----

Peter Charles Hoffer, <i>The Brave New World: A History of Early America</i> (Zbigniew Mazur)	267
---	-----

Filip Lipiński, <i>Ameryka. Rewizje wizualnej mitologii Stanów Zjednoczonych</i> [America: Revising the Visual Mythology of the United States] (Justyna Wierzbowska)	270
--	-----

Piotr Skurowski, <i>Rasa, tożsamość, performans. Rasowość i jej konstrukcje w kulturze Stanów Zjednoczonych</i> [Race, Identity, Performance: Constructions of Race in US Culture] (Kamil Chrzczonowicz)	275
--	-----

Marcin Rychter and Mikołaj Wiśniewski, editors, <i>Kurt Vonnegut</i> (Jarosław Hetman)	280
Amy Bride, <i>Financial Gothic: Monsterized Capitalism in American Fiction</i> (Patrycja Antoszek)	283
Anna M. Brígido-Corachán, editor, <i>Indigenous Journeys, Transatlantic Perspectives: Relational Worlds in Contemporary Native American Literature</i> (Małgorzata Poks)	287
Jeff Kosseff, <i>Liar in a Crowded Theater: Freedom of Speech in a World of Misinformation</i> (Anna Bendrat)	292
Robert A. Segal, <i>Myth Analyzed</i> ; John Karabelas, <i>The Historical Value of Myths</i> (Tomasz Jacheć)	296
Contributors	301

What Is a Latinx¹ Story in the 21st Century?

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Frederick Luis Aldama and Christopher González in the introduction to *Latinx Studies: The Key Concepts* argue that “the shaping of US Latinxs [has taken place] with ties to Dominican, Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Caribbean, Central, South American, and African ancestry and heritage” (viii), thus emphasizing the diversity and heterogeneity of the group who, at the same time shares “common hemispheric experience (culture, language, and history) of those inhabiting the North, Central, and South Americas—as well as those with African origins and indigenous roots” (viii). It has to be noted from the onset that the four main pillars of the group in the U.S. include Chicanx, Cuban Americans, Dominican Americans, and Puerto Ricans, and each of these is represented in this volume to emphasize the nuances of their individual (his)stories. Even though they all share the experience of colonialism and oppression within the U.S., their experiences are at the same time very distinctive and it is important to acknowledge these distinct narratives to avoid essentialist overgeneralizations.

Aldama and González argue that to understand the complexity of Latinx history in the U.S. it is crucial to identify this interplay between common and separate stories, calling them “the different threads that make up a resplendent latinidad” (ix). Such a conclusion is reinforced by William A. Nericcio who claims that “With so many Latinx ancestral genealogies, we are like Magellan adrift in a sea of languages and place names, a diaspora whose history is complex and destiny off the charts” (in Aldama and González). As the largest ethnic minority group in the country (the so-called majority-minority), the Latinx population is not a monolith but a mosaic of diverse identities, languages, and traditions, each with its own unique

1 I use the term “Latinx” throughout the volume since it reflects the community’s diversity, encompassing individuals of Latin American descent who may identify as Latino, Latina, Hispanic, Chicano, Afro-Latino, Indigenous, and more. The term also acknowledges the spectrum of gender identities and cultural backgrounds within the community, fostering a broader understanding and appreciation of its complexity. Frederick Luis Aldama and Christopher González evoke the argument of Sandra L. Soto-Santiago, who insists that “‘The ‘x’, the ‘@’, and whatever may come after this, are an invitation to question language and those who impose those rules upon us” (p. 91). She concludes how the category Latinx “dis-mantle[s] what exists and invites us to re-think how individuals with different ideologies, perspectives, and identities are included or rejected from different spaces or communities through language” (p. 91)” (viii). I am aware of the new linguistic variants of the term already appearing, including “Latin@” or “Latine” and “Latine” forms. I have decided to adhere to the “Latinx” category as the one that started the grassroots linguistic revolution described by Soto-Santiago to reflect the complex identity of the group. At the same time, I am aware of the limitations that such a choice may entail. Terminology is oftentimes problematic in such cases, yet it is beyond the scope of this volume to include all the arguments pertaining to the discussions concerning various terms applied in the discourse.

story and journey. Consequently, as Paul Allatson argues, “[g]iven the historical moment and the widespread denigration of Latinx peoples across the US today, it is so important to understand and locate diverse Latinx perspectives in national, international, and global contexts” (in Aldama and González).

Historically, Latinx presence in the United States predates the country’s founding, which is often conveniently forgotten in official accounts of the country’s vicissitudes. Over the centuries, waves of immigrants from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Central America, and South America have contributed to the diverse outlook of the Latinx population in the U.S. As Aldama and González claim,

Different historical conditions have led to different moments and ways that Latinx communities have moved within the US and across the hemisphere... As the Latinx population has increased, so too has its socioeconomic diversity, yielding a sufficiently large number of urban educated, middle-class individuals who, in turn, yield a sufficiently large number of cultural producers, consumers, and interpreters: authors, filmmakers, intellectuals, readers, critics and academics, scientists, and the like. (x)

The two researchers both emphasize the multifaceted character of the group and point to the contribution of Latinx to the development of the U.S. in various areas. They further argue that “Latinxs have been actively and deeply transforming materially, culturally, and intellectually the everyday lived reality of peoples in the US” (Aldama and González x). Moreover, Aldama and González emphasize a correlation between the transformations of the community and their reflections in cultural productions, claiming that “Over the course of two centuries, Latinx cultural production has been closely linked to the history of Latinxs” (x). The development of cultural productions paralleled other changes taking place in the community, and it began to flourish “Once socioeconomic and political conditions began to change for some of the population of Latinxs [and it is] then [that] we see a growth in a series of Latinx cultural phenomena and Latinx audiences” (Aldama and González x).

The 21st century seems to usher in a new era in Latinx storytelling, with new authors, artists, and themes offering a window into the lives of Latinx communities in the U.S. At the same time it is interesting to observe how certain motifs recur in their altered versions, or how some of the new writings and cultural productions resonate with what may now be called the classics of Latinx culture. This volume, *Latinx Stories in the 21st Century*, seeks to explore the multiplicity of Latinx experience in the U.S. through a lens of critical analysis of works created by the representatives of the Latinx community in the U.S. Historically, such studies focused on Chicana productions, and this volume intentionally incorporates speakers of various Latinx voices. The issue brings together a collection of critical essays that examine a wide range of themes and topics that have been appearing in 21st-century Latinx cultural productions. The connective tissue of the examples analyzed in this study includes

themes of identity, borders, immigration, or storytelling. However, each analysis utilizes different frameworks and approaches, broadening the scope of the discussion on Latinx stories in the 21st century.

The volume opens with Esther Álvarez-López's contribution, "Imagining and Solidarity in Latinx Transnational Migration Narratives." In her article Álvarez-López examines a complex story behind migration, thus referring to one of the most discussed issues in the U.S. in the 21st century, namely that of the enduring challenges of Latinx immigration to the U.S. Analyzing representations of forced migration by Latinx authors of various groups, Álvarez-López argues for the need to implement as a response to migration "pedagogy of solidarity" that induces empathy, which in turn can catalyze social transformations. In the next chapter, Cristina Martín Hernández takes up the issue of migration, mobility, and identity, focusing on the complexities of hospitable encounters represented in Julia Álvarez's *Afterlife*. The titular borders and bridges that can either trigger such encounters or, conversely, prevent them, are analyzed through the framework of hospitality, border epistemology, and, in the author's words, "feminist theories of subjectivity, mobility, and hospitality." The question of border crossings is also undertaken in Ewa Antoszek's study of Reyna Grande's *A Dream Called Home. A Memoir*. In her contribution, Antoszek examines the literary representation of both literal and metaphorical crossings using the intersectional approach, along with the concepts of trauma, insidious trauma, hostipitality, and Leo R. Chavez's "Latino Threat Narrative." Réka M. Cristian in "Healing Processes in Aurora Levins Morales's *Remedios* and *Medicine Stories*" discusses another issue reappearing in Latinx stories, namely the combination of Indigenous wisdom and folklore. She examines *curanderas* as historians and postulates the connection of microhistories with grand narratives. Based on Levins Morales's two collections, Cristian also analyzes the importance of recovering memories and storytelling, which, she argues, can induce healing through writing, or, to be more precise, in that case re-writing Puerto Rican women's histories. Grażyna Zygałło's analysis, "'In Search of Their Mothers' – The Ancestor in Cherrie Moraga's Memoir *Native Country of the Heart*," also relates the importance of intergenerational storytelling. Zygałło explores that topic through the lens of the mother-daughter relationship described in Moraga's memoir, thus emphasizing the significance of recognition of women's stories for the Latinx community. In her analysis, Zygałło also recognizes the power of storytelling as a means of resistance and empowerment. Ewa Łuczak analyzes the concept of *domesticana rasquache* as represented in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*. This concept, as Łuczak argues, brings back to the picture empowered female characters who re-vision the domestic space and challenge the sacred-secular dualism to undermine the restrictions and limitations that relegate them to the margins in their communities. In the next chapter, Richard D. Reitsma examines romance tropes and their functions in Latinx narratives, including *The Squatter and the Don* and *Red, White, and Royal Blue*. Reitsma's comparative analysis juxtaposes Ruiz de Burton's novel from the 19th century with contemporary texts on belonging. He conducts his study of the evolution of Latinx narrative through the

lens of queer romance and argues for the potential of queer national romances to challenge homophobic nationalisms. Małgorzata Martynuska in her “Food and Crime in Raquel V. Reyes’ Culinary Mystery *Mango, Mambo, and Murder: A Caribbean Kitchen Mystery* (2022)” introduces a relatively new culinary mystery genre. Apart from that, in her analysis, Martynuska examines the importance of food for diasporic communities and the creation of diasporic identities. Andrea O’Reilly Herrera, in her essay “Curating *cubanía* Through the Lens of Visual Culture,” relates the process of curating a multimedia event, *Cuba Transnational* that gathered various artists of Cuban origins and demonstrated the versatility of expression of Cuban diasporic cultural productions. In addition, Herrera’s essay discusses the challenges related to the question of representation. Grzegorz Welizarowicz comes back to the topic of borders, frontiers, and indigeneity in the Chicanx theater. Welizarowicz conducts his study based on Carlos Morton’s *Los dorados*. Finally, Oleksandr Pronkevich in “«Theater on the Border» or Here comes *Quixote Nuevo*,” combines the issue of borders and theater in an interview with a Chicanx playwright, Octavio Solis. In this interview, the synthesis of versatile traditions constituting Chicanx culture is emphasized and reiterated.

The collection of these critical essays aims to demonstrate the significance of the versatility of Latinx voices that are more important than ever, contributing to the ever-evolving cultural, social, and political landscape of the U.S. It also intends to prove the necessity to recognize the ongoing contributions of the Latinx community to the transformations taking place in the U.S. Latinx narratives have long contributed to challenging stereotypes and confronting injustices. They have also been a vehicle for social change. In an era marked by political polarization and instability, Latinx stories continue to serve as a vital force for highlighting issues of equity, justice, identity, and representation.

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Aldama, Frederick, and Christopher González. *Latinx Studies: The Key Concepts*. Taylor & Francis, 2018.

Empathic Imagining and Solidarity in Latinx Transnational Migration Narratives

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Abstract: In the context of displacement and violence that characterizes migration, this article highlights the critical role of Latinx writers in responding to the immigration and refugee crises through literature that fosters empathy and solidarity, presenting new ways of encountering others and imagining human relationships as resistance to oppression and inequality. Drawing on a cognitive approach to literature, the analysis explores how literary texts can contribute to enhance social intelligence, promote justice, and inspire prosocial action by evoking empathy and correcting misconceptions. Additionally, it explores the strategies employed by writers to elicit emotional responses from readers to ultimately raise their awareness about immigration and encourage solidarity. In the last section, I examine two novels that exemplify a pedagogy of solidarity (Gaztambide-Fernández) and the transformative power of engaging in solidary relations. The article argues for the ethical and social value of literature in fostering a more just and inclusive society.

Keywords: immigration, empathy, emotion, cognitive schemas, solidarity

Donald Trump's presidency (Jan. 2017-Jan. 2021) stands as a testament to one of the most inhospitable eras in recent U.S. history, marked by an unprecedented flurry of executive actions on immigration—over four hundred between January 2017 and July 2020—resulting in a consistent violation of human rights and culminating in a humanitarian crisis along the U.S.-Mexico border.¹ The implementation of the infamous “big, beautiful” wall, coupled with Trump's radical nativist rhetoric² vilifying Latinx immigrants from Mexico and the Northern Triangle of Central America and attributing the nation's woes to them, as well as the enforcement of contentious anti-immigration laws, notably the ‘zero tolerance’ policy leading to the forcible separation of families,³ formed the cornerstone of his necropolitical

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- 1 The research conducted for the development of this article received financial support from the Spanish National R&D Programme, project PID2021-127052-B-I00 “World-travelling: Narratives of Solidarity and Coalition in Contemporary Writing and Performances,” and from the R&D Programme of the Principality of Asturias through the Research Group Intersections (IDI/2021/000101).
 - 2 Since December 2023, Trump, who is again the Republican presidential candidate for the 2024 election, has continued intensifying his focus on illegal immigration and escalating his anti-immigration rhetoric to help “stir debate”. In his speeches and rallies, he has attacked undocumented immigrants calling them “animals” and “not human”, remarking that they are “poisoning the blood of our country”, and warning that violence and chaos would consume America if he did not win on November 5.
 - 3 The Justice Department rescinded the Trump-era “zero tolerance” policy for immigration offenses. Attorney General Monty Wilkinson wrote in a memo sent to federal prosecutors that

(Mbembe) administration. This regime not only stripped immigrants of their dignity and humanity but also effectively issued a death sentence upon them, often resulting in hostility and even actual death at the nation's doorstep after fleeing violence in their own home countries.

Before Trump, Nobel Peace Prize laureate President Barack Obama (Jan. 2009-Jan. 2017) left a complex legacy on immigration. While he enacted the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy in 2012, offering hope to young undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children, his tenure also witnessed a surge in deportations, peaking at over four hundred thousand in 2012, despite a subsequent decrease by 2015. These actions earned Obama the moniker “deporter-in-chief” among pro-immigrant advocacy groups (Sakuma). In response to the crisis, the administration established the priority juvenile docket or “rocket dockets” in 2014 to expedite deportation proceedings for undocumented minors, drastically reducing their time to seek legal assistance from approximately 12 months to 21 days (Hocutt), as highlighted by Valeria Luiselli in *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (2017). She criticizes these expedited hearings, stating that minors lacked sufficient time to find competent legal representation, thereby increasing their deportation likelihood by 94 percent. For Luiselli, the priority juvenile docket “was the government’s coldest, cruelest possible answer to the arrival of refugee children. Ethically,” she declares, “that answer was more than questionable” (41).

Human rights organizations decried the mistreatment of immigrants and refugees, including children, who were detained by the Border Patrol and held in centers popularly known as iceboxes, jail-like border facilities where they lacked contact with family members, regular access to showers, clean clothes, or proper beds (Human Rights Watch). However, nonprofit organizations, institutions, and concerned individuals mobilized to provide support through solidary actions, offering essential services such as shelter, medical care, and (like Luiselli herself) translation services, while pro bono lawyers volunteered to offer legal advice or represent undocumented immigrants and unaccompanied minors before the court to mitigate the devastating consequences of governmental policies, including deportation, family separation, and desert deaths. All of them have worked to affirm human dignity, promote social justice, and defend the rights of all refugees and immigrants, regardless of their actual status.

The immigration policies of the last decade prompted a surge in literary works across various genres, many targeting young adult audiences, challenging anti-immigration sentiments by providing nuanced perspectives. Latinx writers, such as Francisco Cantú (*The Line Becomes a River*, 2018), a former Border Patrol agent, and Valeria Luiselli (*Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*, 2017; *Lost Children Archive*, 2019), who volunteered as an interpreter in the New York immigration court after the so-called “immigration crisis” or “refugee crisis,” draw on their own experiences to shed light on the violence of the system and the

the policy “was inconsistent with the Department’s longstanding principle that we exercise judgment and make individualized assessments in criminal cases. Today’s action restores to prosecutors their traditional discretion to make charging decisions based on a careful review of the particular facts and circumstances of individual immigration cases” (Diaz).

dehumanization of immigrants, minors included, who are victims of what Cantú refers to as “the thing that crushes” (222). Other authors, such as Javier Zamora in his memoir *Solito* (2022), have written compelling narratives about their own perilous journey north and the solidarity among travelers, without which survival would be impossible. Still others, like Jenny Torres Sanchez (*We Are Not from Here*, 2020), Paola Mendoza and Abby Sher (*Sanctuary*, 2020), and Isabel Allende (*The Wind Knows My Name*, 2023), to name a few, have composed realistic, poignant novels based either on true stories or on their knowledge about the issue and the testimonies of the people involved, plunging the reader head-on into the immigrants’ precarious lives and dramatic experiences, their hardships, desperation, and fears, but also their determination, endurance, and hopes: “I have heard so many stories of loss and suffering,” writes Allende in the Author’s Note, “but also so many of courage, solidarity, and resilience!” (255).

This article explores solidarity in Latinx fiction within the grim context of this ongoing humanitarian crisis, aiming to investigate how Latinx writers have responded to the urgency of the immigration issue—akin to their responses in earlier hardships⁴—engaging in “a mission of imagination, inclusion, sympathy, and voice” (Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice* 119). It delves into the deployment of solidarity in these literary texts and addresses an age-old debate: can literature make us more empathic and, therefore, more solidary? Does it possess social as well as aesthetic value and thus can it contribute to public life? As Julia Álvarez would put it in *Afterlife*, “literature has to pull its weight in the real world or else it’s of no use to us” (21). Drawing largely on Mark Bracher’s cognitive approach to literature—with the positivist idea that exposure to literary texts may change people’s cognitive schemas, emotions, and behavior—the analysis examines Latinx transnational (im)migration narratives and their empathic potential. Additionally, it explores the strategies employed by writers to evoke emotional responses from readers, ultimately aiming to raise awareness about immigration and encourage solidarity and prosocial action.

Reading, Ethics, and Empathic Imagining

In the context of migration marked by displacement and violence, literature faces the dual challenge and opportunity of creatively presenting novel approaches

4 There is an array of books about Latinx transnational migration prior to the Trump era, when migration was already a recourse for desperate Mexican and Central American people who left behind a life and a family, fleeing poverty, hunger, gender violence, or violence-ridden states, enticed by the prospects of a better life in the United States. Graciela Limón’s *The River Flows North* (2009) illustrates these causes through the stories told by her characters on their journey north; the consequences of the separation from parents who migrate to ‘the other side’ and leave their children behind are partly detailed in Ana Castillo’s *The Guardians* (2007), Reyna Grande’s memoir *The Distance Between Us* (2012), and the non-fictional *Enrique’s Journey: The Story of a Boy’s Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother* (2014/2006), by Sonia Nazario, to name a few, where families, above all children, pay a high emotional toll for the loss of mothers and fathers to migration and the ensuing upheaval in their lives.

to encountering others and envisioning forms of human relationality that resist oppression and inequalities. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum advocates for literature's role in fostering what she terms "judicious spectatorship," asserting that fiction reading enhances social intelligence and cognitive empathy, thereby becoming "an essential part of both the theory and practice of citizenship" (*Poetic Justice* 52). Numerous scholars have delved into literature's capacity to nurture empathy, promote justice, and spur social change (Bracher; Duncan et al.; Jurecic; Wrighton). However, some questions arise: does literature genuinely broaden empathy toward others and does textual interpretation contribute to societal change? As literature readers, we often perceive that our deep engagement with narrative fiction sensitizes us to understanding others, regardless of differences. Immersed in their worlds, we cultivate sympathy and compassion as we encounter their stories, for after all, as Antonia Vega, the protagonist of *Afterlife*, asserts, "Art reminds us that we're all connected" (227).

Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández proposes a decolonizing "pedagogy of solidarity" that is relational, transitive, and creative, serving as a "strategy for recasting not only human relations but also the very notion of what it means to be human" (41). Literature, as a cultural practice, aptly engages individuals' imaginative capacities to redefine their existence, fostering "the possibility of new ways of making, feeling, creating, and loving" (58), thereby facilitating novel modes of thinking and knowing. John Wrighton advocates for a socially responsible textual ethics, suggesting that literary criticism holds societal value beyond its aesthetic investigations (151), framing fiction reading as ethical engagement with the text and establishing structural relations between self and other in language (150). Martha Nussbaum, on her part, contends that reading fiction enables individuals to develop the cognitive and emotional faculties necessary for interpersonal moments, facilitating moral deliberations through "the narrative imagination" (*Not for Profit* 95). In her view, literary works serve as valuable guides "to correct response" (*Poetic Justice* 78), offering ethical instructions for civil responsibility. Thus, literature can expand readers' understanding of the human experience, allowing them to perceive and imagine its complexity, and develop or enhance their capacity for "empathic imagining" (*Poetic Justice* xvi, 68): "The ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person," to empathize with another's emotions, and, through their inclusion, "to address particular blind spots" (*Not for Profit* 108). Similarly, Wrighton argues that it is "in the identification and mirror alignment of subjectivities that the reader enters into an exploration of morality that is character building" (156).

Despite relatively high levels of agreement among readers, educators, and philosophers regarding literature's potential for ethical and empathic impact, these assumptions have lacked substantial empirical backing. Until recently, the belief that reading can effectively change behavior and beliefs may have been more wishful thinking than a conclusion grounded in evidence. However, advancements in neuroscience, particularly the study of mirror neurons, have provided significant insights into the mechanisms underlying empathy and its connection to literature.

Mirror neurons, first identified by Italian brain scientists in the 1990s, activate when individuals observe others' actions or emotions, enabling a form of automatic inner imitation that facilitates understanding and attunement to their feelings (Boyd, in Duncan et al. 246). Neuroimaging experiments, such as functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), have further corroborated these findings, demonstrating similar brain activation patterns when individuals observe or read about movements or emotions, suggesting a neural basis for empathic responses (246). Zanna Clay and Marco Iacoboni conclude that "the description of actions and emotions that fictional characters perform and experience makes us empathize with them through a simulation-based form of empathy that is enabled by neural mechanisms of mirroring," which likely underlies, they say, "the great satisfaction people take from reading fictional literature" (317-18).

These insights from neuroscience and psychology provide empirical support for the relationship between literature and empathy. Building on these findings, scholars like Suzanne Keen and Mark Bracher have explored the role of empathy in literature and its impact on cognitive and affective processes. Keen proposes that narrative empathy involves both affective and cognitive elements, as texts evoke both emotional responses and intellectual engagement (213). Bracher, on the other hand, contends that persistent injustice stems not just from flawed beliefs and biased perceptions, but due to lack of emotional change ("Teaching" 469). He further suggests that emotion, as a function of cognition, can be trained or (re)educated to replace cognitive schemas that contribute to social injustice (470).

Once the scientific correlation between fiction reading and empathy has been established, it becomes plausible to consider literature's potential to catalyze societal transformation. If literature can indeed (re)educate the emotional underpinnings of empathy, fiction readers may transcend their indifference to others' suffering, cultivate compassion, and consequently engage in solidarity, a vital component of social justice. If literature can at least "disarm readers of some of the protective layers of cautious reasoning that may inhibit empathy in the real world" (Keen 213), what strategies and techniques are most effective in evoking empathetic responses from readers? Suzanne Keen suggests that narrative theorists, novel critics, reading specialists, and discourse processing experts have identified a limited set of narrative techniques—such as first-person narration and the portrayal of characters' inner thoughts and emotions—as devices that facilitate character identification, enhance empathetic experiences, broaden readers' perspectives, alter their attitudes, and potentially predispose them to altruism (213).

Latinx migration narratives frequently employ first-person narration to foster identification and empathy. Even when using an omniscient narrator, these narratives often include sections expressed entirely through the voices of the immigrants themselves, offering readers an unfiltered glimpse into their lived experiences. First-person narratives play a crucial role in facilitating perspective-taking, where readers adopt the viewpoint of fictional characters—a significant

aspect of narrative engagement (Coplan 141). Graciela Limón's *The River Flows North* (2009), a multi-protagonist narrative, allows immigrant characters to tell their stories in alternating chapters, alongside sections written in the third person about their taxing journey to the border. Similarly, in Allende's *The Wind Knows My Name* (2023), Salvadoran Anita Díaz narrates her trauma as a child, detailing her journey north, separation from her mother at the border, and subsequent harrowing experiences in foster homes. By presenting the character's perspective, readers are prompted to imagine themselves in similar circumstances: how they would react if they were in that situation as the Other, "with the Other's subjectivity (psychological needs, deficiencies, vulnerabilities, capacities, desires, defenses, etc.)" (Bracher, "How to Teach" 378). Like other literary works, Latinx narratives facilitate identification by inviting readers to empathize with immigrants, take up their psychological perspectives, and, to some extent, vicariously experience their challenges.

A complementary strategy to first-person narration is to tap into readers' emotions, recognizing that feelings such as fear, anger, indignation, joy, grief, and hope, when combined with cognition, can elicit empathy and inspire appropriate action. Writers utilize a blend of emotive and reflective content (Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* 7) to offer a nuanced understanding of immigrants' circumstances and provoke emotional responses, as does Francisco Cantú in *The Line Becomes a River* (2018), where he allocates the final section of the narrative to José Martínez, his undocumented friend, allowing him to articulate in his own voice the reasons behind his victimization by the system: he is arrested and incarcerated upon returning from Mexico, where he journeyed to be with his dying mother: "I shouldn't have left the U.S., it's true. I shouldn't have left my family, but I couldn't live without going to see my mother. I remember thinking to myself, if my mother is dying and I have the ability to be by her side, I must do it. It was not a choice for me, there was no other way. And that's why I'm here, because I had too much love for my mother" (238). José recounts his relentless attempts to cross the border after being deported and apprehended multiple times. Despite the perils, he persists: "I have to cross, I have to arrive on the other side" (241), driven by his longing to reunite with his family—his wife and three sons—who are left to fend for themselves while he is imprisoned. Such emotions, particularly love for family, strike a chord with readers, evoking empathy as they grasp the character's motivations and share in the same (common) emotions, which are ultimately what make us universally human.

Cognitive Empathy: Dismantling Faulty Schemas

Both Mark Bracher and Martha Nussbaum concur that emotions are integral to the literary imagination and public rationality, playing a valuable yet complex role. However, they also emphasize the importance of cognition in modeling the rational (moral) standpoint and worldview. Considering the assumption that

reading fiction enhances social intelligence, and accepting cognitive empathy as true at a fundamental level, how can Latinx literature effectively promote empathic identification with immigrant characters, inspiring readers to understand their human circumstances and motivating them to enact change?

According to Bracher, faulty knowledge and beliefs significantly contribute to social injustice (“Schema Criticism” 85). Thus, the initial step toward altering cognitive schemas perpetuating erroneous perceptions, emotions, and behaviors, and fostering accurate, more precise appraisals, is to replace inaccurate factual knowledge with corrective information. Latinx transnational migration narratives, particularly those from the Trump era, challenge biased notions about immigrants propagated through political and media discourse. In Paola Mendoza and Abby Sher’s dystopian novel *Sanctuary* (2020), the protagonist, 16-year-old Colombian Vali Gonzalez, refers to these prejudiced assumptions encapsulated in anti-immigrant rhetoric that significantly influence people’s judgment and information-processing routines—and consequently, emotions:

When we lived in Imperial Beach, every day there were new Presidential proclamations about how ‘illegals’ were trying to ransack and ravage the country. The economy was in danger. The land was in danger. Everybody’s taxes had to triple because there were evil foreigners lurking everywhere, ready to pounce on innocent Americans and take everything they’d worked so hard to achieve. (33)

The immigrant is scapegoated for society’s ills and held responsible for people’s insecurities, economic crises, or societal issues. Latinx writers counter these distortions by substituting them with marginalized yet essential information, enabling readers to reassess their assumptions and form more positive appraisals about immigrants. By providing explicit corrective information and evoking empathy, literature can serve as the core of an effective social justice pedagogy: perceiving the Other’s suffering, recognizing their common humanity, understanding their innocence, and acknowledging that they do not deserve their suffering because it is beyond their control (Bracher, “Teaching” 370). These tasks, for which literature is uniquely qualified, may contribute through multiple iterations, demonstrated with numerous examples, to “incrementally reverse readers’ habitual assumptions and perceptions about extratextual subalterns” (“How to Teach” 371). Similarly, authors promote “critical judgment” (Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice* 76) by providing necessary information and criteria that are not “arbitrary or capricious” (87) to dismantle stereotypes fueling group hatred, fostering habits of mind conducive to social equality.

Works like *The Line Becomes a River* illustrate the type of knowledge that is typically absent from dominant discourses or based on faulty assumptions. Cantú interweaves references to books, articles, reports, films, and radio, as well as quotes from various works and authors with his own recollections of his time in the Border Patrol workforce. These allusions to history, philosophy, literature, language, and

different scholars and writers are crucial for a better understanding of the border from multiple perspectives; they also serve as a much-needed corrective to the ill-informed and deceitful notions that typically shape border issues, including immigration. Valeria Luiselli employs similar devices in *Lost Children Archive* (2019), where she utilizes archival information to support the varied yet interconnected topics she addresses. The family that serves as the protagonist of her story travels to the southern border from New York City with their car filled with boxes containing books, notes, clippings, facsimiles, maps, and even migrant mortality reports. These serve as background sources for the parents' research and their—and by extension, readers'—resultant insights into the issue of undocumented children coming from Central America. Similarly, in *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (2017), Luiselli recounts her personal experience as an interpreter for undocumented children in the immigration court in New York after the peak of the immigrant and refugee crisis in the summer of 2014, offering insights from inside the system itself, laying bare the causes that compel families to send their children on such risky journeys through different countries and across the U.S.-Mexico border, usually alone—causes and consequences that Americans deliberately ignore or are unwilling to learn about. Thus, aphasia seems to characterize the debate around the matter of migrants/refugees, which “has persistently and cynically overlooked the causes of the exodus,” leading to the ingrained belief that migration is the problem of “the southern barbarians,” and that “the northern civilization” feels therefore “exempt from offering any solution” (85). Luiselli informs readers that the causes include “extreme violence, persecution and coercion by gangs, mental and physical abuse, forced labor, neglect, abandonment. It is not even the American Dream that they pursue, but rather the more modest aspiration to wake up from the nightmare into which they were born” (12-13).

This voluntary ignorance characterizes the national narrative, absolving the United States of accountability for its role in creating the conditions that force migration from Central America. In these countries, military-led governments ruthlessly exterminated left-wing opposition groups, such as the guerrilla group Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front in El Salvador, with the United States as their primary allies. Luiselli asserts that both the Carter and Reagan administrations “funded and provided military resources to the [Salvadoran] government that massacred so many and led many others to exile. Around one-fifth of the population of El Salvador fled” and ended up as political refugees in the United States (46). She concludes that it is evident in the mess that has unfolded in this part of the American hemisphere that “until all the governments involved—the American, Mexican, Salvadoran, Honduran, and Guatemalan governments, at least—acknowledge their shared accountability in the roots and causes of the children's exodus, solutions to the crisis will be impossible” (46).

Isabel Allende shares Luiselli's view about the responsibility—and lack of accountability—of the American government for the situation in these countries. In *The Wind Knows My Name* (2023), immigration activist and social worker Selena

Durán explains how during the Cold War the United States attempted to end all leftist movements in Central and South America “by arming, indoctrinating, and training brutal militaries; they knowingly financed government repression” that they justified as the “expansion of democracy,” but resulted in just the opposite: “The U.S. government overthrew democratically elected leaders and imposed vicious dictators; the only thing they were actually defending was the business interests of American companies and the super wealthy” (87). Salvadoran character Leticia Cordero’s family was killed in the El Mozote massacre, which occurred in December 1981, when she was only a child. After losing everything and everyone except her father, they both flee to the North trying to find a better life and secure a safer future for themselves. Likewise, in *Solito* (2022) readers learn that Javier Zamora’s parents’ migrations were also caused “by the United States-funded Salvadoran Civil War (1980-1992)” (385).

Graciela Limón grants her characters in *The River Flows North* the possibility to reveal the reasons that drive them to embark on their migration journeys. Besides state-led violence, they are usually motivated by the urgency to find work, feed their families, and escape gender violence. Doña Encarnación Padilla, one of the migrants making their journey to the border, recounts how, as she headed north, she witnessed hardship everywhere: the children were hungry, and people were forced to abandon families and homes due to the scarcity of work in their part of Mexico. “What else could be done?”, she asks rhetorically (100). Celia Vega’s experience mirrors that of the other migrants. When her husband was unable to support the family, she herself tried to find work but there were too many people and hardly any jobs: “Those were bitter times for all of us, confusing most of us, enraging others, especially since few could explain why such a thing was happening” (141). She blames the “greedy politicians” who were “pulling strings to fill up their pockets” (141). Brothers Borrego and Nicanor Osuna understand that people might wonder what makes migrants try to cross the border repeatedly “even in the face of humiliations, hunger, anger, and stupid decisions, but no one stops to think that what we left behind was even worse” (159). Limón individualizes the characters, generating empathetic imagining and ensuring that the dehumanizing portrayal so characteristic of dominant discourse is no longer sustainable. Readers learn to imaginatively see the world, at least for a time, through the eyes of the migrants to then reflect on the meaning of what they have read.

In case the voices of the migrants alone are not sufficient to unveil the reality concealed from the rest of the world, Valeria Luiselli and Francisco Cantú complement these voices with a section of Works Cited where they include various texts and other non-textual sources that form the archive-bibliography supporting their works. According to Luiselli, this archive “is both an inherent and visible part of the central narrative,” and her references to sources function as “intralinear markers that point to the many voices in the conversation that the book sustains with the past” (*Lost Children* 381). On his part, Cantú adds a ‘Further Reading’ section that includes works, both fiction and non-fiction, addressing immigration

and the pervasive violence on the borderlands. The information provided by the authors may serve as cognitive scripts, in Bracher's terms ("How to Teach" 379), ultimately aiming to correct readers' faulty, biased knowledge and replace their current schemas with more adequate ones. Additionally, they may contribute to improving readers' perceptions and judgments of immigrants by fostering empathy and sympathy-entailing appraisals (375, 376) instead of harmful assessments of the Other. In short, they may potentially enhance readers' cognitive and affective social intelligence (Duncan et al. 255), which may eventually lead them to support more just and effective policies and actions. Martha Nussbaum argues that "Novel-reading will not give us the whole story about social justice, but it can be a bridge both to a vision of justice and to the social enactment of that vision" (*Poetic Justice* 12). In this regard, Latinx writers provide that vision of justice, contributing to training readers in alternative, less biased information-processing routines and thus promoting more adequate responses to people who are different from themselves.

Pedagogy of Solidarity:
***The Wind Knows My Name* (2023) and *Afterlife* (2020)**

Gloria Anzaldúa's insights in her oeuvre underscore the intricate relationship between self-change and social justice actions, positing them as mutually interdependent (Keating 59). She emphasizes that compassion is a catalyst for transformation (Anzaldúa 569), suggesting an interconnectedness among compassion (empathy), self-change, and social transformation. Similarly, solidarity is believed to possess transformative power (Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, "Collective; Featherstone; Gaztambide-Fernández), fostering multiple transformations within solidary relations. While social transformation is evident, personal transformation also holds significance, shaping individual selves within communal contexts, so that relations of solidarity ultimately "affect what it means to *be* as an individual in community with others. Something fundamental about how one exists in the world, with others, and with oneself—opening new possibilities and foreclosing others—is embraced in the solidary relation" (Scholz, "Collective" 185; emphasis in original). Furthermore, Gaztambide-Fernández claims that it is in and through relationships that the "I" is constituted, that we are made as subjects: "There is no 'I' outside of 'we' and there is no 'we' without a 'they'" (52). Therefore, he posits that solidarity involves actions taken in relationship to others, actions that affect or modify not only the other person but also the one who acts. The Spanish verb "*solidarizarse*," *to solidarize (oneself) with*, which is transitive in this language and therefore needs a direct object—a person the subject performs an action upon—to complete it, best encapsulates to him the true meaning of entering a solidary relation with others. This form, with the particle *-se* (i.e., *solidarizar-se*) as a reflexive pronoun linking the action of the verb to the subject, represents the middle voice, "in which the action of the verb is not only directed to another, but also modifies the subject that takes the action" (54).

Latinx migration narratives partly function as a pedagogy of solidarity, illustrating these solidary relations—the being-with, the deliberate commitment to others—and their transformative potential. Authors portray characters initially self-oriented but transformed upon engaging with others in solidary relations. In Isabel Allende's *The Wind Knows My Name*, Frank Angileri and Samuel Adler exemplify this transformation. Angileri, hailed as “the favorite” among his colleagues at the San Francisco-based law firm Larson, Montaigne & Lambert, boasts a promising future and holds a distinctive position with his employers. Meanwhile, social worker Selena Durán seeks support from the firm for the Magnolia Project for refugees and immigrants, which the associates are willing to provide as part of a campaign aimed at improving the firm's image, since it had long held a reputation for defending criminals who were “clearly guilty but prepared to pay a fortune to get off the hook” (69). When Selena meets Frank, he is precisely working on a case that involves a business magnate accused of trafficking minors, embezzlement of funds, and money laundering. In her talk to the firm's employees, she endeavors to dispel misconceptions and faulty assumptions about Latinx immigration. She thereby informs them about Central American families making the dangerous journey to the U.S. border; about the border guards and armed vigilantes going out to hunt down the migrants as if they were animals; about the detention centers or iceboxes, where these people are subjected to freezing temperatures, and about “heartrending scenes of border agents dragging screaming children away as their mothers and fathers pleaded desperately” (70).

Upon learning these distressing facts, Angileri experiences a wave of embarrassment for not having paid more attention “to the tragic fiasco playing out at the border” (70). To everyone's surprise, he earnestly asks how he can contribute. In this scenario, Angileri stands in for the reader, echoing Judith Butler's notion of solidarity, which requires “persistence and an openness to connection precisely where it is not expected” (18). She emphasizes that while we do not necessarily need to fully identify with one another, it is crucial to converge “at the site of our disidentification” (18), as an unexpected coming together of disparate individuals. Driven by a shared commitment to combat injustice, Angileri and a woman colleague volunteer their time as pro bono lawyers, despite their differing backgrounds: while they may not initially fully identify with the migrants' experiences, they soon feel a sense of empathy and a duty to combat injustice. Their collective action underscores a united front against inequality, injustice, and oppressive systems, embodying a call to disidentify with structures perpetuating harm.

Although the attorneys acknowledge their lack of expertise in immigration law, the social worker-activist persuades them that while a strong legal argument is essential, “it was even more important to elicit emotion” (Allende 77). Selena's rationale works very similarly in literature: for the narrative to be appealing to readers (i.e., to make a strong case), it must not only work aesthetically—in terms of plot, structure, language, characters, events, etc.—but also fundamentally at the level of emotions. It must first make them feel, and then move them in such a way

as to make them reflect (ethically) upon what they encounter in the text. It must also ideally motivate them to modify and act upon their (biased) schemas, concern themselves with the good of other people, and ultimately prompt them to engage in solidary relations to achieve social justice.

In this transformative journey, Frank begins to work on his first case for the Magnolia Project: Anita Díaz, a seven-year-old Salvadoran partially blind girl, has ridden on the infamous Beast on her way to the U.S. border, where she has been separated from her mother and institutionalized in inadequate residential youth homes and foster homes. The lawyer's commitment to finding Anita's mother, which helps him experience first-hand the reality of immigration, is consistent with Sally Scholz's assertion that solidarity prompts a shift in perspective, reorienting one's priorities (2024, 188); as a result, his mission alters drastically his ethics, mindset, and main concerns, as well as his promising future, which he now envisions away from Lambert and associates. In this and other Latinx migration narratives, each appeal of one character to another for perspective taking, as Selena does with Frank, is also an appeal to the reader to engage in this process, and ultimately an appeal to model their behavior. Like Frank, readers may feel called upon to act by challenging the existing situation and, in whatever small scale possible, changing it, rather than just being unconcerned witnesses of injustices and not doing anything about them.

Samuel Adler, like Anita, is also an immigrant. However, his experience, shaped by historical tragedies and personal loss, is different in terms of time and place, yet quite similar in the innermost personal aspects. Following the Night of Broken Glass in Austria on November 9, 1938, where his father fell victim to the Nazis and his mother struggled to protect him, Samuel is evacuated on a Kindertransport train to England, where he finds refuge. Despite escaping immediate danger, the trauma of separation from his parents and subsequent orphanhood haunts him throughout his life. Upon resettling in the United States and marrying Nadine, a compassionate and altruistic artist, Samuel remains emotionally distant, unable to reconcile his solitary, reserved upbringing with Nadine's commitment to solidarity and harboring at their home people who needed a temporary shelter. Unbeknownst to him until her passing, Nadine had also covertly supported immigrants from Guatemala and El Salvador through her artwork and the Magnolia Project that she had founded for that purpose, a legacy that Selena takes up and continues years later.

Initially resistant to Nadine's inclusive ethos, Samuel's perspective shifts during the COVID-19 lockdown when he forms a bond with Leticia Cordero, a Salvadoran woman who works for him and who is apparently the only relative of Anita in the United States. Leticia and Samuel's small, enclosed world will be transformed forever when the latter jumps up at the opportunity of welcoming Anita into their home: "Whether she was a relative or not, it didn't matter," he tried to persuade a more reluctant Leticia. "Fate had presented them with the opportunity to do something for her and it would be unforgivable to sit comfortably by without doing anything" (202). This act of solidarity helps Samuel atone for what he calls his past "sin of indifference" (231), an indifference rooted in a failure of identification

and recognition that ultimately undermines connection (Scholz, “Collective” 192). Thus, despite the painful memories evoked in him by Anita, he embraces a newfound sense of responsibility towards her, and through his solidary relation undergoes a profound personal transformation, not just because “the adoption of moral obligations ... has the potential to radically affect one’s lifestyle and perhaps even all other significant choices” (Scholz, *Political Solidarity* 77), but because the active orientation toward others, the commitment to a cause, also transforms subjectivity: Samuel’s solidarity, his ethical and human concern for the girl’s well-being, changes Anita’s life as well as his own, while his affection for her reinvigorates his will to live. Together, the three become a family: “In the months that followed, Samuel and Leticia became grandfather and aunt to Anita Díaz, embracing their new roles so fully that they could hardly remember what their lives had been like before her arrival” (211). Samuel helps to gradually heal Anita’s trauma, teaches her English and music, and makes provisions for her future: the house that had been a safe harbor for so many people in his wife’s lifetime will remain in a trust to support Anita when he is no longer there, thus keeping the category of a haven for people in need that it had held for Nadine from the very beginning.

However, not everyone responds to solidarity as readily as Frank and Samuel do with Anita. In Julia Alvarez’s *Afterlife* (2020), Antonia Vega, a Dominican American widow, retired teacher, and “reluctant activist” (18, 103) initially grapples with personal dragons—as she refers to them—that hinder her from being fully concerned with other people’s problems. Despite feeling overwhelmed by her own challenges—the recent death of her husband and the disappearance and eventual suicide of her sister—Antonia is confronted with the plight of Mario, an undocumented immigrant who works for her neighbor on a Vermont farm and who soon becomes one of these ‘dragons’: Mario needs money to help his *novia* (girlfriend) Estela, who has crossed the border but has encountered some problems with being released. The *coyotes* (smugglers) have refused to put her on a bus to her destination until they get more money, which Mario does not have. With “let sleeping dogs lie for now” (31) or “she’d rather pass on this heavy load” (106), she tries to convince herself that she would rather not get involved, that she needs to focus inwardly, put herself first. Antonia blames America’s individualism or what she calls the mantra of the First World, which she epitomizes in aircraft procedures in case of an emergency: “Put your oxygen mask on first” (48). And that is what she does while she keeps repeating the question, “Who is the most important one?”—which gives title to chapter 6 and closes it— (119, 141, 166), and the same self-interested answer comes up: “She has already decided: *she* is the most important one” (117; emphasis in original).

Alvarez employs free indirect speech as a technique that enables readers to partake directly of Antonia’s mental quandaries and constant pangs of guilt, which make her wonder what her lack of involvement and need for no complications will do over time to her sense of compassion (131). Estela’s situation evokes maternal instincts in Antonia and forces her to confront ethical dilemmas: “*What is the right thing to do?*” (234, 235; italics in original). The truth is that these immigrants’ plight

ultimately contextualizes Antonia's own challenges, putting "her puny sorrows (and joys) in perspective" (227), so much so that she eventually realizes that she must look her dragons in the eye and act. Thus, she ends up sheltering the pregnant Estela in her home, arranging medical assistance for the delivery of the young immigrant woman's baby, risking arrest for harboring and transporting undocumented immigrants, and paving the way for Mario and Estela's future by financing the equipment repair shop that he will be opening back home and her going back to school to be a "norsa" (243). Through her solidary relation with Mario and Estela, Antonia acknowledges that there is something bigger than oneself, which allows her "to let go of the desire to secure one's own person" and admit that her own "preservation is not the central focus" (Scholz, "Collective" 188). Embracing solidarity not only changes the lives of Mario and Estela, but also has a transformative impact on Antonia, catalyzing her personal growth: she finds healing and purpose in helping others, rebuilds the shattered pieces of herself following her husband's and sister's deaths, and ultimately appeases her dragons.

Similarly to Samuel in *The Wind Knows My Name*, the protagonist of Álvarez's *Afterlife* is presented as a character who may well stand in for the reluctant reader: she first shies away from commitment to solidary relations, putting herself and her own troubles first, but eventually comes to understand that she is aligned "to a world larger than her own" (227) and that her peace of mind is intricately linked to "her intense need to get not just the words but the world right" (51). Frank, Samuel, and Antonia function as Nussbaum's 'judicious spectator,' a figure "whose judgments and responses are intended to provide a paradigm of public rationality (whether for the reader or for the citizen) ... The spectator must ... endeavor, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer" (*Poetic Justice* 73). By projecting themselves into the situation and the skin of the Other, they are appealing to the reader to engage in this process as well.

Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández argues that a pedagogy of solidarity must transcend passivity, emphasizing its nature as praxis, since it is not sufficient to enter "into a state of solidarity—to be in solidarity—which might suggest feelings towards, but actions taken in relationship to someone" (54). Thus, mere solidarity, understood as a static state, falls short, as it requires action-oriented engagement, not just emotional connection. Gaztambide-Fernández highlights that to think of solidarity as transitive "means to underscore that it demands that we act in the world" (55). This perspective aligns with Cantú's narrative in *The Line Becomes a River*, where the author urges readers to move beyond empathy towards proactive, prosocial involvement. The last two pages, entitled 'Get Involved,' provide a list of organizations with advocacy programs in the borderlands, many of which offer volunteer opportunities for those who, perhaps after reading his narrative, wish to change the current necropolitical order by helping advance initiatives that protect and assist immigrants, promote human rights, and work toward racial and economic justice. Cantú cites Susan Sontag, asserting that compassion "is an unstable emotion.

It needs to be translated into action, or it withers” (266). Similarly, he argues that empathy is useless unless it “compels us to act in a way that might someday improve” these people’s situation (267). Empathy, then, needs to be translated into action, for oppressive policies and structures “will remain in place until we push firmly against them, demanding that they be abandoned or remade” (266-67).

In response to his own call to action, Cantú collaborates with an American lawyer and with the employer of his deported and later incarcerated friend José Martínez to help the prisoner and his family through his various deportation processes, supporting them with solidary actions at all levels. Activist Paola Mendoza and author Abby Sher echo this sentiment in *Sanctuary*. They claim that this novel “is a call to action” (*La Jeunesse*) and therefore highlight the insufficiency of rhetoric and slogans in the face of oppression. After escaping from the Deportment Force and upon finding safety in California, which has seceded and become a sanctuary state for undocumented immigrants, Vali Gonzalez rejects passive acceptance, advocating for active engagement: “I can’t just make up this new life here when Tomas is bobbing in that marsh... I can’t memorize algebra rules when people are being stuffed into meat trucks or chained together by the neck” (300). Vali’s call for praxis underscores the imperative of concrete action in the fight against systemic injustices.

Akin to Mendoza and Sher, Valeria Luiselli presents characters who respond actively to the challenges faced by immigrants and undocumented children. Luiselli asserts that “being aware of what is happening in our era and choosing to do nothing about it has become unacceptable. Because we cannot allow ourselves to go on normalizing horror and violence” (*Tell Me* 30). Inspired by Luiselli’s perspective, her students at Hofstra University establish the Teenage Immigrant Integration Association (TIIA). Their inaugural public action coincides with the first presidential debate on September 26, 2016. The TIIA students are resolute in their mission to transform emotional capital—“the rage, sadness, and frustration produced by certain social circumstances”—into political capital: “Well, we know how to do it now. We don’t want to be voluntourists in our own town anymore. We want to do something that matters” (*Tell Me* 94), one of the students declares. As they demonstrate, solidarity “is both a personal commitment and a social commitment” (Scholz, *Political Solidarity* 75), a commitment “to form relations to a cause with others and work with these others to achieve the end that will bring about wider social change” (78). Transitioning from empathy and compassion to collective action, the TIIA students engage in a spectrum of activities aimed at promoting social change: from preparing speeches, carrying out protests on campus, and organizing civil rights talks, to teaching English to the refugees or arranging skateboarding classes and soccer matches. Through their multifaceted efforts, they endeavor to create an environment conducive to the inclusion and well-being of immigrants who are usually ostracized by dominant society.

Latinx writers utilize their narratives to inspire readers to engage in proactive social action, particularly during times of crisis, when transnational relocated individuals with their own identities, families, and livelihoods are imperiled,

transcending mere statistical figures. One of Luiselli's students reflects on this shift in perspective, remarking, "You know, I never thought the kids we've been reading and talking about in abstract all this time would actually be riding in the back seat of my car one day. I'm proud of being part of this" (*Tell Me* 103). This sentiment underscores the transformation of intangible entities discussed in conversations or literature into tangible individuals with real lives. Aligned with the idea that "no local loyalty can ever justify forgetting that each human being has responsibilities to every other" (Appiah xiv), Latinx writers generate Self-Other "spaces of identification" (Amin) that become an opportunity for encounter and human recognition. As Bracher ("How to Teach" 369) suggests, experiencing empathy necessitates recognizing one's own connection to the suffering of others. Through their literary works, these writers challenge necropolitical strategies of division and exclusion, advocating for active solidarity and the formation of coalitions as an effective political strategy that shapes different ways of challenging oppression and inequalities.

Solidarity then emerges as a powerful force in shaping political contestation and "reshaping worlds in more socially equitable and just ways" (Featherstone 12). It involves new understandings of how subjectivities are shaped, reconceived, or transformed by the dynamics delineated in the solidary relation, changing the self-interested, inward looking individual into a socially, collective-minded participant with an outward mindset. Characters in Latinx transnational (im)migration literature ultimately come to realize how their actions or inaction contribute to existing structures and systems, hence prompting them to take up their (moral) obligation and become agents of change. The examined narratives underscore the essential interplay between cognition and emotion(s) in the pursuit of social justice: debunking harmful and inaccurate cultural depictions of Latinx Others through explicit, corrective information, together with the evocation of empathy as a form of perspective-taking can produce more correct appraisals of the immigrant Other to bring about wider social change. Ultimately, these strategies constitute a fundamental part of an effective pedagogy of solidarity committed to challenging inequalities, divisiveness, and oppression while promoting more inclusive social spaces and new social imaginaries.

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Of Borders and Bridges: Re-Imagining Hospitable Encounters Through a Feminist Border Perspective in Julia Álvarez's *Afterlife*

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Abstract: While hospitality constitutes a threshold similar to a geopolitical border, the negotiation that its participants partake in commonly results in the establishment of a new borderline. Therefore, in a world where borders and movement are constantly being patrolled and (trans)formed—thus generating power asymmetries and perpetuating systemic violence—hospitality needs to be read as a possibility for ethical encounters and empathetic proximity to the Other. Drawing from Derrida's foundational theory of hospitality, border epistemology (Anzaldúa 1987; Brady 2000, 2002, 2022; Manzanos and Benito 2017) and feminist theories of subjectivity, mobility and hospitality (Braidotti 2011; Hamington 2010; Still 2010), this essay aims at exploring the migrant experience as expressed in Julia Álvarez's novel *Afterlife* (2020) by analyzing the interplay of hospitable and hostile spaces, and the negotiation of hosts and guests' subject positions. In so doing, this essay unfolds the instability of binominal relations within bordering and hospitality practices to ultimately disclose new forms of relationality and feminist social transgression.

Keywords: hospitality, borders, immigration, feminism, Julia Álvarez

Introduction

Practices of hospitality have become paramount in the democratic attempt of dismantling prejudices and forestalling discourses of exclusion and social containment. Paradoxically, many of these practices have failed to acknowledge the key role border dynamics play when social encounters occur, thus assuming and perpetuating hierarchical and asymmetrical power relations. In a world where migration constitutes, in many cases, a national crisis and a natural catastrophe akin to political discourses of sovereignty and prejudice, revising the intricacies of our encounters with the Other is rendered necessary in order to dismantle the language of violence and polarization. This revision, as this paper aims to disclose, is intrinsic to contemporary literary representations that deal with the nuances that construe mainstream political, ideological and historical representations of (im)migrants, and the consequences thereof.

Whilst the assumption of hospitality as a mark of Western civilization functions as an imperative to encourage welcoming practices (Lind et al. 1195), national policies and media coverage regarding migration and international humanitarian crises work towards an increasingly profound unawareness of what hospitality "truly" is, its ethical potential, and how has morphed throughout human

history. Thus, contemporary hospitality acts often fall flat in the face of massive and/or consistent human mobilizations, such as the refugees “crises” in Europe or the US-Mexico border crossings in North America. Uncertainties regarding how to encounter the Other—notice that positionality is often a proxy for the subject-host stance—are traversed by a pending and long-coming query: who are “we” and where do “we” belong within the hospitality scheme. Bereft of stable rubrics, the hospitable act is performed in a myriad of ways depending on the contextualization and identification of the participants (Still 5). Indeed, far from the homogenization of migrant experiences (Hron 287; Hoffman et al. 42), the major tenets of discussion revolve around “how” and “who” becomes eligible for entering the nation. While this eligibility might be understood in terms of capital and reciprocity, meaning citizens’ contribution to the host nation, mobility and hospitality ultimately relocate the performative and policing nature of the border to a wider and exchangeable social encounter where safety, legality and belonging are constantly at stake.

Thus far, this essay aims to analyze the need and potential of literary representations of hospitality and migration. This constant negotiation at the basis of spatiality and identity formation is beset by the political dimension of hospitality, which in turn elaborates the language of welcoming (Still 7).¹ In light of this political magnitude that structures hospitality as the relationship between states and individuals, the self—or what Levinas understood as the subject-host—is commonly constructed as “in opposition to,” thus unfolding an aporetic border perception that permeates the language of relatedness and socialization. Thus, the critique to Levinas’ subjectification of *hôte*, equally meaning host or guest, becomes essential to understand why the hospitality encounter has significantly been approached from the subject/host perspective. However, a shift in the paradigm is possible when resorting to feminist lenses and the original location of hospitality. If the hospitable act occurs when “crossing thresholds” (Still 4, 7), then the liminal space cannot be mastered by any of the participants, thus deactivating the principle of belonging—ultimately read by Levinas as usurpation (Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 40) and built upon the premise of social hierarchies. The texture of hospitality takes on what Jean-Luc Nancy advances as the convergence of two singularities, whose proximity is paradoxically an emphasis on distance as “the law of touching is separation” (Nancy 5). In this vein, no assimilation nor sameness are then at the core of hospitality, and a feminist form of understanding hospitality as horizontal and empathetic is rendered necessary.

In a similar vein, when crisscrossing territories, what may dissolve the idea of border or barrier may as well preserve it. This is the case of borders, which have been contemporarily read as a transforming, productive site that transfigures social and economic status (Brady, *The Fungible* 174). This performative vein of the border proves timely when discussing the corporeal practices of displacement, containment and surveillance (Sánchez-Palencia 15), and stresses the urge of “every society [that] needs to solidify and consolidate itself” (Martins 156). Other than construing spaces

1 I adhere here to Judith Still’s analysis of the three dimensions that construe hospitality: the social or ethical (between individuals), the psychological (with oneself or the Unconscious), and the political (between States or between the individual and the State) (7).

where power asymmetries perpetuate labor docility, cultural oppression and other forms of contemporary brutality, hospitality needs to be read as a potential resource that defuses its organizing and hierarchical nature by bringing to the fore what Rosi Braidotti denotes “the nonfixity of boundaries” as the basis of contemporary subjectivity (*Nomadic* 66). It is then not an imperative to execute hospitality within the realm of political subjectification, but the urgency to return to the ethics and sociality of hospitality encounters that matters (Still 8).

While hospitality constitutes a threshold similar to the border, the negotiation that its participants, host and guest, partake in commonly results in the establishment of a new borderline. In this sense, this paper seeks to demonstrate that albeit physical, borders have also been imagined as movable and invisible to later emerge in the way one encounters with the Other. Not only do we need to establish a parallelism between the politics of hospitality and border dynamics, but it is rendered urgent to envision a non-hierarchical structure of hospitality through the feminist theorization of proximity, horizontality and care ethics. In the case of migrants, this approach is considered primordial since borders are carried within themselves by navigating practices of hospitality and hostility within the alien land, as it is the case of Julia Álvarez’s exploration of hospitable relations in her novel *Afterlife* (2020). Following the story of Antonia, the novel explores the nuances of a double role: a (former) migrant who hosts a (newcomer) migrant, and the liminal states of hospitality. In analyzing these multiple encounters with the Other, Álvarez aptly pinpoints the fault lines of current hospitality schemes. Drawing from the foundational theorizations of hospitality, border epistemology and feminist theories of subjectivity, mobility and hospitality, this essay aims at exploring the migrant experience as expressed in Álvarez’s novel by analyzing the interplay of hospitable and hostile spaces and the negotiation of such binomial relations, thus mirroring borders’ kinetics. Ultimately, readers and characters will be able to navigate in/hospitable encounters and read them anew through new forms of relationality and feminist, social transgression.

Redefining Hospitable Encounters Through Feminist Border Lenses

Current conceptualizations of hospitality are irrevocably intertwined with ideas of migration, mobility and identity. So much so that a vast majority of contemporary examples of human movement are appraised through their convergence with plurality and directionality, thus placing the idea of “encounter” at the heart of these processes (Berg and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 1). Whether hospitality implies a political, economic or ethical dimension is at stake within the multiple strands that aim to delimit the subject matter. Whilst some authors stress the traversing nature of borders, others reject the trite association between migration and hospitality since it enhances a paradigmatic and systematic narrative of power asymmetries (Molz and Gibson 6). The same is true of hospitality within a global context, where mobility is understood as a pivotal element of contemporary societies. Even though movement

does not equate migration, it does dialogue with the liberal notion of freedom which “is materialized through mobility, and [thus] power is materialized through the ways in which it can regulate and constrain movement” (Brady, *Scales* 12). It is no surprise, then, that hospitality is radically prized as an “industry” (Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 2, 5), or even a “business” (Still 1), thus mirroring already set-up ideas of migration industry and tourism (Cranston et al. 543). What is true is that welcoming practices of mobile subjects are strongly informed by a capitalized systematization of legal—and/or illegal—mobility that is sustained by an exchange of capital, services and privilege.

Already in the eighteenth century, hospitality was—and now continues to be—extended on the basis of law enforcement and reciprocity, quite unlike the Ancient Greek prescription, which foreshadowed a moral subordination to the divine unknown and the *xenos*. While the latter was conducted by means of absolute dedication and the promise of a divine reward through humility and generosity, contemporary forms of hospitality are subdued to a social and/or economic contract (Hamington 24; Still 11-12). Thus, the discourse of hospitality has morphed from a moralizing practice of civilization into a political encounter with the Other (Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 19). In the face of such limited rubrics, there unfolds a complex uncertainty: Is there a form of encounter that resembles unlimited hospitality or is it reciprocity a foundation of contemporary hospitality?

Mobility occurs at many levels and within many transpositional processes, to use Braidotti’s term. As Gloria Anzaldúa, and later Mary Pat Brady advance, the borderlands are of multiple kinds and are never—or not only—ascribed to statism. Trespassing social, cultural, political or economic borderlines is far beyond the geopolitical static borders these incursions are commonly associated with (Manzanas Calvo, n.p.), and so the resulting relocation of the subject becomes fluid and transitional. Far from a positive reading of hospitable encounters, border epistemology does not abide by the original moralizing nature of welcoming a visitor, but it rather codifies an encounter based on performative acts of bringing in/rejecting, opening and closing doors, etc., thus eliciting the visitor’s difference as a mark of displacement and illegitimacy (Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 20; Miller 114).

More than a reminder of binomial structures, border epistemology is of aid when apprehending the underlying neo-liberal rubrics of contemporary hospitality and functions as a platform for epistemological disobedience (Hamington 26; Smith et. al 259). This paradoxical double nature of borders as sites of containment and renegotiation opens the possibility of transcending aporetic perceptions of space and identity by laying bare the mechanisms of polarization. In this vein, feminist authors within the fields of transnationalism and new materialism imply that contemporary subjectivities are intrinsically grounded on modernity and Western Enlightenment, an assumption that resonates with the hospitality metaphor insofar as “[t]he oscillation and tension between mobility and the security of fixed locations

is one of modernity's most enduring and complex oppositional binaries" (Kaplan 212). The neo-liberal discourse ultimately juxtaposes the mobility of first-world citizens and the rendition of precarious experiences of migrants, thus elaborating a complex plot dominated by power and surveillance.

Border dynamics partake of hospitality in that the ethical and political aspects of encounters pivot transnational mobility and expand the work of bordering. Its performative vein regarding geopolitical displacement rather construes a productiveness that emerges from cultural transference and transversal mobilities (Brady, *The Fungibility* 175). Put differently, border work is still conceptualized as the foundation of state security inasmuch as identity negotiations at the borderline aptly restore a history of colonization, meaning that historical continuity re-produces a colonization and territorialization of bodies (Ahmed et al. 7). In the last decade, authors specialized in border theory have interrogated the coherence of border work once the border is "decentered," thus eliciting the permeability and porosity of borders as "not just lines on the ground, but rather ... an important part of our political imaginary that is predicated on an idea that territory exists, that states inhabit it, and that people are bound by it" (Johnson and Jones 4, 6). Indeed, borders emerge in the different spheres where hospitality occurs. Thus, the border is incorporated as a site of social (trans)formation and political encounter to the hospitality metaphor.

The history of colonization, as well as the historical continuity of colonial power asymmetries (Saldívar xi, coloniality of power), impinges on the radical relocation of hospitality as an ethical approach to the Other, as understood by Levinas, to a site of national belonging and citizenship. Under this light, Manzananas Calvo and Benito Sánchez aptly signal a transition between ethical hospitality and what they term "national hospitality" (37). In other words, a relocation of priorities within the hospitable encounter is what grants a new form of hospitality that displaces the guest's needs and brings to the foreground the safe emplacement of the host:

The birth of this form of conditional hospitality—contingent upon the presentation of legal documents, and the analysis of the returns of the hospitable act—is tied to the existence and recognition of sovereign territorial demarcations, boosted by the emergence of the nation-state. (Manzananas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 40)

What before was covert divinity or an opportunity for ethical encounters is now a presumed threat to national citizenship and belonging. Hospitality, then, consists of both a form of political surveillance (e.g. migration) and a form of enhancing neoliberal reciprocity (e.g. tourism). The stratification embedded in mobility and subjectification reveals how "the migration industry provokes different experiences of mobility, as well as immobility, across lines of class, legal status, age and gender" (Cranston et al. 549). Thus, binomial identifications such as

mobility-guest-precarity and immobility-host-sovereignty need to be further and critically analyzed from a feminist viewpoint, as this paper aims to do from now onwards.

Ahmed et al., in their questioning of home and migration, go on to identify the collision and superposition of different practices of mobility that generate a circuit of social transpositions ultimately bereft of generic assumptions of the self since “[i]t is precisely these collisions of the corporeal, the familial and the (post)national that create the densely conjoined (and often traumatic) struggles over identity, belonging and longing within uprootings and regroundings” (4). Thus, if hospitality partakes in the futile imagination of these binomial categories that contribute to the systematic establishment of precarity and sovereignty, then strategies of deflation are rendered necessary in order to broaden the potentiality of hospitable encounters. Likewise, the migration experience, whose meaning is produced and controlled by neoliberal conceptualizations of mobility, cannot be reduced to a one-way movement or to the mere transposition of economic subjects. Hospitality stands for not only crossing thresholds but, rather, inhabiting permanently these politicized spaces (Molz and Gibson 9).

Feminist theories do acknowledge the politicized and gendered practices of mobility that are inherently intertwined with circumstances of precarity and vulnerability. It is worth noting that the metaphorical vein ascribed to the conceptual analysis of migration and hospitality is not exclusionary but finds its logics in the material experience of those who traverse geopolitical boundaries in more than spatial terms, ultimately “this question of hospitality does entail paying serious attention to the question of political frontiers where admittance or refusal may even be a matter of life and death” (Still 4). Thus, precarity and vulnerability are enacted as material consequences of neoliberal discourses and practices of mobility. Albeit prone to be fetishized, literary and/or media representations of precarity do not only denounce an oppressive mastery over space and political sovereignty but also reflect upon the border gnosis underlying those social encounters that are dissociated from “state/security/mobility” (Cooper et al. 15) and that are performed by individuals in their daily lives. Thus far, other than dis/placement, the conceptualization that these feminist theories propose is based on relatedness as an analytical tools (Conlon 354), care ethics (Hamington 24), and horizontality in power relations (Brady, “Hemispheric” 167, *Scales* 34).

The feminist attempt to approach hospitality by means of resorting to an ethical origin relies on the assumption of vulnerability not as a prescription to precarity and submissiveness but rather understood as “a deliberate exposure to power, [which] is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment” (Butler 22). This vulnerability, embodied and relational, works towards the disempowerment of structural law enforcement or the conditions upon which hospitality is nationally and politically extended. In so doing, notions that sustained national hospitality will be deflated in order to create new forms of approaching the Other. If neoliberal work—such as “scaling,” in Brady’s terms—is what permeates

the systematic precarity within mobility and hospitality, and becomes “an effective imperial and colonial tool with profoundly homogenizing effects,” the subsequent reversal of roles within these encounters will lay bare the mechanisms of the coloniality of power that underlies national security and surveillance (Brady, “Hemispheric” 158). Conversely, an ethical and feminist approach that considers the border as a movable borderline that operates at psychological, ethical, and political levels, may give way to horizontal, empathetic and interdependent webs of solidarity and connection. According to Brady, regulating mobility through the neoliberal scale or scaffold imaginary undermines the ethics of hospitality by weakening kinship among migrants or “keep[ing] social relations precarious,” which in turn problematizes social integration or at least recognition as part of a society, resulting in what Brady denotes a “new docile labor force” (Brady, *Scales* 2). Thus far, the decentralization of labor and/or capital docility holds a central position in the renegotiation of identities and the reconfiguration of—at least—less hostile political and cultural imaginary. In like manner, it is fundamental to disentangle both hospitality and border work from the imperative of security/nation-state, thus leading to actual reparation and solace through an active enhancement of “emphatic proximity” (Braidotti, “Writing” 182) or “[d]ensity, not scale” (Brady, *Scales* 115). The feminist priorities are to leave behind the passive listening from a state of privilege and citizenship, and to dismantle the static emplacement of the self. This disjunction at multiple scales aims ultimately at decentralizing the host-subject position in the hospitality metaphor and codify the encounter by means of an ethical disposition.

Julia Álvarez's *Afterlife* as a Case Study

Álvarez's novel commences with the interweaving of absence and presence that results in the convulsion of time and space. Antonia, the protagonist, has lost her husband to an abrupt death. Thus, the subsequent scene is that of a woman waiting for her husband to return, and, in her waiting, she wanders about space as a deserted woman. Readers do not know yet, but Antonia's process of mourning hints at a further alienating situation other than grief. Had the process of hospitality ever began or ended, she would have had the reassurance that her sense of belonging and grounding has tragically shifted. It is worthy to note that Antonia's Dominican background plays an important role in the construction of this initial sense of uprooting since she had partaken of the migratory phenomena as a social process whereby she became an English professor, married Sam, her now deceased partner, and became part of Vermont's societal structure. Her love for Sam was built not only on the basis of genuine affection and partnership but also drawing from the stability of relying on Sam's mediating and protective figure.² The extensive dimension of hospitality impinges on Antonia's grief for an impossible encounter, thus offering a relevant insight to what Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous claimed as an “outside

2 This idea can be misread since dependency on host figures is often used to imbue migration with a parasitical nature. Nonetheless, dependency is rather construed as a collateral result of vulnerability and law enforcement.

in the inside” that seems unbearable and never-ending (qtd. in Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 48).

Precarity and vulnerability are pivotal elements in hospitality and are associated with the guest’s state of affairs regarding spatiality, temporality, and identity. For Antonia, the absence of her husband, her mediator-host within the national and domestic space, elicits a new type of uprooting or displacement through familiar yet unfamiliar spaces, such as home. In *Uprootings/Regroundings*, Ahmed et al. advance the affective relations between space and identity, and how homes, far from being an epitome of stasis and safety, recreate the axes of change and adaptative metamorphosis. In this vein, home and homing are in a constant state of flux and consist of “the reclaiming and reprocessing of habits, objects, names and histories that have been uprooted – in migration, displacement or colonization” (Ahmed et al. 9). Under this new light, Antonia’s home is divested of familiarity; *habitus* implies an impressive and unsettling effort, and now even lying in bed becomes a journey to “terra incognita” (*Afterlife* 6). She resorts, unconsciously, to a state of vulnerability akin to the migratory experience of dependency and criminalization. Her home becomes a sort of prison, but also the space where power relations are going to be negotiated according to the law of hospitality and property.

Fragmentation is present in the structure of the very first chapter through a prose populated by slashes, a poem that is broken into verses but also amended and integrated within an interdependent structure. English turns into a faulty language, inhospitable and distant, since the referential figure she used to cling to has vanished from her life, if it was ever there. In the host’s house, the host’s language is predominant, but what if there is no host to talk to? This estrangement towards not only a space but also a language suggests a “historical tendency for the language and practice of hospitality to ‘turn’ against the guest” (Still 13), and through this enmity or linguistic disavowal hospitality mirrors its embedded, hostile counterpart. Irrespective of the participant’s intentions, if hospitality is understood as a “gift” relation, to use Still’s conceptualization, providing the Other with generous gestures and gifts might entail both a sense of indebtedness and dependency. Giving becomes a prescription to obedience, surveillance and, in sum, “a means of political control over the visitor” (Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 38). The host’s property—space and language—resembles highly regulatory spaces such as hospitals and caretaking facilities, where there is a similar expropriation of the body of the patient by being incorporated to a sanitized and stratified institution that works both towards safety and massive control. Under this light, Antonia’s new status is constantly questioned by her relationship with space, language and other actors within hospitality, and in such questioning, she will be able to restore a sense of homeness after death and separation. Battling along with her self-image as “tie-breaker” (*Afterlife* 77) and as an eternal guest of her (non)country will lead her to (trans)form the ethics of hospitality towards oneself and the Other.

Master's Tools

Albeit successful, Antonia's scaling process seems far from the utopian closure of what Levinas terms the ethical responsibility towards the Other.³ In his thesis, Levinas proposes a disentanglement from political and cognitive approaches and peruses instead proximity and alterity (Levinas, *Other* 48), the latter being not just constructed beyond the metaphorical endeavors of ontological entities but prominently enacted through the corporeal and material implications of vulnerability and exposure. However, even when the migrant masters the way to "melting" and "becoming," for instance, American, this commodified assimilation proves limited as if the migrant's "original identity would be colonized, taken over" due to a lack of awareness and recognition (Hoffman et al. 46). Pending a broader recognition whether from an outer or inner source, the afterlife prizes Antonia's dwelling in the threshold as a site that can be read twofold: a spatial and temporal suspension of national signifiers, such as language, in order to fully embrace the Other's demands; or a residual space where cultural differences are prone to generate fragility and exclusion. To summon up the portrayal of Antonia as a deserted woman, both in the sense of ignominious abandonment and of the desert as a "socially" constructed and imagined place (Price 20), Antonia's dwelling aptly reflects on the political implications of desertification and cultural infertility. Unlike the border or borderlands, the desert diverges from common assumptions of "contact" or "separation" zones (Pratt 34) and plays in turn a key role in processes of oblivion, silencing and boundless violence (Martín Hernández 59). Notwithstanding this rather contemporary interpretation of deserts, such a space was conversely read in biblical renditions of hospitality as a space of encounter and openness towards what is unknown or cannot be known, placed away from the state of law and property but protected by what Levinas claims as "the ethical approach to the Other," meaning "an entrance into the area of the unknowable, of potentiality, the realm of the 'perhaps'" (Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 27). Thus, the open space awaiting and haunting Antonia, both metaphorically and materially, now that she is alone and only master of the house, will play a decisive role in staging different forms of hospitality but also in laying bare the social and political strata of national enclosure.

Part and parcel of (im)migrating and settling is the consolidation of the liberal notion of movement, that is to say that mobility is not a neutral conceptualization of freedom but a constructed imposition upon those who traverse national lines and spaces (Brady, *Scales* 12). Antonia, on her part, finds herself genuinely immersed in the process of eligibility and positive assimilation of the rules of the hosting nation—an omnipotent subject-host—by learning and mastering the Other's—now, host's—language: "[s]he mended her broken pieces and ended up teaching

3 See the ethical relocation of subjectivity, language and self when approaching the Other and *otherwise* in Levinas (1961, 1981).

Americans their own language, four decades total, three at the nearby college. What now, now that she has retired?" (*Afterlife* 11). Labor gives Antonia access to reliability and reciprocity, and in such exchange, her status in the nation is preserved. With her retirement, her sense of self within Vermont subsides into caution and fear. Even though she has fulfilled common requirements of social integration, there remains a constant sense of displacement that adheres to emotional distress while being also cultural and socially framed. As a(n) (im)migrant, Antonia relies on these mending practices between two worlds—two national identities—by adjusting herself to English, "doing," as Hoffman would put it, the "melting pot" herself (Hoffman et al. 45). The fact that she becomes a professor of the host language evokes the porous and ambiguous nature of hospitality roles, what in turn refrains from eliciting new formulations of belonging and fosters narratives that "are comforting and reassuring" at least for those who hold privilege and sovereignty (Manzanas Calvo n.p.).

Derrida, among other modern and contemporary authors, explores this reversal of roles by advancing the revision of concepts such as liberation and emancipation, thus claiming that the host has always been a guest to a house that ultimately does not belong to him or her, "the master of the house is at home, but nonetheless he comes to enter his home through the guest—who comes from outside. The master thus enters from the inside *as if* he came from the outside" (Derrida 125, italics in the original). This estrangement towards one's 'hostness' also implies an active role on the migrant's part, undermining his or her portrayal as an alien to the house/nation. Derrida's expropriation of the own house opposes the premise of sovereignty within national hospitality and gives way to an apparent non-hierarchical structure of reciprocity. This reciprocity, presumably, abandons the conditions of the Kantian cosmopolitanism and international relations and turns into a (trans)formative sense of responsibility that, following Emmanuel Levinas, rejects the sovereign movement of the consciousness and stages a solidarity that does not neglect but consolidates subjectivity (Levinas, *Huella* 63). Thus far, it is through her later encounters with a migrant that Antonia, now the hostess of the house, dis-covers the multilayered nature of hospitality and reconfigures the encounter with the Other. Feminist appraisals of reciprocity might be of aid at this point in so that the practice of hospitality cannot be understood as a mere gift relationship; due care needs to be paid to the factors this reciprocity entails, such as a "directional and hierarchical character: The host gives and the guest receives" (Hamington 29). Far from perpetuating a fixity of affiliations, a reversal of roles fosters the possibility of destabilizing monolithic poses of host and guest, taker and receiver, inside and outside and it elicits new modes and spaces for hospitality and communication.

For Antonia, linguistic dissonance in the host language has become stronger and rather significant now that her companion is gone. The silence at home has made her regain a sense of alienation and foreignness through the series of losses and departures she has experienced—her retirement, Sam's death, her sister's upcoming disappearance. In a similar vein, what Antonia endures resorts to what Homi Bhabha

denotes “unhomely,” meaning not homeless but dislocated within the common boundaries of the world-home dichotomy:

In that displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is divided as it is disorienting The home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart. The unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world. (Bhabha 141)

Her unhomeliness, so to speak, is that of a woman who navigates the hostile structure of national and political existence within the domestic. She is haunted by not only the (g)host—a present absence—of her husband, but also the multiple factors that flesh out her psychic dwelling, a sense of “doubleness” (Bhabha 148) that mirrors Levinas’s “externality of the inward” (qtd. in Bhabha 150) and the already-mentioned “outside in the inside” advanced by Derrida and Cixous. This dwelling that is at the heart of Antonia’s experience reinforces the connection between hospitality and borders inasmuch as “it is exactly the constructed nature of modern state borders that can extend them so far in real space that human beings can be stuck on them almost permanently” (Szakolczai 22). The materiality of the limit emerges in the psychological outcome of Antonia’s sense of displacement when locating herself “at the outer edge where, in the old maps, the world drops off, and beyond is terra incognito, sea serpents, the Leviathan—HERE THERE BE DRAGONS” (*Afterlife* 6).

On their part, Jennie Germann Molz and Sarah Gibson denounce the futile endeavor of applying the metaphor of hospitality to migration narratives since it perpetuates the structure of national hospitality and the history of colonization.⁴ Assuming the (im)migrant as guest propels the idea that “the ‘host nation’ maintains its historical position of power and privilege in determining who is or is not welcome to enter the country, but also under what conditions of entry” (Molz and Gibson 9), thus neglecting Levinas’s ethical approach. That being said, the common juxtaposition of liminality and hospitality leaks an opportunity to imagine the afterlife of border crossing, the coexistence of cultural differences and the reconfiguration of ethics that are not grounded in political and national tenets. For Antonia, this threshold is not merely abstract but experiential, embedded in her psyche and in her body, and materially experienced through embodied practices of hospitality and territorialization (Smith et al. 259). Not being able to fully incorporate herself into a status of belonging to the country, Antonia struggles to find the way back to the proper word in Spanish and resents the global colonization of the Anglo-American language and imaginary:

[To her sister’s question about her well-being] I’m okay. Antonia’s mantra of the last year. Somewhere she read that *okay* and *Coca-Cola* are the two must

4 It is important to recall that the status of host has not always equated the status of native. In this vein, the case of America’s colonization stands as an illustrative process of guests taking hostage of hosts.

universally understood words. It depresses her to think that the ties that bind are so flimsy. Even silence would be better. (*Afterlife* 10).

This imposition of the host's language hinders the incorporation of the outsider, while simultaneously forestalling the conditions of autonomy within the national territory. Unsurprisingly, the mastery of language—or lack of it—also works as a way of availing or pervading the foreigner's right for hospitality (Derrida 15), thus arresting processes of cultural and linguistic independence within the national ground. After losing Sam, and at an already old age, Antonia finds herself reassuring her perpetual state as a foreigner/guest, “[e]ven now, long after immigrating as a child, she still thinks of it as ‘their’ country. Not for her to meddle in their affairs” (*Afterlife* 17). Unlike the temporality prescribed to national hospitality and Kant's cosmopolitan idea of international hospitality (Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 40, 44), the temporal span for performing the guest role is conveniently dilated to the point of producing paradoxical social and psychological effects: the perpetuation and enhancement of fragility upon which violence is legitimized. However, this temporality is not new to the interweaving of hospitality and colonization, for part of the neoliberal systematization of violence and order is the work of scaling and captivity that divest individuals of agency in national soil. This is the case of the illegalization of mobility through immigration policies that infantilize and/or criminalize individuals in order to systematize and control movement, “[l]ife without papers in the twenty-first century must also be understood as a form of captivity, as a flexible enclosure that constrains and delimits socialities just as forced removal and mass deportation have broadened the geometry of captivity seemingly everywhere” (Brady, *Scales* 2-3). The disempowerment of the illegal migrant allows the emplaced subject, the national entity, to order and perform power upon their bodies, minds and social realities. Brady reads this captivity through the metaphor of the child, who “came to symbolize all those ineligible to claim the right to steer their own social relations or to hold the status of citizen” (*Scales* 6). The infantilization, feminization and criminalization of the mobile subject/guest correspond to some of the many strategies that pervade and limit hospitality practices. For Antonia, her sisters, and the migrants she is going to encounter, this temporality or suspension generates a web of captivity and precarity that does nothing but undermine their agency by empowering the nation-state.

Sisterhood and Care Ethics

As part of her suspended state of affairs as a former migrant, Antonia shelters in her relationship with her neighborhood as a way to prove her involvement within Vermont community. Likewise, her experience as a teacher and a translator provides Antonia with a mediating standpoint that helps incorporate her to the hosting process while negotiating the entrance of others. Even at home, she performs mediating techniques, a “neighborly” behavior by means of “letting him [her neighbor] have the

last word—it worked most times with Sam” (*Afterlife* 11). Thus far, being a mediator in her private and public spheres reveals not only a hyper surveillance but also a consequential reconfiguration of affiliations. Antonia is prone, then, to assume her role as a potential caretaker within her family, her sisterhood—conformed by four sisters, including Antonia, the second oldest; Izzy, the oldest one and the one who embodies unlimited hospitality; Mona, the youngest, and Tilly—that emerges as a system of filial relationships fostering communication, mutual support and care relations. It is through her conflictive relation with her family—she constantly dwells between the urge of care labor and individuality as a tie-braker—that Antonia foreshadows the feminist problematization of hospitality relations by navigating the tensions of self-preservation and the ethics of care and responsibility (Hamington 24, 28). These tensions are illustrated when Izzy, the oldest sister, disappears without notice, which means that Antonia is expected to take charge of the situation since she is the second oldest sister. While their sisterhood comprises a communal experience of (im)migration (*Afterlife* 73), their multiple positionalities reveal a myriad of hospitality practices.

Even though every sister is “emplaced” in the coherence of the dyad of nation-state/security, their kinship is rendered indispensable when trying to understand Izzy’s standpoint and intentions. As far as readers know, Izzy has gone into a reckless mission: finding a place to house migrants far from the labor farms, where their creativity and agency define their lives rather than (their) labor (*Afterlife* 49-51). For this mission, Izzy renounces her home-state and finds practical ways of housing others. The prescription of homelessness in order to enact hospitality resorts to an ethical—and biblical—form of approaching the Other (Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 24, 25), thus expanding Derrida’s definition of unlimited hospitality not to a tolerance of difference but also to a divestment of what originally produces hostility: property and mastery.⁵ At first, Antonia seems reluctant and agrees with her sisters on the fact that Izzy’s choices in life are both a waste of resources and time as well as a mortifying process for her family. The political unconscious of hospitality practice emerges here in the reticence of risking one’s safe position within the national territory. Although it is deeply rooted in a history of colonization as well as in the experience of “foreignness,” the experience of Antonia and her sisters ushers readers and each other in a process of not only getting closer to the uncanniness of the migrant experience through reversing roles—caretakers and care receivers, guests and hosts—but it also unfolds the many nuances adhered to the assimilation of a new culture.

While Izzy turns uncanny within her own family structure, Antonia and her sisters’ attitude unravels the constant state of fear and hyper surveillance that the scaffold imaginary and the political tenets of hospitality enhance. This constant state of vulnerability and precarity, that Brady identifies as a form of captivity, surpasses the limitations of hospitality itself and gets installed in the unconscious

5 In words of Derrida, unlimited hospitality means “to give the new arrival all of one’s home and oneself, to give him or her one’s own, our own, without asking a name or compensation, or the fulfilment of even the smallest condition” (77).

of the 'eternal guest,' meaning that the prescription of temporality works not against law enforcement but versus the guest herself: "[t]he sisters all have an aversion to authority, an immigrant thing" (*Afterlife* 73). Such aversion—covert vulnerability—reveals in turn an interiorized hostility towards the Other and towards themselves at once, they perform and reproduce border work by generating an inside-outside dichotomy (Johnson and Jones 6-7). Álvarez's overt depiction of the core tenets of scale work and power asymmetries help readers interrogate the multiple encounters that occurred in the novel. This constant state of vulnerability and uneasiness is, in the pursuance of destabilization, constituted by the interweaving relations of hospitality and hostility the sisters partake in and the encounter with unexpected guests and other familiar haunting presences. Most of all, it is the disarticulation of the guest's limited representation that enables readers and characters fathom a feminist hospitality that "unlocks the epistemic power of hospitality" by incorporating the guest as a subject rather than an object (Hamington 28).

Something that the sisterhood filiation proves in this novel is the complex directionality of hospitality practices and the importance of centralizing care ethics over, for instance, space and language mastery. Since Francisco de Vitoria and Immanuel Kant, any work on hospitality implies that direction and reciprocity are key to understand the current limitations of hospitality as well as its potential (Green 214). While her sister's background construes a multivocal source of akin experiences of vulnerability and hospitality/hostility, Antonia, far from embodying a hospitable subject, finds herself refraining from her mediating role in her domestic and professional life, while negotiating her own status within the home-state. Under this light, and in an ironic turn of events, Antonia encounters Mario, a helpless man knocking at her door. He has crossed the border from Mexico to the United States by a cross-border bus. How he has ended up at the porch of Antonia's recently empty house is easy to elucidate, "though everyone assumed it was she who was the political one by virtue of her ethnicity, as if being Latina automatically conferred a certain radical stance" (*Afterlife* 18). The border is, through hospitality work, transposed to everyday life and domestic spaces that become policed and politicized (Johnson and Jones 3).

Prior to Mario's knocking, Antonia is informed by her neighbor Roger, a host for migrant workers in his farm, that she is needed to mediate with Mario. Indeed, Antonia's reception is incited on behalf of her "Spanish," or rather Hispanic, heritage, although she is, in her own words, "not really *Spanish Spanish*," but Dominican (*Afterlife* 13). Antonia's mediation as a 'hostess' is rather significant insofar as she is requested to mediate for a host that is defined by whiteness, capital and masculinity. If "[a]cts of hospitality constitute the identity of the host, as well as the identity of the group, culture, or nation for which the host acts" (Hamington 24), women have rather been obliterated from and/or disempowered by the execution of hospitality. Even though authors such as Tess Varner associate the historicity of hospitality labor with women's work while acknowledging the mastering or "credit" to the male host (42), there still exists a lack of attention to the gender implication of hospitality

practices. Still is one of the few authors who digs deeper in this scarcity of interest and evaluates the linguistic and philosophical implications of being a *hôtesse*. For Still, the *hôtesse* bears unavoidable gender and professional connotations, usually associated with sexual difference. The reliance of the hostess is fostered by a generic dependency on the “true” master of the space, and so her role consists of merely mediating, “[h]er authority is thus only a delegated one, and she is an intermediary, her body (and mental and emotional faculties) a means for two or more men to communicate and bond” (Still 21). Thus, Antonia’s reluctance to bring the Other in is not only sustained by her connection with her immigrant background but also with the expropriation of agency within hospitality practices. Ultimately, what Antonia, Izzy and the sisterhood construct is rather a feminist, ethical statement on responsibility, emotional labor and care relations by re-signifying the domestic space while navigating the political implications of their actions.

Antonia’s hosting is thus built upon gender prescription and language as a means to enact hospitality. On his part, Mario is conversely unable to claim hospitality to his former master—Roger—since he does not know the host’s language, English, which aptly demonstrates “the extent to which the foreigner is forced to ask for hospitality [only] in a language he does not know” (Lind et al. 1196). Other than pursuing proximity, the interaction between guest and host is coded following the rubrics of the nation-state, which becomes “the ultimate hospitable space for the *national occupant*” (Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 54, *italics mine*). Roger, the master of the farm Mario is working at, does not know Spanish nor aims at enhancing a linguistic proximity to his migrant employee. So much so that he delegates the mediating position and emotional labor to Antonia, who at first feels uncomfortable trying to linguistically accommodate Mario, even though Spanish is her mother tongue. Hospitality, in this case, proves not to call for proximity but for a borderline between participants, with language being a pivotal and “critical” element of the relation, since “forcing the other to speak my language even as they ask for asylum is hardly hospitable” (Still 19). Consequently, Antonia is compelled to provide hospitality and, in doing so, to prove that mediation works no longer as a hospitality practice, but complete commitment does. If, as stated before, hospitality works towards performative acts of identity (Hamington 24, 26), Antonia would find herself at the insurrection of being host and guest and thus, she will problematize her status in order to embark on a rather horizontal hospitality.

To talk about horizontal hospitality is to reflect on the directionality of hospitality practice and the implications of enhancing proximity. While, as previously discussed, feminist hospitality focuses on the importance of care ethics, proximity, and alternatives to power asymmetries, these ethical practices clash against the language and rubrics of national hospitality. In other words, borders’ movable nature and performative role within hospitality relations often arrest the potential aspect of care ethics. Far from being solely what BMette Louise Berg and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh identify as a “fundamental human capacity” and a “basic human need” (4), care might also be enacted as a political and performative act that ultimately construes

identity. Even though the often-fetishized association between migration and hospitality falls far short of a transformative renewal of the self-Other relationship, re-imagining relationality within long-term (im)migration is rendered necessary to understand the tensions of welcoming on a gift-relation basis. As an (“former”) immigrant, Antonia stands for a vulnerable subject that reproduces the anxiety of border crossing, not in its eventual and metaphorical aspect, but in the subsequent displacement that living permanently in a state of difference and estrangement engenders (Molz and Gibson 9). There is no easy welcoming for Antonia when “[t]he people’s fear of displacement from *their* nation emerges as a form of political unconscious, hidden in the national mind but still prevalent in the nation’s dealing with the Other showing up at the border” (Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 40, *italics mine*). The way Antonia receives Mario does not differ from what the national subject perpetuates, which implies a subjectification to what Derrida termed laws of hospitality, meaning those which set up the conditions of the welcoming. Thus far, being unable to imagine Antonia as a host, the binary opposition immigrant/mobility/guest and citizen/immobility/host, is rather problematized and dismantled. First, by placing Antonia in a detachment state regarding the home-state, both in public and private terms, and second, by provoking the impossible hosting of a migrant who she intimately identifies with.

The border, as a paradigmatic set of eruptions within social relations, emerges alongside the hospitable encounter. A relevant aspect of the border dynamics is displayed when Antonia, being aware or not of her vulnerable position and her hosting reluctance, arrays a myriad of patrolling and policing strategies that perform the act of hostage. Enacting these containment tactics towards the Other, namely portraying him as a guest, uncovers the political unconscious of hosting as self-preservation over ‘the’ law of hospitality or unlimited hospitality. Thus, Antonia’s incapability to sincerely commit to the law of hospitality ushers readers in the core tenets of conditional and conditioned welcoming. Most of Antonia’s hosting experience is marked by a sense of fear of displacement, self-preservation and reticence that prevents her from disclosing a larger, unlimited hospitality towards Mario, who also stands as a vulnerable subject under the national siege. In her domestic relationships, Antonia is constantly struggling with prioritizing self-care over caring for others, and the ethics of responsibility, empathy and proximity, that summon hosts to dissolve power asymmetries comprises a risk of belonging for Antonia. Therefore, in preserving her hosting status, Antonia must distance herself from the guest since it apparently is “the best perspective on and route toward knowledge of self and others” (Kaplan 212). What is true of this distancing process is that it performs the limitations of hospitality and construes the conditional and conditioned welcoming. Opposed to ethical rubrics, national hospitality aims at relocating the supremacy of the host to the space of the nation-state. This relocation is what grants a new form of hospitality, by which the guest’s demands become secondary to the primal and essential protection and safe emplacement of the host (Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 40). Thus far, Antonia will perform the limits

of national hospitality as she faces the incapability to enact proximity when her status within the nation-state is threatened by abjection.

Unlike Derrida's unlimited hospitality, Antonia knows her visitor's name and partial story, which simultaneously humanizes Mario and subjects him to his host. Even though Mario does speak a fair amount of English and often talks with Antonia in Spanglish, this linguistic bridge is rather eclipsed by a negotiation of the intimate-public relationship with Antonia. It is their exchange in such an aporetic space that fathoms a new approach to hospitality through recognition, connection and collaboration. Their affiliation is infused with humanization through a cultural and social bond between the two originally counterparts of hospitality practices. While the scaffold imaginary of Western neoliberal discourse advances the scale that "operates through process of comparison and containment, requiring abstraction and homogenization to enact a limiting, hierarchical perception of spatial and social relations" (Brady, *Scales* 4), Antonia and Mario's interaction will unravel the metaphorical construction of hospitality as moving from a reciprocal political contract towards an ethical approach to the Other. Antonia relies, then, on a covert kinship by relating to language and cultural similarities as, for instance, Mario gives his condolences in Spanish and Antonia realizes "somehow it gets to her more" in that way, as "roots go deeper" (*Afterlife* 14). However, this kinship will not only be built upon moments of identification and sameness, but it will also accomplish an ethical proximity by acts of witnessing and answering social demands. In this vein, Antonia is asked "a favor," that is, to bring in Mario's girlfriend, Estela—she is trapped on the way to Vermont by the coyotes, who are asking Mario for money in order to release her. In view of these demands, Antonia faces an ethical dilemma regarding hospitality and its fundamental imbrication with politics and the nation-state. While she relies on her political status as American as she is "becoming" a host to the Other, she also faces the possibility of an empathetic response, which is portrayed by the interweaving and at times ironic set of resemblance-distinction that occurs when physically and metaphorically encountering Mario as the Other: "[r]are also for Antonia to feel tall in this country. For a moment she understands the self-assurance of those who can look down at another's face" which in turn aligns with the awareness of privilege and safe emplacement as "what comes with health care and good nutrition" (*Afterlife* 12). All in all, Antonia undoes the political conceptualization of hosting by undergoing a process whereby she is able to identify the Other within, the unhomeliness of national belonging and ultimately the potential of ethical proximity.

Border Patrolling and Parasites

Likewise, Antonia embodies the paradoxical aspect of consciously hosting when she decides to perform the policing role upon Mario. As a host, she prioritizes a commitment to oneself, which in turn unfolds a commitment to law's authority and safe emplacement as part of a modern understanding of hospitality (Manzanas

Calvo and Benito Sánchez 22). In so doing, it is the omnipotent host, the nation-state and law enforcement, that penetrates the private space and “violates” the home so as to clean it from any parasitical entity (Derrida 51).⁶ Characters such as Mario or Estela are eventually depicted as parasites, meaning “a guest who is wrong and illegitimate, clandestine, liable to expulsion or arrest” (Derrida 61). The nation-state, in this regard, operates as a host in order to pervade the imaginary of welcoming and mobility, with (im)migration as a usual prescription for public illegalization and criminalization (Molz and Gibson 9, 10). As it happens with borders, the material and psychological implications of strategies of containment are affecting both host and guest, and this is made explicit in Álvarez’s novel through the constant state of fear and sense of persecution that makes Mario hide in Antonia’s house as soon as someone approaches. The undocumented and illegal state of the migrant transforms him both into a captive (Brady, *Scales* 3) and a parasite that “only fails to fulfil his duties” while perpetuating vulnerability and dependency towards the nation-state (Still 13; Molz and Gibson 10). This is especially true of the United States’ large history of immigration policies and how difference is constructed within a national context (Still 19; Miller 115). Small wonder, then, that the host to a migrant commences to practice power relations upon the guest, as it is the case of Antonia when she shouts “La Migra!” to demonstrate control over her visitor (*Afterlife* 18). However, once Mario hides, and aware of these containment strategies, Antonia decides to play a more hospitable role by ensuring safety, which in turn permeates her complete sovereignty within the domestic, unhomely space: “Tranquilo, tranquilo, she calms him. Estamos en Vermont. Here there be no torture of prisoners,” a mirroring statement of the forementioned “here there be dragons,” to which Mario, as readers, react by being skeptical and distrustful of authority and the nation-state, just as Antonia and her sisters are, “[h]e stares back, unconvinced. The world is crazy. Who knows what angry people will do” (*Afterlife* 22). Bereft of agency and constantly being pushed and pulled among hosts, Mario equates the age minority that scale imposes on illegal migrants and other unwanted visitors. This episode aptly mimics border dynamics in so that it juxtaposes safety and control, outside and inside, thus generating a state of precarity and dependency that fosters control over the visitor through law enforcement and policing practices.

Ultimately, another instance of reticence and hostility that paradoxically leads Antonia to absolute hospitality and problematizes current conceptualizations of hospitality is her incapability to accept Estela’s gratitude, as though she were reluctant to engage in hospitality discourse: “[g]racias, gracias, the girl keeps saying. Her gratitude is hard to bear. De nada, Antonia, replies, a more accurate rejoinder than *you’re welcome*: she has done nothing to be thanked for” (*Afterlife* 26). Whether she rejects to be publicly recognized as a host or understands the futility of acknowledging what otherwise would have been, again, a natural mark of civilization is not as relevant as her critical view on dependency and control over

6 I am using the term “violate” since it is the word that Derrida uses in his analysis (51), although authors such as Still and Smith et al. have already denounced the use of the metaphor of the body (and usually the female body) as part of hospitality traditional rubrics (Still 26; Smith et al. 259).

the ethics of care and responsibility. Hence, the question she is ultimately intrigued by is whether this/that is hospitality, and, if so, if it is likely to be part of the ethical approach to the Other. In any case, Antonia both figuratively and literally resist to “welcome” Mario and Estela since she ultimately feels unhomely and not entitled to do so. At the end, her sense of unbelonging, of dwelling in no man’s land, both liberates her from the imposition of the host as well as reconfigures hospitality relations. Far from regaining on the right of hospitality, Antonia’s resistance to greet the migrant as guest by rejecting gratitude unfolds the compliance of a faulty integration into the hospitality structure: “[t]hanks for what? Antonia hasn’t agreed to anything. But how can she refuse just talking to the girl? What is the minimum one owes another?” (*Afterlife* 26). To answer this question, which is the purpose of any encounter, requires resorting to Still’s conceptualization of hospitality as “*recognized* as a structure with no fixed context – ... [which] is intuitively understood by practitioners. Thus, offering someone a glass of water, or a bed for the night, is *or is not* hospitality depending entirely on the relation between the one offering and the other accepting or refusing” (11). Thus far, the structure of hospitality is malleable as long as the practitioners redefine the practice. Even though some encounters might be systematically read as part of hospitality practices, the affective associations an encounter or contact implies may equally resort to a hospitable framework (Still 12). Conclusively, as structures are socially enacted and constructed while materially experienced, both hospitality and borders share the paradoxical nature of binomial opposites and enhance their (trans)formation. In other words, a wall is built in order to simultaneously impede and generate contact in the same way that stating difference and imposing sameness through material and metaphorical endeavors work as a reminder that these sites are rather prone to be equally dissolved and transformed.

Conclusions

In Álvarez’s novel, a kinship with the other is laid out by means of a series of recognitions of the Other within, the outside in the inside, and the self in the Other. In particular, the haunting presences that blight the dragon country give way to a revision of relatedness between hosts and guests by which, in this case, they relate to each other as being “all residents of a dragon country, no man’s land beyond the gated communities of belonging” (*Afterlife* 31). This impossibility of locating oneself through unbelonging opens the possibility of transforming hospitality relations by deflating the host subject-position. While this dragon country state is also a blank space in the eyes of hospitality language, it is worth noting that such gated communities do not always operate as exclusionary unities within hospitality but as a territorialization of difference through bodies and relatedness (Smith et al. 259). Unlike Sam’s safe emplacement, or Roger’s hostile sheltering based on labor and economic reciprocity, Antonia discloses new forms of hospitality that align with her and her sisters’ communal experience of (im)migration. In this vein, Izzy, far

from committing to national belonging and property, ends up inspiring Antonia a sense of recklessness and complete, horizontal and empathetic proximity. In so doing, Antonia aligns with feminist strands of relationality that could permeate hospitable relations and encounters by focusing on the possibilities beyond structural responses of the nation-state. Likewise, Álvarez centralizes the ethics of care that construe a community of interconnectedness and interdependence rather than mere dependence and control. She recognizes herself in the Other, not by imposing sameness nor her host subject-position but by enacting reparative relations with those who are vulnerable to power asymmetries.

In sum, a reversal of roles and hospitality practices is enhanced by means of a transformation from a sense of self-preservation and a hostile attitude that reminds her that “[w]e live in America ... where you put your oxygen mask on first,” into the possibility of answering the demands of the otherwise alien, foreigner or guest, since “either way, the plane is going to crash. So why [not] a little kindness before she, too, is a body in a ditch on the side of the road” (*Afterlife* 48). Ultimately, Antonia does not obscure her political relationship with the Other as she is the one deciding on Mario and Estela’s behalf (*Afterlife* 128); however, her sense of unhomeliness reflects the hostility (im)migrants politically read as guests have to face in the United States. By contrast, a more positive reading of the original prescription of the host becoming ‘hostage,’ as it were the case of the history of colonization, Antonia finds a way out of the rigid rubrics of national hospitality through caretaking and un/housing practices. She is divested of her home-state while performatively embodying the hand of law that comes from outside and penetrates the inside as a way of self-preservation, security and social reorganization (Derrida 51, “violation of the inviolable”). Indeed, Antonia’s relationship with power hierarchies becomes entangled with the dynamics of dwelling and liminality that often infuse migration with vulnerability and precarity. Nonetheless, the reconfiguration of these dynamics as aptly deconstructing the hospitality metaphor is of aid to disarticulate national core tenets: mastery of space and language.

All in all, Antonia embraces a sort of “afterlife” by which she feels freed from former visions of social and hospitality practice. Through the many (re)cognitions that underly the performative rendition of hospitality within national identity, Antonia unfolds the instability of this rigid and binomial structure regarding hospitality/hostility, host/guest and the subsequent mobility/guest and immobility/host. In this vein, both readers and characters are able to navigate the multiple and nuanced spaces of the inside and the outside and their superposition, and thus traverse the threshold of the private and the public, the Self and the Other. Such duality, however, proves not to be an unbreakable dyad but a constantly negotiated open space, or encounter, that gives room to new modes and sites of and for hospitality and relatedness.

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Crossing Multiple Borders: Reyna Grande's *A Dream Called Home. A Memoir*

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze Reyna Grande's *A Dream Called Home* (2018), through the lens of crossing borders in search of home and belonging. The memoir exemplifies Patricia Hill Collins's intersectional approach, which, according to the authors of *The Matrix Reader: Examining the Dynamics of Oppression and Privilege*, "examines how race, gender, and other systems of inequality interact and intersect within a matrix of oppression and privilege" (xi). Thus, Grande's work will be examined using the intersectional approach, along with the concepts of trauma, insidious trauma, hostility, and Leo R. Chavez's "Latino Threat Narrative" to analyze representations of multiple border crossings and their effects on the main character.

Keywords: Reyna Grande, the U.S.-Mexico border, border crossings, insidious trauma, hostility, intersectional approach

Reyna Grande is a Latina author of Mexican origin, currently living and working in the U.S. She was born in Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico located in the south-western part of the country on the Pacific Ocean. She spent her early childhood there, experiencing socio-economic inequalities and hardships typical of this part of Mexico. Poverty forced her father to emigrate to the United States when Reyna was only two years old. Soon afterwards Reyna's mother followed in the footsteps of her husband, while Reyna and her siblings stayed in Iguala with their paternal grandmother. The trauma of being "left behind" will be part of Grande's future life, which she reveals in her interviews. Analyzing her and her family's experience from the perspective of an adult, Grande admits that it was even more challenging, due to the fact that they had been left in the care of people who did not want to take on this responsibility and as a result the children subsequently became victims of all kinds of abuse (Steiner 11:22). Consequently, the Mexican part of her story constitutes an inseparable element of her personal life, and references to these experiences appear in all her works.

The migrant experience and all its consequences is the theme of both her fictional story, *Across a Hundred Mountains* (2006), and two parts of her memoir, *The Distance Between Us. A Memoir* (2012) and *A Dream Called Home* (2018). In these stories Grande writes about her abandonment, the gradual breaking apart of her family as a result of immigration to the U.S., and the process of crossing the border to the U.S. The American counterpart of her story is equally important, and, combined together with the migrant experience, the two distinct stories constitute a whole that reflects the complicated and complex fate of migrants. Since I have already analyzed the roles of the border in *Across a Hundred Mountains* (2006)

and in *The Distance Between Us. A Memoir* (2012),¹ the purpose of this study is to analyze Grande's second memoir, *A Dream Called Home*, through the broad lens of crossing borders in the pursuit of home and belonging. *A Dream Called Home* is a great example of a literary representation of Patricia Hill Collins's intersectional approach, which, as the authors of *The Matrix Reader: Examining the Dynamics of Oppression and Privilege* explain, "examines the ways in which race, gender, and other systems of inequality interact and intersect as part of a matrix of oppression and privilege"(xi). Thus this work by Grande will be analyzed with the use of the intersectional approach and the frameworks of trauma and insidious trauma, hostility, and Leo R. Chavez's "Latino Threat Narrative" will be introduced to best process and understand Grande's writing.

A broad concept of the border constitutes an intrinsic element of Grande's personal life and her works. In one of her lectures, „Beyond Borders: Immigration, Trauma, and the American Dream” (2019), Grande talks about various borders that she has had to cross in her life. Starting with her illegal border crossing to the U.S. as a nine-year-old, Grande enumerates subsequent borders that she has faced in her life, namely “physical/geographical borders, language borders, cultural borders, legal borders, economic borders, education, gender and career borders, etc.” (“Beyond Borders” 28:12). As Grande admits, after crossing the physical/geographical border, she thought they “were done with borders” (“Beyond Borders” 28:11), but it soon appeared this was only the beginning of the series of both literal and metaphorical border crossings she was to experience in her life.

I have discussed various concepts of the border and their changing functions in Chicana discourse in several publications to date, and these works further outline multiple aspects of borders. Here it is worth highlighting once more the major tenets and their transformations that have reflected various roles borders play in literary and cultural productions, including in Grande's works. First of all, it is important to mention the axis that Casey and Watkins suggest in *Up Against the Wall: Re-Imagining the U.S.-Mexico Border* to introduce border-related terminology that reflects the scope each concept entails. Consequently, on one side of the spectrum there are “walls and fences” (21) that, they argue, are border markers that have been erected to separate, isolate, and keep nation-states closed. On the other extreme, they place “borderlands” (21), a space that embraces not only the political borderline, but the adjoining territories as well, creating a potential for dialogue and exchange between the two sides. The generic concept of “the border” (21) resides in the middle of this axis, between the terms that stand for more fixed and tangible concepts to more porous ones, as it combines aspects of both, being “closer to a borderline in

1 *Across a Hundred Mountains* was analyzed in Ewa Antoszek's “La Línea vs. La Frontera – Representations of the Border and Border Crossings in Grande's *Across a Hundred Mountains*.” *A View from Elsewhere*. Eds. Marcel Arbeit and Roman Tručník, (Olomouc: Palacký University Olomouc, 2014). pp. 195-214. *The Distance Between Us. A Memoir* was examined in Ewa Antoszek, “Contested Spaces/Striated Spaces: Representations of the Border in Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us: A Memoir*,” *Roczniki Humanistyczne: Anglica*, (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 2016), pp. 125-147.

terms of its putative precision but also integral to the very idea of a borderlands" (Casey and Watkins 21).

The question of the fixity versus the porousness of borders has in turn been undertaken by many of the scholars and researchers who examine how borders function in the contemporary world. The research points to contradictory facets that borders share, i.e. they become more permeable when the economic situation of a given country requires outside assistance, creating a pull factor for foreign incomers who are usually workers. And, conversely, economic fluctuations can stop this influx and lead to the closing of borders. Push factors in the country of a migrant's origins, oftentimes including wars, violence, poverty and, resulting from that, unstable political situations, increase the probability of border fixedness, both in the countries that are the final destination for migration and in the transit countries. In such cases a border's fixity becomes reinforced through extended militarization and aggravated security, which often results in the growing death toll of border crossers who are forced to take more dangerous routes, which I describe, using Achille Mbembe's concept, as "border necropolitics" or "necropolitics on the border."

All these phenomena take place on the U.S.-Mexico border. As Paul Ganster argues, "[t]here are many ways in which the U.S.-Mexican border provides a paradigmatic case of global border development" (xvi). Moreover, similar to some other borders in the world, the history of the U.S.-Mexico border and borderlands is far more complex than official or popular accounts, which for a long time have relegated to the margin the Mexican story of this space, and moreover, have typically silenced its indigenous aspect. The focus on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands as solely a route of migration erases the part of history when this space was a native land of Indigenous peoples and then, subsequently, a Mexican land, which added a Latinx aspect to the story of the borderlands. It can be argued that after 1848, the U.S.-Mexico borderlands have gradually become perceived through Anglo-American perspective which has adopted what Monika Kaup calls an "immigrant paradigm" (*Rewriting* 10). In Kaup's discourse, the original inhabitants of this land were overlooked, as their presence would have revealed the complexity of the borderlands' history and required a different perspective to describe this location. At first the communication and connection between the two sides of the border remained feasible, allowing people from both sides to live alongside each other and cross the border at will; however, the shadow of the border has become more visible, making such transborder exchanges aporetic, until they have become almost impossible. New waves of immigrants who attempted to cross to the U.S. from the south in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries only escalated already existing tensions and intensified the perception of the U.S.-Mexico border as a contentious space. Throughout the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century, the U.S. witnessed waves of hostility towards the migrants, particularly those of Latino/a origins. Depending on the U.S.' socio-economic situation and dominating political discourse, there have been periods of increased fear of migrants coming from the south. Many argue that Latinx are still treated in the U.S. as "the Other,"

which makes their situation tenuous, since, as Mike Davis claims, they are haunted in their lives by the “third border”(70) which both determines their position in the American society and oftentimes prevents them from achieving success, particularly in comparison to the Anglo-American population. Jesús Benito and Ana Manzanás describe this experience as a “repeating border” (4) that appears in the lives of migrants at different stages of their lives. Reyna Grande’s story depicted in *A Dream Called Home* illustrates such multiple border crossings she as a Latina has been experiencing in her life and the effect these literal and metaphorical journeys have had on her and her family.

As mentioned above, *A Dream Called Home* is a continuation of *The Distance Between Us. A Memoir*, retaining its autobiographical character. In *A Dream Called Home*, Grande comes back to the events described in the first memoir and complements them with more recent events from the lives of herself and her family. The memoir is divided into two parts: “Twice the Girl I Used to Be” and “The Home I Carry.” *A Dream Called Home* focuses largely on Grande’s identity dilemmas related to her status and situation as a Latina in the United States, with the author again locating this issue in the context of crossing multiple borders. Both parts contain descriptions of the narrator-character crossing subsequent borders and constructing her new identity. Another central theme in this story is family and home. Grande devotes significant space to the analysis of the situation of her family, examining how immigration has influenced their functioning and what immigration’s long-term effects have been on each family member. Grande once again does not hesitate to describe the dysfunction in her family and the difficult moments they have experienced, including her father’s alcoholism and violence; the problems of her siblings, including her sister Betty’s early pregnancy; or finally, her own relationship issues with her partners. She also acknowledges the people who have helped her by becoming her surrogate parents and supporting her in her efforts: Diane, who let Reyna live in her house and supported her in making her most important decisions; and Marta, Micah and Robin, the “strong, intelligent, hardworking women, who helped shape me into the woman I could one day become” (*A Dream* 131). This process is linked to the discovery of family stories that turn out to be much more complex than they first appeared. Journeys – to Mexico and to the past – allow Reyna to sort out her complicated present and gradually cross other borders to venture into the future. Inherent in the issue of family is her sense of alienation and the lack of acceptance, and the search for home in both the physical and metaphorical sense. As the title of the book, *A Dream Called Home*, suggests, a real home will be Reyna’s dream and she will cross many borders to fulfill this dream: from her sudden and often forced relocations, i.e. literal abandoning of the places where she lived, to the redefinition of the concept of home, which will allow her to construct a home that will be a reference point for the future.

Even though *A Dream Called Home* relates some of the issues already discussed in the first part of Grande’s memoir, one notices that they are described from a different perspective. In this story the narrator is no longer a child or a

teenager, but she is a woman entering maturity. Therefore, both the descriptions and analyses included in this story reflect an increased awareness and growing maturity of the narrator. The first part of the memoir, "Twice the Girl I Used to Be" begins with Grande's trip to UC Santa Cruz. Even though geographically this journey is not as remote as her previous trips, as any other literal or metaphorical border crossing, it evokes in Reyna the feeling of being torn, uprooted and lacking home. Relating her journey, Grande also refers to its effects:

Every minute that went by, another mile separated me from my family. We drove north on I-5, and I felt divided in half, like this highway I was on – one side going north, the other going south... Just like my hometown in Mexico, Los Angeles was now part of my past... We sacrificed so much for a shot at the American Dream, and I would be damned if I didn't make the dream mine. A broken family was the price for me to be here. Back in Mexico the distance between my parents and me had been two thousand miles. In Santa Cruz, the distance was three hundred, but emotionally, we were light-years apart, and this time, I was the one who had migrated north in search of a better life, leaving them all behind. (*A Dream* 3; 5; 10)

From the beginning of her account it is apparent that border crossing, including her first trip from Mexico to the U.S., still has an enormous influence on the life of Reyna and on her family. Moreover, Grande has become more aware of this influence, especially when the roles have reversed and she is the one departing. She gradually begins to analyze how the first border crossing and subsequent borders continue to shape her life and determine her fate. Borders have a significant impact on the malfunctioning of her family, including the lack of good relationships between children and parents, and also between the siblings, and her personal problems as well. This first border crossing to a large extent dictates her decisions as an adult.

In an interview about *A Dream Called Home*, Grande admits that it is only as an adult that she realized how this first border crossing and passing across other metaphorical borders have resulted in her PTSD. She calls this state "immigrant trauma" (Ruyak 5:43) and reflects upon how this type of trauma stays with an immigrant throughout his/her life. Grande's experience with trauma fits into a larger framework discussed in trauma studies. Janani K.S. and Manali Karmakar in their article, "Insidious Trauma: A Literature Review" provide an overview of trauma studies from their inception. Examining the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the researchers utilize the definition of trauma from one of the most well-known trauma scientists, Cathy Caruth, who defines it as "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours" (quoted in Janani and Karmakar 386). The authors also show how Caruth's model of trauma is reflected in literary productions. They quote Joshua Petersen, who "argues that trauma in

literature manifests itself through three tropes: absence, indirection and repetition” (386). In the case of Grande’s works, apart from multiple absences, the “repeating border” (Benito and Manzanás 4) is a good example of the last trope.

Janani K.S and Manali Karmakar address the critique of Caruth’s model of trauma, where the main accusation is that “she focuses on a single event of magnitude as the locus of trauma” (386), disregarding the fact that “trauma could be a prolonged phenomenon that affects the psyche not at once but slowly corrodes it every day” (386). To that end, the authors refer to an alternative concept of trauma, namely insidious trauma, that has been defined by, among others, Maria Root and Laura Brown. Quoting Maria Root’s famous essay, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality,” they provide a definition by Root, who claims that “insidious trauma [is] a form of indirect trauma... [and] is usually associated with the social status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic intrinsic to their identity is different from what is valued by those in power” (quoted in Janani and Karmakar 386). Therefore, “the experiences of insidious trauma are normalized by those power structures that marginalize and exploit certain groups of people” (Root quoted in Janani and Karmakar 386). Consequently, as Janani K.S. and Manali Karmakar argue, the concept of insidious trauma allows to understand how certain groups are particularly prone to experience this type of trauma and how insidious trauma “shapes the subjects’ worldview and sense of self” (386). Therefore, the experience of insidious trauma, according to Root, “shatters a sense of safety and security in the world of traumatized and causes a constant sense of hypervigilance through an ‘activation of survival behaviours’” (quoted in Janani and Karmakar 386). Laura Brown draws analogical conclusions, maintaining that “traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but do violence to the soul and spirit” (quoted in Janani and Karmakar 386). Another trauma researcher, Kai Erikson, puts forwards similar postulates in “Notes on Trauma and Community” and he suggests broadening of the generic concept of trauma. He argues that “in order to serve as a generally useful concept, “trauma” has to be understood as resulting from a *constellation of life experiences* as well as from a discrete happening, from a *persisting condition* as well as from an acute event” (Erikson 185). In the light of these examples from trauma research it can be argued that Grande’s first, illegal border crossing becomes a trigger of insidious trauma and every other border, every other experience of oppression or discrimination aggravates that state.

In *A Dream Called Home* it is clearly visible that the traumatic experience of Grande’s first border crossing comes back to her and even haunts her in different ways. One day when she is already a mother herself, she talks to her father in front of her new house. The sound of a police helicopter patrolling the neighborhood evokes in her head the memories of border crossing. And since she did not have an opportunity to talk about their illegal crossing with her father, she takes advantage of this situation and recollects later:

A helicopter flew by, and the sound took me into the borderlands, reminding me of the crossing that divided my life into a before and an after.

I remembered so vividly that moment when we were trying to cross, the fear of being caught by Border Patrol, of being sent back to Mexico and losing my chance at having my father back in my life. I remember how my father had been right – at nine years old, I was too little to make the crossing, and I had put everyone at risk of being caught. Sure enough, Border Patrol caught us and sent us back to Tijuana twice. It was a miracle that we made it the third time, although my father had to carry me on his back most of the way.

It was there at the U.S. border that I got my first piggyback ride from my father. “Do you remember our crossing?” I asked him.

“No,” he said. “I’ve tried to forget.” Then he lowered his drill and looked at me. “You shouldn’t think about it, Chata. What happened is already in the past. Leave it at that. Olvidalo. Move on with your life” . . .

As I held my son in my arms, I began to understand the paradox of our immigrant experience. Despite the trauma I had suffered from my father’s decision to immigrate, the same decision would allow me to be the parent he could never be. . . . My father’s greatest gift to me was that I would get to be the parent who stays. (*A Dream* 201)

Even though years have passed since they crossed the U.S.-Mexico border illegally, the memory of this experience is still in her subconscious. And even if it seems to be dormant for some time, an accidental trigger – in this case a helicopter flying over their heads – can make this event come back to her. Therefore, immigrants are particularly liable to experience insidious trauma, since they undergo “daily incidents of marginalization, objectification, dehumanization, intimidation, et cetera” (“Insidious Trauma”). Moreover, as it was in Grande’s case, because the first border crossing was not successful, the related oppressive events – such as being caught by the Border Patrol, being kept in a detention center, or deportation – only continue to aggravate trauma. Finally, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the journey from Central America to the north can be perilous or even lethal, which is illustrated in Ivannia Villalobos-Vindas’s documentary, *Casa en tierra ajena* (*Home in a Foreign Land*), that discusses the issue of forced migration from the Northern Triangle.

In Grande’s case, insidious trauma leads to the feeling of split identity, which undermines her sense of security in the world that surrounds her. With age Grande becomes more and more aware of these inner divisions and she begins to name them:

Because I was a child immigrant, my identity was split; I often felt like an outcast for not being completely Mexican but not fully American either. The border was still inside of me. Physically I had crossed it, but psychologically I was still running across that no man’s land. I was still caught back there, and so were my parents because the truth was that we were never the same after

we crossed the border. We all changed. Perhaps it was because we had left something of ourselves behind, the way migrants leave a shoe, an empty can of tuna, a plastic water bottle, a shirt. What we each left on the border was a piece of our soul, our heart, our spirit – clinging to the branches of a bush, flapping in the wind. (*A Dream* 35)

Grande takes up on these dilemmas and dichotomies in the second part of her memoir when talking with her friend, Rosa:

The duality, the light and dark, the two faces of the moon. I thought about how upon our border crossing, we take on new identities in subtle ways, and other times in drastic ways – like using a borrowed identity to work or having to lose one of our last names so that we can fit in. Hadn't I gone from being Reyna Grande Rodríguez in Mexico to simply Reyna Grande in the U.S.? Hadn't my sister gone from being Magloria to Maggie? Hadn't Gibran Khalil Gibran gone through a forced identity change when he had immigrated to the U.S. as well? Marta once said I was twice the girl I used to be. And she was right. Being split in half had forced me to create two versions of myself. I went home thinking about the duality of being an immigrant, our split identities, the cleaving of our hearts and bodies – half of our heart remained in our homeland, the other was here with us. One foot remained rooted in our native soil while with our other foot we dug into American soil to anchor ourselves and weather the storm. As with the moon, there is the face that we immigrants show to the world, but our second face is the one we keep hidden in darkness so that no one can see us weeping. (*A Dream* 241)

These two reflections from different stages of Grande's life illustrate an immigrant's dilemmas considering their status. And even though some immigrants are supported by their new friends – as is Reyna by her teacher, Marta, who is Grande's mentor and helps her out in difficult moments, the support is not enough to resolve doubts nor strengthen one's self-confidence. Marta tries to convince Reyna that her duality should be treated as an asset, since owing to her hybrid status, she gains rather than loses: "You are now bilingual, bicultural, and binational. You are not less. You are more" (*A Dream* 96). Initially, though, Reyna does not perceive her situation that way; conversely, her hybrid identity aggravates her sense of alienation. Only with time does she reach a conclusion that Marta has been right, and this moment will then trigger Reyna's first step to undertake a challenge and start fighting for herself.

Insidious trauma also has an influence on the aforementioned sense of alienation related to hybrid identities. Because of insidious trauma, Grande experiences much more intensely her alienation, failures, and disappointments. For example, immediately after arriving in Santa Cruz, Reyna feels like she does not belong there. As it turns out soon, this move is like a journey to a completely different world, when the main character leaves the old world behind her, and in

the new world, she paradoxically both stands out and is invisible at the same time. First of all, moving out of a Latino neighborhood in Los Angeles to a white Santa Cruz she “felt hyper-aware of [her] foreignness, [her] brownness” (*A Dream* 14). In such circumstances even an ordinary act of grocery shopping resembles a border crossing. Reyna first visits Kresge Food store – a students’ co-op in which she is not a member and thus she cannot do her shopping. Moreover, inside Kresge Food, Grande feels like she is on a different planet, as the store sells “things I have never eaten in my life or even known existed” (*A Dream* 19). She has a similar experience at a local supermarket, where again, there are goods that are completely unfamiliar to her. Only after some time does she discover Esperanza Market with Mexican products, which alleviates her feeling of estrangement and becomes a substitute of home in Santa Cruz.

Grande feels different not only because of her skin color, but also due to her origins and status. Even though she already holds a green card, which legalized her stay in the U.S., the residence card has “the words ‘RESIDENT ALIEN imprinted... with accusing blue letters” (*A Dream* 8). The words keep reminding her that she is still a guest in this country. Therefore, as she herself admits, “I felt inferior to my younger siblings” (*A Dream* 15) who were born in the U.S. and held a full American citizenship. Already one of her first conversations with her roommate illustrates Reyna’s awareness of her complex and complicated status, and her hypersensitivity about it:

“Where are you from?” she [Carolyn] asked.

The question always confused me when asked by a white person. Because I was an immigrant, the question “Where are you from?” made me wonder if I was being asked about the place of my birth, my nationality, my cultural identity, or simply the city where I now lived. It was an innocent question, but it was a question that made me think about my foreignness, a question that made me raise my guard.

“I’ve come from L.A., but I’m originally from Mexico,” I said. It was my way of admitting that I wasn’t from here. *Yes, I’m a foreigner, and everything from my brown skin to my accent to my Mexican birth certificate prevents me from laying claim to the U.S. even though I have a green card that gives me permission to be here.* I couldn’t simply say I was from Los Angeles, which might imply I was American born. I wasn’t. I was an outsider, and I had to claim that part of me so that no one could make me feel ashamed about being an immigrant. So that later I could say, *I never pretended to be something I was not.* (*A Dream* 11-12)

An ostensibly innocent question, one often used as an icebreaker, invokes a plethora of feelings in Reyna, from uncertainty, through shame, to the need of self-justification and defense. This status of an outsider, in spite of her legalized stay in the U.S., functions in Reyna’s life as the aforementioned Davis’s “third border” (70) and controls her social interactions, often restricting them.

These examples of multiple alienation Grande suffers and her equivocal status illustrate Jacques Derrida's concept of hostipitality. Derrida describes this term in his well-known essay, "Hostipitality," where he explains an apparently paradoxical interdependence of hostility and hospitality or, to be more precise, a potential of hostility that exists in any act of hospitality, which leads to the creation of the third construct, hostipitality. Derrida argues that unconditional hospitality is impossible, since it is always limited by conditions and restrictions, and therefore, it can quickly transform into hostility that is most often directed at the Other – a migrant, a foreigner, a stranger, a newcomer. Due to that, it is immigrants who frequently experience hostipitality, and can include Latinx people living in the U.S. In their case the situation can be even more complex, as even though it is not a homogenous group and its members have multiple statuses, they are often perceived as recent immigrants in the U.S. It is also related to the dominance of Monika Kaup's immigrant paradigm in the mainstream discourse, as mentioned above. Superiority of an immigrant paradigm over the nation-based paradigm in the discourse both disturbs its balance and allows for an unjust treatment of a whole, diverse social group, as well as oversimplifies the complex history of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

Another issue that prompts Grande's experience of hostipitality is class differences. Reyna becomes increasingly aware of them when she moves through subsequent stages of her education. Even though she is better educated than her parents and becomes the first person in her family to graduate from college, the educational process makes her realize that she has at least one more border to overcome, which is the lower socioeconomic status of her family. Related to that are the economic and social constraints from her childhood which become more acute with time. They concern not only these most visible differences, such as the fact that her white colleagues are rarely first generation college students, but instead the offspring of parents or grandparents who attended universities. Grande discovers that due to her family's low social status these childhood deficiencies affect other aspects of her life, including Mexican culture. Although Reyna treats Mexican culture as her own, native culture – a metaphorical haven that allows her to face challenges on a daily basis, she also realizes that her knowledge of what she regards as her own culture is quite fragmentary. Her friends, mentors and teachers help her to fill the gaps, and they inspire Reyna to learn more about Mexican culture. From them she learns about folklórico which, as she describes, "was the source of pride, a rich cultural tradition that celebrates the unique history of my native country through dance. In addition to honoring our indigenous roots, folklórico also celebrates el mestizaje – the cultural intermixing – that took place in Mexico" (*A Dream* 116). One of her friends, Erica, tells Reyna about strong Mexican women who can become an inspiration for her, such as Frida Kahlo, who "turn[ed] her pain into art" (*A Dream* 115). Owing to such lessons Grande gradually discovers sources for inspiration – for example, learning Kahlo's story, Reyna admits: "From that day forward, Frida Kahlo became my hero, too. Especially when I discovered her famous double self-portrait, *Las Dos Fridas*. I saw myself in that painting. The Two Reynas holding hands, the

two versions of me – the Mexican and the American – holding tightly to each other. It was by looking at this painting that I finally understood what Marta had meant. I was twice the girl I used to be” (*A Dream* 116).

One of the factors that most reveals class differences and Reyna's status is language. Here Reyna's estrangement is magnified. As a child she has to study English, and she abandons Spanish. Grande comes to learn that this process is described as “subtractive bilingualism” and it is typical of immigrants' children who learn the second language at the cost of their native tongue (Ruyak 7:12). Apart from that, since she arrives in the U.S. as a child, she will learn a new language, while her parents will have difficulties, and in fact her mother will never learn English. In an interview with Beth Ruyak Grande admits that she has been ashamed of her mother for a very long time. Because her mother did not speak English, and the inability to speak the language of the country where she lived testified to her mother's otherness (7:43). It was such a problem for Grande that later on she did not teach her own children how to speak Spanish (Ruyak 7:43). Finally when Grande wants to retrieve her native tongue and enrolls in Spanish classes it turns out that her Spanish also has deficiencies, which indicate her origins. As she reveals:

I had known that the language I had inherited from my parents wasn't perfect – their grammar and vocabulary reflected their poverty and lack of education – but I hadn't truly known until then how riddled with “mistakes” our Spanish was. We spoke words that were mispronounced, words that didn't exist, verbs that were conjugated completely wrong... I also discovered that I spoke a third language that described who I was – a mixture of two cultures, two languages, born from the collision of two identities – Spanglish. Not only did I speak incorrect Spanish because of my family's poverty, but growing up in America had added yet another layer to my native tongue. (*A Dream* 94)

This situation exacerbates the feeling of otherness in Reyna, as it turns out that the command of her native tongue which she has taken for granted is far from being a metaphorical anchor for her. Therefore, the question arises what language is her language, the one that she can use to express herself. On the one hand, at university she tutors Anglo-American students on how to write papers, and she is surprised to discover that these are people “whose native language was English but who had worse grammar than ESL students and couldn't write a decent paragraph in their native tongue” (*A Dream* 33). In this situation her role has reversed – she turns from an outsider into a host. On the other hand, when she speaks English, her accents is still noticeable, and as a result, she is still perceived as a guest in the U.S. An analogical situation takes places when she comes back to Mexico, and a taxi driver in Mexico City asks her, “You aren't from here, are you?” (*A Dream* 44). When Reyna denies, he says: “I can hear America in your voice” (*A Dream* 45). During this visit Grande realizes that also in Mexico she is not perceived as a host but as a guest. She admits sadly: “I was no longer Mexican enough. Everyone treated me like an

outsider, as if I was no longer one of them, as if I had lost my right to call Mexico my home" (*A Dream* 44). The situation gets complicated due to the fact that she does not feel herself in any of these languages – only the mixture of English and Spanish, Spanglish, reflects her hybrid identity. Writing becomes a rescue for her, as one cannot hear an accent in her writing. But before she realizes that, she will have to cross multiple borders on her path to self-acceptance.

The experience and representation of oppression, insidious trauma, and hostility illustrates the aforementioned intersectional approach that influences Latinx living in the U.S. As the authors of *The Matrix Reader* argue, social location is determined by primary statuses, which include "race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality and [is] informed by factors such as age, religious orientation, and ableism" (2). Apart from that, "these statuses and factors interact, intersect, and shift according to the various contexts in which we find ourselves" (Ferber et al. 2). Moreover, "[p]rimary statuses determine not only how we see ourselves, but also the manner in which we are viewed by others and the treatment we subsequently receive at both the individual and institutional levels" (Ferber et al. 2). In such a social system some groups are particularly vulnerable to oppression and, as Patricia Hill Collins maintains, "the interconnected axes of oppression and privilege form a hierarchical matrix of domination that affects our lived experience" (quoted in Ferber et al. 2). In Grande's case the specific attitude to Latinx immigrants in the U.S. is also a significant factor that should be included in this matrix, namely "The Latino Threat Narrative" described by Leo R. Chavez in *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens and the Nation*.² Chavez analyzes the process of perception of Latinx immigrants as the Other, and illegal strangers with the use of The Latino Threat Narrative that defines Latinx as different from other immigrants – and in this way, particularly dangerous for the illusory stability of the American nation-state. The Latino Threat Narrative describes Latinx immigrants as a threat to American economy as well as well-being and standard of life of non-immigrant citizens. This threat is based on the illegal status of Latinx in the U.S., their alleged unwillingness to adapt and assimilate, or conversely their possible attempt at recovering the territories of the Southwest. Chavez examines historical and legal foundations of anti-Latinx sentiments in the U.S. with resulting specific images of Latinx immigrants, as well as the role of the media in sustaining stereotypes and discriminating against Latinx. Anti-Latinx sentiments can be exacerbated by various media accounts related to migration issues in general. Such an approach inevitably results in the mainstream perception of Latinx immigrants as illegal aliens, encroaching upon illusory integrity of the nation-state and thus threatening its status quo. At the same time these very strangers are from time to time needed to rescue the American economy, since they often perform jobs unpopular among American citizens, only to become redundant when the market gets saturated or undergoes fluctuations. Analyzing these processes, Justin Akers Chacón and Mike Davis provide various examples how the U.S. profits

2 I examine this concept in my analysis of *Casa en tierra ajena* in "Hostipitality and Solidarity in Ivannia Villalobos-Vindas' *Casa en tierra ajena* (2016)."

from the southern border, including the benefits from the Bracero Program and its legacy, *maquiladoras*, NAFTA or all these non-institutionalized forms of work that migrant workers crossing from Mexico perform (*No One Is Illegal*). However, this part of history is not very well-known among mainstream audiences and the media frequently propagate the image of Latinx as a homogenous group comprised of people with scarce education and propensity for breaking the law.

Grande as a Latina immigrant from a poor family was much more vulnerable to experience multiple oppression and discrimination resulting both from intersectionality and The Latino Threat Narrative. After the stage of uncertainty, inner conflicts and doubts, Reyna decides to fight for herself. She starts the fight in small steps and gradually finds support in other people, who help her cross subsequent borders. When she takes part in protests against Prop 209 – legislation that changed California's state constitution and ended affirmative action there – she discovers other Latinx students and gains this feeling of community, which makes her realize that she “had a voice and that it was [her] responsibility to use it” (*A Dream* 39). As Grande admits, “the protest did have a profound effect – on me, that is. It led me to a place of belonging and brought me closer to making Santa Cruz and the university my home” (*A Dream* 40). These activities incite other transformations, and writing plays a key role in them. Grande reveals how creativity rescues her in difficult moments in *The Distance Between Us*, but *A Dream Called Home* describes the whole long and convoluted path to become a writer and also explains in detail the many functions writing has served in her life. As she states, “I turned to writing to save myself, to record and remember, to give meaning to my experiences” (*A Dream* 35), but also to retrieve the Mexican part of her story, since her memories of Mexico became blurred and almost lost (*A Dream* 36). Grande admits that writing, in addition to being an escape for her, gave her the power to dream: “I hoped someday to write my way into a place where I finally belonged, where I finally felt I was ‘enough’” (*A Dream* 36).

However, here Grande also faces many challenges due to her location in the “matrix of domination” and oppression (Ferber et al. 2). In her writing classes, Grande's stories are not understood by her teacher or her classmates. When her white friends write “stories about drinking, doing drugs, going to parties, and having sex – the teacher praised them as if they had just written a masterpiece worthy of a Pulitzer” (*A Dream* 75). Her stories set in Iguala are met with criticism, since the events she describes are so ontologically remote for her classmates and teachers that they undermine their plausibility. When Grande describes a flood similar to the one she includes in *Across a Hundred Mountains*, she hears: “You have wild imagination” (*A Dream* 75); “Your work is over-the-top and overwritten” (*A Dream* 75), is a reaction to her story about a girl who had to go to school barefoot, since her parents did not have money to buy shoes for her, and who was punished in school for being left-handed. Another accusation that she hears is: “Your work is too flowery and full of clichés” (*A Dream* 75), when she writes a story of a woman who drowned in a local well while washing clothes. This criticism forces Reyna to reconsider her

choices. She recollects this in the following way: "There were times when I wanted to run out of my classroom and never come back. *What am I doing here?* I thought. *Who do I think I am to even consider that my stories are worth telling?*" (*A Dream* 75). Similar to an incident in elementary school when her work was rejected from the writing contest since it was written in Spanish, Grande encounters another rejection: "Now I am experiencing the same disapproval. The experiences I put on the page were so foreign to everyone in my class, I might as well have written them in another language" (*A Dream* 75). Being misunderstood and othered is yet another element of hostility in her life, when Reyna formally participates in the classes, has the right to speak, yet her voice is not understood and thus ignored.

In spite of these adverse circumstances Reyna gets support from other teachers and continues her struggle. Marta Navarro – her teacher of the Chicano literature course encourages Grande to continue writing, in spite of the obstacles and to describe her personal experiences in these stories. As a result, Reyna writes "Under the Guamúchil Tree." Micah Perks, her creative writing teacher, addresses Reyna's complaint about the books that never describe her own migrant experience, since the books on immigration that Grande knew, told the stories from a perspective of an adult. She gives Reyna advice: "Reyna, sometimes you have to write the book that you want to read" (*A Dream* 127). Another influential person, Grande's mentor, María Amparo Escandón, makes her realize that she has a voice and she should use it to talk about her experiences. As a result, Grande begins to find analogies with other marginalized groups, since, as she admits, "[a]s a woman of color and an immigrant, I know what it was to be marginalized, to have to prove constantly how American I was, always to have to fight for my right to remain" (*A Dream* 126). The turning point occurs when Reyna applies for the Emerging Voices grant, where she has to explain why she is the right person for the grant. She argues in front of the committee: "Of the books I've read about the immigrant experience, not one has been written by an immigrant herself, as if we were voiceless," I said. 'As an immigrant, I have a voice and I want to be heard.' 'If you accept me in the program, this is what I will fight for – inclusion and diversity'" (*A Dream* 232). This awareness that she is not the only one fighting to speak with her own voice and to be heard sustains her in these efforts. When she first sends *Across a Hundred Mountains* to the publishing house, the editor suggests changes that would make the book address mainstream audiences better (*A Dream* 277-278). However, this time Reyna is too self-confident and too decided to surrender. When the book comes out with a different publisher, in its original version, Grande feels "[she] had finally built a home that [she] could carry" (*A Dream* 316) – the concept she conceived earlier, inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa. Fascinated with this idea Grande relates, how Anzaldúa wrote: "I am a turtle. Wherever I go, I carry my home on my back. It was then that I understood what I needed to do. If I could become a turtle and build a home that I could carry on my back I would never feel homeless again" (*A Dream* 98).

The concept of home that can be carried on one's back inspires Grande to look for her own place on the earth. In *A Dream Called Home*, as the title suggests,

the motif of a search for home returns cyclically with each move Reyna makes, her travels to Mexico, and her growing self-awareness. During one of the trips to Iguala Reyna learns a true story of her family – the story that is a tale of unfulfilled female love and violence and abuse that women in her family have experienced for generations. It is then that she realizes that Mexico with its patriarchal culture of *machismo* and *marianismo* cannot become her home. She recollects: “I hated my culture for breeding these men who would treat women as if they were merely objects to be used and abused” (*A Dream* 149). This cycle of violence is exemplified by the life of her maternal grandmother, Abuelita Chinta, who “was so used to being victimized that even after he [the grandfather] died she was still a faithful wife” (*A Dream* 149). She at the same time perpetuated this violence against her own daughter, Reyna’s mother, forcing her to marry Reyna’s father, as a result of which “[her] siblings and her hadn’t been products of love, but [their] grandmother’s abuse, mistrust and betrayal” (*A Dream* 222). And even though Grande decides to break this cycle of oppression and violence, at the beginning she fails to do that when she becomes pregnant with her ex-partner, Francisco. Grande decides to have the baby, but she feels guilty about perpetuating this cycle of violence against women in her family. As she admits: “Worse, I had given it [a baby] a father who only liked making babies but not raising them, who would not be there to guide it, love it, and teach it how to be a good human being” (*A Dream* 184).

Pregnancy motivates Reyna to buy her own house, as the places where she has lived – whether a rented apartment or a room at her brother’s house in East L.A., do not qualify as a dream home. However, when she finally buys her first house, owing to the program “The Teacher Next Door,” it is far from an ideal. Its description resembles that of Esperanza’s depiction of her house in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (4). First of all, the house is located in a dangerous neighborhood. Reyna moves in to South Central, which “was an area notorious for its crime and violence from gangs such as the infamous Crips and Bloods; its troubled history, such as the Watts Riots of 1965, and most recently, the 1992 riots sparked by the beating of Rodney King by white police officers who were not held accountable for what they did” (*A Dream* 190). It is one of the most dangerous districts in Los Angeles, and the house when she first sees it looks terrible: it is derelict, decrepit and smells bad. It is full of trash both inside and in the yard, and since it is located “directly in the flight path to LAX” (*A Dream* 191) right on a busy street, the noise pollution adds to the sense of chaos and temporality. Reyna looks at the house as if it were “one of life’s jokes – to send me the opposite of the dream house I had fantasized about” (*A Dream* 191). After a momentary breakdown, though, she claims: “I knew in my heart that this house was the equivalent of the first draft of a novel. And as every good writer knows, the first draft is always shitty” (*A Dream* 192). It is the house where she is going to bring up her son and therefore, she needs to turn it into the space that will allow her to do that. Her father helps her build the fence that is to protect them against vanguards and homeless, and after, he also does some renovations. It is an important and symbolic moment in Reyna’s life, since, as she recollects, “[f]

or the first time, I found myself reconnecting with my father" (*A Dream* 199) and "I realized that for the second time in my life, my father had built me a house, but I was the one building myself a home" (*A Dream* 276).

She will construct this home with her future husband, Cory, who will accompany her in crossing subsequent borders. Grande initially has mixed feelings about this relationship, as having fallen in love with a white man, she once again has to face the legacy of Mexican women. She has this notion that she behaves like la Malinche from a traditional version of Hernan Cortés's conquest (*A Dream* 257). Her uncertainty is intensified by the fact that in spite of Cory's family's kindness to her, she feels like a stranger among them, since, as she recollects, "[t]his was middle-class, white America and so unfamiliar to me that it felt like being in another country. I participated in their games, family outings, and activities, but no matter how welcoming they were, a part of me still felt like an outsider. My shyness and insecurity were in hyper mode with all these new people and experiences" (*A Dream* 312). Here Marta, her teacher, comes to the rescue, reminding Reyna that the true story of la Malinche is much more complex than the official legend. At this stage of her life Grande realizes that her dream home must be built on her conditions, and what the home will look like and whether she will be happy there depends solely on her. In this way Grande does what Monika Kaup describes in her *Rewriting North American Borders in Chicano and Chicana Narrative*, namely deconstructs the house founded on patriarchal principles and re-constructs it, according to her own, feminist rules (201). It is a long-lasting process that involves crossing multiple physical and metaphorical borders, which will lead her to a point when she will be able to carry this home with her, as did Anzaldúa, her inspiration. Carrying the home on one's back, means, as Kaup explains, "that home belongs to the *mestiza*, rather than the *mestiza* belonging into the home" (86) and "[t]he revision implies thus not an all-out rejection of the idea of home (or, by extension, the collective house of ethnicity), but a reversal of relations of ownership and a radical remapping of geographical location" (86).³ Such an approach serves as a model for other writers of Mexican origin, and owing to that, Grande finds her own version of home where she can be herself and express her own language.

In one of the podcasts entitled "Two Border Crossings, 33 Years Apart" Grande relates her accidental meeting with Hector – a migrant from Guatemala (<https://themoth.org/storytellers/reyna-grande>). While talking to him she realizes similarities to her own story and her memory returns to the day when she crossed the U.S.-Mexico border illegally. Conversing with Hector, Reyna remembers the feelings she had when talking to her students once, who, as she reveals in *A Dream Called Home*, "didn't speak English, but in their eyes I could see the desire to find a place to belong, a place where they could feel safe. Their stories were so similar to my own. Broken homes, broken families – that was the price we all had paid for a shot at the American Dream" (*A Dream* 188). However, now, 33 years later,

3 I also use these quotations in my analysis of ethnic houses included in *Out of the Margins: Identity Formation in Contemporary Chicana Writings* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Warszawa, Wien, 2012).

the political situation is completely different and Hector has hardly any chance of getting a green card. This meeting reminds her why she writes, because, as she admits, she has to “keep on writing and fighting for all those fatherless daughters and daughterless fathers separated by the border” (“Two Border Crossings” 13:14). As a co-editor of *Somewhere We are Human*, she creates such a space where various migrant voices can be heard. She also perceives her writing as a metaphorical tribute to those who have been stopped at one of the multiple borders migrants have to cross. Describing these transformations in her life, she relates the difficulties that she has had to face and depicts how the border and border crossing operate at different ontological levels. Her memoir shows how the aforementioned “repeating border” (Benito and Manzananas 4) or Davis’s “third border” (70) function in migrants’ lives. Grande has crossed this “repeating border” several times and these crossings through geographical and psychological borderlands contribute to the construction of her hybrid identity. Owing to that, the border will always play an important role in the migrant’s life, both literally and metaphorically.

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Réka M. Cristian

Healing Processes in Aurora Levins Morales's *Remedios* and *Medicine Stories*

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Abstract: The article maps the healing processes contained in Aurora Levins Morales's two works, *Remedios* and *Medicine Stories*, in which the author combines life narratives, history, botany, autobiography and fiction in a synergic way. Levins Morales considers life as a net of ecosystems, where the writer works as an "organic intellectual" by creating stories that have a certain power, including a healing potential. Levins Morales uses medicinal history and general history "to cure the wounds of a deeply colonized sense of ourselves" by charting a mosaic of histories with a microhistorical strategy that deconstruct compounds of mainstream history and replace them with the untold, idiosyncratic histories of generations of women. Besides texts, the process of this deconstruction, too, holds a curative power that can heal even transgenerational traumas.

Keywords: Aurora Levins Morales, *Remedios*, *Medicine Stories*, curandera, healing, women, trauma, generations, feminism, ecosystem, microhistory

"Curandera, you knew
there were no *yerbitas* here."
"Oh, there's a few," I said.

Gloria Anzaldúa *The Curandera*

Aurora Levins Morales: Latinx Activist and Curandera Writer

Aurora Levins Morales (b. 1954) defined herself in one of her poems as "child of the Americas," who was "born at the crossroads" ("Child of the Americas" 79). She is today one of the most influential Latinx writers, who "was prominent among the first generation of U.S. feminist of color writers in the 1980s" and, as many readers and critics agree, "her work today is just as groundbreaking but differently so" (Bost 186). Two of Levins Morales's publications, *Getting Home Alive* (1986) and *Cosecha and Other Stories* (2014), were co-authored in a "dialogic creative process" (Cristian 20) with her mother, Rosario Morales, with whom she also contributed to the innovative feminist volume *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa in 1981. In 1998, Levins Morales published a book of eighteen essays titled *Medicine Stories: History, Culture, and the Politics of Integrity*, which was republished in 2019 in a revised form of sixteen essays and with a new title, *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals*, one of her most intriguing works on the curative potential of narratives. Her other publications include works of history and feminism such as *Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History*

of *Puertorriqueñas* (1998). She also co-authored a Pan-Latina anthology known as *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (2001). Besides, Levins Morales published a combined volume of essays and poems, *Kindling: Writings On the Body* (2013), alongside two, more recent volumes of poetry entitled *Silt: Prose Poems* (2019) and *Rimonium: Ritual Poetry of Jewish Liberation* (2024).

Overall, Levins Morales's work focuses on the cultural cross-fertilization among peoples of Northern Anglo-America, Latin America and those living in Caribbean cultures by embodying a "syncretism of culturally complex Americas mirrored in the self-reflexive portrait of the lyrical and narratorial texts" (Cristian 22, 28) she wrote over time. Rooted in this context, the paper examines two of her works, *Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas* (1998) and *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals* (2019) from the vantage point of the writer as healer and scrutinizes various strategies resulting in personal and communal healing processes by combining life narratives, history, botany, autobiography and fiction in a microhistorical synergy.

Levins Morales has been part of the Latinx movement, which "initiated a large-scale renarrativization of the master account of U.S. history" (McCracken 12) and of American literature and culture, involving a large number of Latinas publishing political essays, short stories next to volumes of fiction. In the group of more contemporary, new Latina narrativists she was enlisted among "Castillo, Cisneros, Denise Chávez, Corpi, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Mary Helen Ponce, Nicholasa Mohr, Rosario Morales, ... Carole Fernández, Carmen de Monteflores, Gina Valdés, Sheila Ortiz-Taylor, Alma Luz Villanueva, Margarita Cota-Cárdenas, Helena María Viramontes, Patricia Preciado Martin, and Beverly Silva" (McCracken 12), writers combining life narratives and autobiography in a synergic way with fiction, as well as poetry fused with sustainable activism, weaving their intersectional identities into a unique, transnational experience that involved, as Anna Marie Sandoval put it, living "within and among many borders: geopolitical, spiritual, racial, ethnic, and sexual" (97). Along these lines for example, for Levins Morales the Latino/Latina/Latinx is a term she acknowledges as complicated because it obscures "heritage as the original peoples of these lands," with many Latinos being actually "displaced Indigenous people or descendants of Indigenous people" (Melgar 2023).

In this heterogeneous context, for Levins Morales the perspective and the political practice of intersectionality is not only based on her identity as disabled Latina, Puerto Rican, Jewish, mixed-class, single mother feminist but is also "fundamentally ecological," as she explains, "insisting on the organic" side of all things (Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories* 25). This is an overarching approach to what Levins Morales writes about in her works because she considers life as a net of ecosystems that "has its feedback loops and tipping points, moments of crisis and renewal and transition into different successional stages, its key species whose absence or alteration would set off cascades of consequences that change everything" (*Medicine Stories* 26). As a "certified organic intellectual" (Levins Morales, *Telling to Live* 27), this is the ground on which she stands and from which

she has been writing; this ground is at the root of her story's power, including the healing potential of her stories and texts.

Levins Morales's *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals*, which was published in 2019 as the updated form of *Medicine Stories: History, Culture, and the Politics of Integrity*, "offers a revised and expanded version of the 1998 collection that confirmed the author as a key voice of social justice activism," with the reworked book drawing especially "on her personal experience and history as a disabled and chronically ill Puerto Rican Ashkenazi Jew living in the United States, as well as on years of collective organizing, thinking, and writing about social issues" (Lajoie 500-501). Since the volume is based on an authentic, personal involvement, it comes natural to read it as both "a collection of information about a person's health that allows the person to manage and track his or her own health information" in the form of personal health record (PHR) or personal medical history (as the National Cancer Institute defines it) and also one that involves "the story of a life" in various forms involving "a memoir, a tribute, a life story, an autobiography, a biography, an oral history;" but it can also function as "legacy letter or ethical will"—as the Association of Personal Historians (APH) defines it. Moreover, for the reader, both *Medicine Stories* function as microhistories, since they fit in the definition by Natalie Zemon Davis for the term. Microhistories are mostly "letters and diaries, autobiographies, memoirs, family histories," alongside "literary sources—plays, lyric poems, and stories—which, whatever their relation to the real lives of specific people, show us what sentiments and reactions authors considered plausible for a given period" that function as "documents of self-revelation" (1-2). Both volumes of *Medicine Stories* emphasize the specificity of the historical actor's experience within deep, hidden historical structures and adhere to all facets of Zemon Davis's definition subsequently functioning as documents of self-revelation plausible for a given time, place and individual.

Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals is thus a set of self-referential, personal narratives embedded within the grand narratives of history and science. The discursive patterns and the themes employed in the book transgress the boundary of disciplines and discuss traumas, illnesses and therapies, building an intriguing combination of subjective and objective history, on the stable terrain of two early works published both in 1998, *Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas* and *Medicine Stories: History, Culture, and the Politics of Integrity*. The first publication—as the writer confesses on her own webpage—was part of her doctoral dissertation in Women's Studies and History and contained information that most "official histories have considered unimportant," while it questioned "the purpose of history" with the aim to see of "how it can serve the urgent needs of the present and help to construct a better future" (auroralevinsmorales.com). Levins Morales's goal in writing *Remedios* was, as the author explains, to induce texts and practices of medicinal history—and generally history—"to cure the wounds of a deeply colonized sense of ourselves" by charting "the course of our resistance, throughout millennia, to everything that tried to rob us of our humanity"

(auroralevinsmorales.com). Accordingly, the Puerto Rican author structured her mosaic of histories in such a way that it would deconstruct mainstream history and replace it with the subjective histories of generation of women in time, all based on information and sources that can be found in the list of sources of “La Botanica” (Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories* 209-228) and in the so-called “Medicine Cabinet” (Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories* 232-233), which specifies books on herbal remedies used for traditional cures. The curative history starts with a ‘plant-based’ “Preface” (Levins Morales, *Remedios* xxiii—xxix) involving *yerba bruja* or the witch’s herb (Bryophyllum pinnatum, fam. Crassulaceae), known also as the life plant, which has multiple healing properties and functions as a metaphor for the book’s strategy for healing through written narration but can also refer to the traditional healer as *bruja*, the witch.

Reflecting back on the process of writing *Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas*, Levins Morales used the strategy of drawing parallels between the lives of women in the Caribbean and her own experience, when she writes that

throughout the writing of *Remedios* I was simultaneously engaged in two tasks: digging up the histories of Puerto Rican and related women and their responses to the often brutal conditions of their lives; and recovering the buried memories of my own experience of, and responses to, brutality. I used my own history to help me understand the choices of women long dead, and increasingly the lives of these women from different centuries and lands gave me insight and strength to face what had happened to me. In fact, I began therapy and the graduate school program in which I researched and wrote *Remedios* within two weeks of each other. I do not think this was accidental. I created for myself the possibility of healing my own wounds as I explored the collective wounds of Puerto Rican women’s oppression and the medicinal powers of history. I became my own laboratory. It is the laboratory of an herbalist. One who gathers what is growing wild, and with the help of handed-down recipes, a little fire and water, and a feel for plants, prepares tinctures, concentrating faint traces of aromatic oils, potent resins capable of stopping a heart or healing it. The history I gathered here is like the medicinal plants growing in a long-abandoned garden. (xxv)

For the author, the garden and the laboratory share similar facets, just as her biography and the personal medical history of her traumas and disability do. In addition to rewriting Puerto Rican women’s histories, she also talks about the therapy she underwent while she was writing *Remedios*, that is, the book of remedies.

Akin books with *Remedios* regarding the medicinal powers of reinterpreting history are the first and the second editions of *Medicine Stories*. In these two, later publications, Levins Morales also blends personal histories of pain and trauma with historical and scientific data, transforming microhistorical issues into mirrors with which she reflects on the predominant global narratives. As Corinne Lajoie writes,

“the most directly significant contribution of *Medicine Stories* to contemporary disability studies is Levins Morales’s framing of oppression as the most widespread and systematically reproduced source of trauma,” which, according to the critic, “uncover[s] the massification of global structures of oppression as large-scale individual and collective injury” (501). Fighting oppression of various kinds, the author “spent seven years writing *Remedios*,” while she crafted her “identity as a historian that was not like that of any other historians;” at this point in her life, Levins Morales knew she recreated a history of women by women with the use of “a lot of metaphors from medicinal healing” (Voices 85). She even confessed in the interview with Kelly Anderson, that

I kept thinking that the history that I wanted to tell bore the same relationship to the history that mostly was available, that healing traditions in the community bore to the pharmaceutical corporations’ products and that also that researching and writing this history in academic language and sticking it in a university library somewhere was the equivalent of discovering AZT [azidothymidine, an anti-HIV drug] and then making it cost a million bucks—you know, that it had to be available to people, and that literary language made the stories available. (Voices 85)

In both *Remedios* and *Medicine Stories*, Levins Morales takes the hidden accounts, mostly oral stories of women and weaves them into new, curative texts superposed to the grand narratives of official history, a strategy Gertrude Stein used in her fictional account of remaking the immigrant American history through reading genealogical ties in *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family’s Progress* (1925). Unlike Stein’s characters, the Latinas of Levins Morales are real persons and so, her accounts are bound to undeniable authentic life experiences that materialize in internalized modes of oppression and various historical traumas, seen as

a big backpack full of rocks we haul around on our backs. It slows us down, tires us out, and skews our aim. There’s a left tradition of seeing attention to our psyches as “navel gazing,” a self-indulgent preoccupation with personal affairs, a kind of fiddling while the world burns. But that comes from old, male-dominated, overly narrow understandings of how people and societies change. If the personal is political, so is the political personal. (Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories* 13)

In terms of the political and personal entanglement, Levins Morales reveals that she is a “container of identity” with “massive deposit of experience,” a complex system providing “powerful grounds on which to stand and find people to stand beside us” (Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories* 35). Moreover, besides the attributes enumerated above, she considers herself to be “a writer, an artist, a historian, a teacher and mentor . . . an activist, a healer, a farmer, a revolutionary,” who tells “stories with

medicinal powers” that have the role to heal both the narrator and the reader alike, stressing that as the narrator of her own life story, is also a person “with chronic illness and disability,” having a body that “is unable to handle the toxic load of twenty-first century capitalism,” for which she had “to invent other ways to engage with the world” (auroralevinsmorales.com). The ways with which she engages with the world are the restorative stories she writes, and of which she also talks on her continuously updated personal webpage. Here, Levins Morales claims that

[T]he stories we tell about our lives shape what we’re able to imagine, and what we can imagine determines what we can do. My job is to change the stories we tell and help us imagine a world where greed has no power, the earth is cherished and all people get to live safe and satisfying lives. Because once we truly imagine it, the pull to create it becomes irresistible. (auroralevinsmorales.com)

Also irresistible is the ingenuity in the emotional release and the mental therapy of telling histories that heal individuals and communities alike by giving them voice and words and, so, by virtue of their new visibility, power to act and react. Similar to the tools of *curanderos*, *curanderas* and *parteras* [healers and midwives], of medicine women and men from Americas’ Indigenous and First Nations communities, the microhistories evoked and re-rendered by Levins Morales are an effective healing device used to overcome oppression of various kinds. As she writes in *Medicine Stories*, *Remedios*, like many of her other texts, are attestations, “both in the sense of a life story” and an autobiography of her relationship to her past (71), claiming that the way in which

Remedios differs from conventional historical writing is in how explicitly I proclaim that my interest in history lies in its medicinal uses, in the power of history to provide those healing stories that can restore the humanity of the traumatized, and not for any inherent interest in the past for its own sake. *Remedios* does not so much tell history as it interrogates it. It seeks to be provocative rather than comprehensive, to build the potency of our resistance, not just accumulate information. (72)

It is precisely this strategy of asking questions she emphasizes as a model or re-writing history that is described in detail in the chapter of “The Historian as Curandera” from the second edition of *Medicine Stories*.

The Historian as Curandera

In the most current version of *Medicine Stories*, Levins Morales talks once again of the schemes of healing she uses when writing in general and when writing history in particular. She emphasizes that her subjective history, alongside those of the Latina

women of the Caribbean, interrogates a larger context of historical, official narratives making them organic part of a restorative project. This “restorative” adjective works for both the reconstruction histories of oppressed women of various ethnic, racial, class and age groups and shows also the curative properties of various personal narratives, especially if placed in the scientific frame of history.

Levins Morales sees history as a combination of personal and public narratives, describing it as “the story we tell ourselves about how the past explains our present, and the ways we tell it are shaped by contemporary needs,” while stressing the fact that each historian—her included—has its own perspective and point of view because storytelling “is not neutral” and, in knowing this, “[c]urandera historians make this explicit, openly naming our partisanship, our intent to influence how people think” (Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories* 71). This way, curandera historians—including herself—practically adopt the aforementioned microhistorical method described by Zemon-Davis. What is more, in doing so, Levins Morales also blurs the line between the memory reflections of her memoir and the accurate data of the history behind it. Furthermore, by writing down elements of otherwise oral history, curandera historians make personal history a written artifact worthy of historical consideration. This way, the personal narrative becomes a testimony, a solemn declaration, an authentication and evidence placed in an official context, that of history as such. Nevertheless, Levins Morales redefines this testimony as “histerimonia” (197) by means of gender, when she acknowledges that

[L]ike all living things, we are repositories of stories, archives of what I call histerimonias, because “testimonio” comes from the custom of Roman men swearing on their testicles, which I don’t have, and because the idea of hysteria has been used for many centuries to dismiss and silence those who are considered unreliable witnesses, especially women. (Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories* 48)

In line with many of her Latina writer predecessors, especially that of Gloria Anzaldúa, Levins Morales overcomes the “tradition of silence” (Anzaldúa 54, 58), and switches language codes by putting down bilingually her “escritura y sabiduría” (Anzaldúa 77), the writing and the wisdom of a new mestiza consciousness at the crossroads (Anzaldúa 77, 80) of cultures. Similar to Anzaldúa’s strategy that reconstructs “the traumas behind the images,” Levins Morales also makes a renewed sense of the wounds, illnesses, breaks and traumas, especially at the level of microhistories and—as Anzaldúa writes about her own experience of writing—“once they have ‘meaning’ they are changed transformed,” making writing itself an authentic process of healing (70) as art or talking therapies do. However, the Puerto Rican author adds to her texts an extra amount of historical authenticity fused with a strong theme of personal touch that grounds them into an experienced, lived reality. This experience sets out the capacity of these narratives to reach and heal not only the writing subject but also entire communities with the help of broken, silenced or

forgotten stories, which, brought to surface, help healing groups of people, through the mediation of the individual

[B]ecause the story of what is broken becomes something whole. The story of what was forgotten becomes memory. The story of how we survived becomes communal medicine. The story of what we lost becomes new soil. The story of how we are the same as everyone and the story of how we are unique are a braided lifeline. Our stories are not just personal compasses. They are navigation for the world. (Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories* 50)

Medicine Stories is the perfect example of how Levins Morales uses this strategy of re-telling history and how she built herself as curandera historian. Here, she goes back to her springboard-book of *Remedios*, which was conceived around personal questions and existing contradictions, an experiment of decolonizing history through individual story. This is how the author recounts the birth of herself as a healer-historian:

Remedios does not so much tell history as it interrogates it. It seeks to be provocative rather than comprehensive, to build the potency of our resistance, not just accumulate information. In the writing I chose to make myself visible as a historian with an agenda, but also as a subject of this history and one of the traumatized seeking to recover herself. My work became less and less about creating a reconstructed historical record and more and more a use of my own relationship to history, my questions and challenges, my mapping of ignorance and contradiction, my anger and sorrow and exhilaration, to testify, through my personal responses to them, to how the official and renegade stories of the past impact Puerto Rican women. To explore, by sharing how I had done so in my own life, the ways that recaptured history could be used as a tool of recovery from a multitude of blows. In writing *Remedios*, I made myself the site of experimentation and engaged in a process of decolonizing my own relationship to history as one model of what was possible. As I did so, I evolved a set of understandings or instructions to myself about how to do this kind of work, a kind of *curandera's* handbook of historical practice. The rest of this essay is that handbook. (Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories* 72)

Indeed, “The Historian as Curandera” Chapter of the *Medicine Stories* in a handbook of untold stories “full of women, poor people, workers, children, People of Color, slaves, the colonized” (Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories* 72). Here, Levins Morales maps the most important steps for curandera historians, including the demand for the right questions and for how these can change the perspective if women are in the center of historical narratives (*Medicine Stories* 73) by identifying essential pieces of missing information that contradict the existing narratives (74) and guides them in finding strategies that make absences visible especially in case of the

“disenfranchised people” by asking questions and pointing out at the inconsistencies, while documenting their lives (*Medicine Stories* 74).

In a witty remark, Levins Morales even states that the “[l]ack of evidence doesn’t mean you can’t name and describe what is missing” (*Medicine Stories* 74), later on pointing out at the question of what might constitute as evidence, especially with “biases built into historical standards of evidence” (*Medicine Stories* 77). The author of *Medicine Stories* sees these standards of evidence as the grand or master narratives of history to which medicinal history must provide alternatives and make these alternatives available in written form, in other words, to validate other, predominantly oral forms of histories as equally important to written forms. As stated by Levins Morales,

[A]lthough there is an increasing acceptance of other forms of documentation, the reliance is still heavily on the written It simply means that someone with sufficient authority to write things down recorded their version of events or transactions while someone else did not. It is evidence of some of what the authorities did, some of what they wanted others to think they did and some of what they thought about it. No more. Of course, even something as partial as this is a treasure trove, but when we rely on written records we need to continually ask ourselves what might be missing, what might have been recorded in order to manipulate events and in what direction, and in what ways are we allowing ourselves to assume that objectivity is in any way connected with literacy. We need to remind ourselves that much of what we want to know wasn’t written about and also to think about ways to expand what we will consider as contributing to evidence As historians of the underrepresented we need to question the invalidation of nonliterate mechanisms of memory (*Medicine Stories* 77)

Furthermore, medicinal history, according to Levins Morales, must also show agency and reflect the lives and perspectives of powerless people (*Medicine Stories* 78) by showing complexity, embracing ambiguity (*Medicine Stories* 78) and revealing hidden power relationships (*Medicine Stories* 79). For her, medicinal history written by curandera historians must be highly personal (*Medicine Stories* 81), connecting and contextualizing the narrating individual with the community in which she lives or which she recounts (*Medicine Stories* 84), with the aim of restoring global meaning of people’s histories (*Medicine Stories* 84) by crossing borders and revealing the author’s figure and her context in the work (*Medicine Stories* 87). However, one of the most important steps for a curandera historian is to provide alternative histories for all, with a content and language that is easily accessible and digestible for larger groups of people—including the ways in which these stories are delivered to them. Levins Morales frames this thought in a critique of the mainstream medicine and pharmaceutical industry in the following way:

If the purpose of medicinal history is to transform the way we see ourselves historically, to change our sense of what's possible, then making history available to those who need it most is not a separate process from researching and interpreting it. The task of the curandera historian includes delivery. To do exciting, empowering research and leave it in academic journals and university libraries is like manufacturing unaffordable medicines for deadly diseases. We need to take responsibility for sharing our work in ways that people can assimilate, not in the private languages and forms of scholars. This is the difference between curanderas and pharmaceutical companies. Pharmaceutical companies notoriously go into communities of indigenous people and other People of Color worldwide, steal and patent traditional science, technology, and even the plants themselves, and produce medicines that are completely out of reach of the people who invented them. We need to be careful, in doing historical research about disenfranchised communities, to see that the active ingredients get back to the people whose ancestors generated our work. A good medicine also includes a delivery system, something that gets it to the parts of your body that need it. Those who are hungriest for what we dig up don't read scholarly journals and shouldn't have to. (*Medicine Stories* 86)

As a result, the curandera historian must not only write and deliver content in an accessible way but, as the Puerto Rican author sees it, also needs to be the educator of her own community as well give community members access to knowledge. And as an educator, she can be a healer, similar to a doctor that brings relief to the ill and sick. In addition, as historians, the task is multifold because

we need to either be artists and community educators or we need to find people who are and figure out how to collaborate with them. We can work with community groups to create original public history projects that involve people in their creation. We can see to it that our work gets into at least local popular culture through theater, murals, historical novels, posters, films, children's books, radio documentaries, websites, or a hundred other art forms. We can work with elementary and high school teachers to create curricula. Medicinal history is a form of healing. Its purpose is conscious and overt: to improve the social health of all people. (Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories* 86)

Healing Histories and Cultural Healing

A couple of years ago, Ralph E. Rodriguez said that he was "interested in the ways the criticism circumscribes what we talk about when we talk about Latinx literature and how we talk about it," especially "what works we put in conversation with each other" to see how they circulate, how are validated and how they "create an authoritative bias, influencing what gets taught, talked about, and read" (3). His approach to Latinx literature is similar in many aspects to Levins Morales's Latinx curandera

historian strategy described above and shows that there is an increased need for a radical change in historians' attitudes along the continuous debate on how minority literatures and their alternative histories shape renewed forms of literature and history today when "memory, individual and collective, is one of the most important sites of social struggle" (Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories* 58).

The change in attitude seems to be a long process of cultural healing, which, according to the definition on the website of The Network for Public Health Law, "reconnects people to the vibrancy and strengths of their culture and in doing so, enhances health and wellness" (Shaw 2022) both on the individual level as on the level of the smaller or larger communities. Indeed, as Levins Morales asserts, "healing takes place in community, in the telling and the bearing witness" (*Medicine Stories* 62) and she urges everyone to "heal, actively, consciously, continuously" (13) through telling their stories to be recorded and heard.

Nevertheless, in order to cure one must have healers around, focusing on the correct diagnosis, proper treatment and the prevention of illness or disease. It seems that healers are not merely doctors, medics, curanderos and curanderas. With the multiple histories of the oppressed, cultural healing can be achieved with the mediation and coping mechanisms taught by cultural healers, including that of curandera historians. The role of the healing historian—remarkably close in its strategy to that of the physician-healer—is to understand the flaws and the gaps in the existing grand narratives and after this, to re-work and recontextualize life narratives, especially the untold ones, and by doing so, to reestablish practical relationships of the individual as writer and historian in given contexts so that the individual overcomes her understanding of suffering and oppression leading to a process of healing. By finding, explaining, interrogating, correcting, re-editing, explaining, curating, exposing, and disseminating new perspectives for the individual in a certain historical, economic, political and cultural context, the historian as healer practically catalyzes the corrective processes of the official history by attending to and engaging in the dialogue between the individual's microhistory and the grand narratives of canonized historical accounts.

Healing in medical discourses implies a reconciliation of the distress leading to a transcendence of suffering to reinstate the integrity of physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual aspects of existence but overall, as Thomas R. Egnew argues, "the physician's role became 'curer of disease' rather than 'healer of the sick.'" Accordingly, curandera historians such as Levins Morales might heal the sick individual, but their primary task is to perform cultural healing for their own community through correcting the grand narratives by inserting fitting microhistories that are ultimately read by masses. If, in this case, individual healing coincides with that of the community, the better.

In conclusion, Levins Morales seems to exhibit, through the above-examined works, the attributes of a multiple healer: first, she is a curandera writer through her literary art; second, she is a gender and ethnic curandera through her activism; and third, she contributes through her civic engagements to the healing of nature and the

communities living close to it, especially by stewarding Finca la Lluvia's thirty-four acres of forested land in the highlands of the Cordillera Central of Maricao, Puerto Rico (for further details see the author's webpage on auroralevinsmorales.com). In addition, as a historian, Levins Morales brings corrective perspectives in remapping and re-writing the microhistories of the ill-fated, with which she delivers Latinx Caribbean women's unseen or less heard histories on a more general level of current historical and academic practice, with her bilingual definition of the curandera historian as a practical addendum to the currently unfolding historical and cultural theories.

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“In Search of Their Mothers”: The Ancestor in Cherrie Moraga’s Memoir *Native Country of the Heart*

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Abstract: Mother-daughter relations have been an ongoing discussion within gender studies since the second wave of feminism, yet the character of this debate is very much dependent on the generation and the ethnicity of the people involved. This paper is part of a larger project devoted to the research of the female ancestor’s role, specifically grandmothers and mothers, in ethnic women’s writing – mostly Latinx and African American authors. Cherrie Moraga, along with Ruth Behar and Sandra Cisneros among Latina writers, or Alice Walker, bell hooks, and Toni Morrison as African American representatives, all belong to the same generation of authors, who in their early years tended to be in the opposition to their mothers and grandmothers as the “gatekeepers for patriarchy,” but who at the later stages of their creation (re)discovered the cultural significance of this intergenerational bond. The article analyzes the recent publication by Cherrie Moraga, her memoir *Native Country of the Heart* (2019), in which she decided to record her mother’s life within Mexican American history in the US and more broadly within “an impossible patriarchy” (20) to “hold one thickly braided cord as a story – my queer self and my writer self, and each would bring me home to my Mexicanism” (3). In that sense intergenerational storytelling plays a representative role of not only an individual’s biography but becomes the “conscious historical connection” between generations in a diaspora and a path to identity formation. The mothers’ stories serve as a beginning of a journey towards ethnic writers’ self-discovery and personal growth.

Keywords: ancestor, women’s writing, storytelling, identity formation, cultural awareness, memory

Most associations with Cherrie Moraga concern her activism and writing about being a Chicana lesbian and her subsequent liberation (*Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca paso por sus labios* (1983), *Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness. Writings 2000-2010* (2011)), queer motherhood (*Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood* (1997)), as well as the role she played as the co-editor of an anthology *This Bridge Called my Back* (1981) in the lives of many women/lesbians of color. Even the recent volume *Chicana Portraits: Critical Biographies of Twelve Chicana Writers* (2023) in the chapter devoted to Moraga begins with the author’s (Lourdes Torres’) recollection of how Moraga’s queer writing “saved her life.” Apart from that, Moraga is mostly famous for her plays for which she has received numerous awards, among others: a National Endowment for the Arts Theater Playwriting Fellowship Award, A United States Artist Rockefeller Fellowship for Literature, the American Studies Association Lifetime Achievement Award and many other honors. Moreover, some of her essays such as “La Güera” or “A Long Line of Vendidas” enjoy global recognition and are taught in gender and women’s studies courses worldwide. Nonetheless, there

is a part of her creation that in my opinion was not given due attention and this is the topic that I have been interested in for some time now, namely mother-daughter relations in the literature of women of color. Generally, mother-daughter relations have been an ongoing discussion within gender studies since the second wave of feminism, yet the character of this debate is very much dependent on the generation and the ethnicity of the people involved. In fact, this work is part of a larger project devoted to the research of the female ancestor's role, specifically grandmothers and mothers, in ethnic women's writing – mostly Latinx and African American authors. Cherrie Moraga, along with Ruth Behar and Sandra Cisneros among Latina writers, or Alice Walker, bell hooks, and Toni Morrison as African American representatives, all belong to the same generation of authors, who in their early years tended to be in the opposition to their mothers and grandmothers as the “gatekeepers for patriarchy,” but who at the later stages of their creation (re)discovered the cultural significance of this intergenerational bond. Subsequently, in this paper, the meaning of the word ancestor has more of a symbolic and cultural dimension than a traditional and historical meaning to show a long lineage of people who we descend from in the past. Similarly, the analysis of the mother-daughter relation in Moraga's memoir will serve to underline the importance of passing on the family/ethnic group stories from generation to generation of women to keep the group memory alive.

Alice Walker in her essay “In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens” (1983) from the collection under the same title reflects how her mother's stories shaped her ethnic and cultural awareness and “handed on the creative spark.” She writes:

Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories – like her life – must be recorded. (240)

Subsequently, she points out that “our mothers and grandmothers, *ourselves* have not perished in the wilderness” (235), but are still alive thanks to the work of their daughters – artists – which is very important not only in terms of carrying on the legacy of the generations, but also for the daughters themselves “who in search of [their] mothers' garden, found [their] own” (243).

Similarly, Cherrie Moraga in the prologue to her memoir *Native Country of the Heart* (2019) writes “My mother – and her generation of Mexican American women – was to disappear quietly, unmarked by the letter of memory ... But when our storytellers go, taking their unrecorded memory with them, we their descendants go too (3). Hence, Moraga decided to record her mother's life and place it within Mexican American history in the US and more broadly within “an impossible patriarchy” (20) to “hold one thickly braided cord as a story – my queer self and my writer self, and each would bring me home to my Mexicanism” (3). In that sense, intergenerational storytelling plays a representative role of not only an individual's

biography but becomes the “conscious historical connection” between generations in a diaspora and a path to identity formation: “We breathe in the last exhale of our mother’s breath. This is what they bequeath to us. And they also bequeath their stories” (5). Therefore, the mothers’ stories serve as the beginning of a journey toward writers’ self-discovery and personal growth. Moraga writes:

Through the act of writing that so-called autobiography, I learned that a story well told is a story embellished and re-visioned just like the stories that poured from my mother’s mouth in our family kitchen some forty years earlier. The fiction of our lives – how we conceive our histories by heart – can sometimes provide a truth far greater than any telling of a tale frozen to the fact. (*A Xicana Codex* 4)

Moraga’s memoir *Native Country of the Heart* (2019) is divided into 4 parts. In the first one, she boldly describes both her and her sister JoAnn’s sometimes painful, sometimes happy childhood up to the point of their growing up and leaving home – JoAnn to get married and Cherrie to escape home as a result of her coming out. She describes the pains of being a female in a traditional Mexican Catholic family with a mother who is totally devoted to God and her husband. At the same time, Cherrie realizes how difficult her mother’s – Elvira’s – life was when as a little child she worked in the fields, since her own father exploited his children due to the family’s poverty but also his drunkenness. Then Moraga’s grandfather decided to move the family to Mexico during the period of the Great Depression and this was the moment when Elvira had to leave school forever, which made her illiterate (the fact described by Cherrie in her essay “La Güera”) and was an open wound in her life (*Native* 11). Instead of going to school, she worked in a Mexican casino selling cigarettes and candies for Mr. Bowman who was her protector – Patron – but at the same time an old predator for a young girl’s sexuality. The splendor of this life – meeting famous Hollywood stars but also criminals like Al Capone, in the words of Cherrie, “ruined her mother,” making “an ordinary Mexican life in the United States impossible” (*Native* 13). Therefore, she struggled most of her life with being an ordinary Mexican woman trying to hold her extended family together, at times cruel to her daughters, yet desperately loving them and trying to protect them:

La fuerza de Elvira. I cast the character of my mother in Spanish because all that I understand as strong, as capable, as having principled values, resided first in the one-hundred pound mestiza body of my mother. She was someone who could handle so much and so many in the world. In our extended familia, she served as the planet around which our near-hundred relations hovered like orbiting moons. Over the years, I came to realize that what kept us all gravitating to the sphere of my mother’s kitchen was our shared sense de su fuerza incansable. She was not always right, but she was always, until the last days of her life “present.” In the very way my father was not. (*Native* 48)

Even when Cherrie is leaving home due to her “secret” and the mother initially tries to stop her, when Moraga says “Don’t make me choose, Mama. Because if I have to choose between this life and my family, I have to choose my life,” Elvira answers: “How could you think that there is anything in this life you could do that you wouldn’t be my daughter.” As a result, [they] “did not lose each other by pretending we were other than who we were” (84-85).

The second part of the memoir is mostly devoted to the description of the progressing deterioration of Elvira’s health due to dementia, later diagnosed as Alzheimer’s, presented within the context of Mexican familism, “impossible patriarchy” and Mexican mothers’ blind devotion to their sons, which is the common theme in Chicana literature. As Phillipa Kafka claims, the problem with Mexican/Chicana mothers is that they abuse their daughters, as they not only play “a crucial role in perpetuating the culture” (10), but also in the indoctrination of young women in terms of women’s roles and duties within the patriarchal model of the family. Latina girls are raised to identify with their mothers, encouraged to serve their father and brothers, and denied the right to follow their own path in life. In *Caramelo*, Sandra Cisneros’ second novel, one of the main characters is Soledad, a grandmother, whose nickname is “Awful,” yet not without a reason. She not only watches over family tradition and stories but is a despotic and cruel figure to her daughter, Aunty-Light-Skin, whom she hardly notices, but keeps complaining about her independence and selfishness: “You’ve always done what you wanted with your life, always, always, always. I hate you,” while all her daughter wants is love: “Is that too much to ask one’s mother?” (267). Soledad also despises her Mexican-American daughters-in-law, criticizing their Spanish, cooking, and American lifestyle. Moreover, the grandmother is also austere for her granddaughters:

It seemed to the Grandmother that the girls had too much of everything – clothes, spending money, boyfriends, and their parents indulging them further with each birthday. She tried to give them some badly needed instruction, but they were lazy, ungrateful girls, beyond reach.

- Always, always, keep a neat bed, the Grandmother said, pinching and tugging the chartreuse bedspread until it was taut. – You can tell the character of a woman by how she makes her bed. Show me her bed, and I’ll tell you who she is. Anything the Grandmother said always made Amor and Paz miserable....

– An unmade bed is the sign of *una mujer cochina*, the kind who catches lice, do you hear me? No man wants to marry a woman who can’t make a decent bed (292-293).

Kafka calls such grandmothers “gatekeepers of patriarchy,” who, treating young women with neglect, prepare them to assume the traditional female roles of a wife and mother, watching over patriarchal rules and regulations:

Stand up straight, Celaya. I can’t stand looking at you walking about like the hunchback of Notre Dame. Why do you insist on wearing your hair like that?

Can't you at least pin back your bangs? You look like a sheep dog. The last time I saw you, you were a normal little girl. And now look. You're as big as a Russian. Don't you think you should exercise and try to look more feminine? (Cisneros 262).

Such women, instead of offering an empowering model of identity to their kin, become castrating figures for young Latinas, suppressing the possibility of enacting an alternative identity of a woman as an individual. Accordingly, in *Caramelo* Sandra Cisneros searches for the explanation of this lack of unity and understanding between generations of Mexican women. The main reason for it she sees in the Mexican mothers' preference and devotion to their sons who make the future of the *familia*, and subsequent neglect of daughters and daughters-in-law. This devotion is mutual, since Mexican men always favor their mothers over "their" women: "No Mexican man would choose his wife over his own mother!" (239). As a result, sons enjoy a high degree of privilege and power within the family, while their mothers are both respected and subjugated by them:

Mama. Calling her made him feel safer. – Mama, Mama. There is nothing Mexican men revere more than their mamas; they are the most devoted of sons, perhaps because their mamas are the most devoted of mamas ... when it comes to their boys (Cisneros 130).

Similarly, Cherrie Moraga, in her essay "A Long Line of Vendidas" in the part significantly titled "My brother's sex was white, Mine, brown," recounts how her brother was waited by her and her sister, and actually this situation kept repeating through most of their lives, and "the only thing that earned by brother [her] servitude was his maleness" (*Loving* 82). This behavior was a repetition of what her mother had been doing to her brothers and their friends. The role division in Mexican family was clearly defined – women were cooking and serving and men were watching them: "Elvira, my mother knew she was being watched by the men and loved it. Her slim hips moved patiently beneath the apron. Her deep thick-lidded eyes never caught theirs as she was swept back into the kitchen by my abuelita's call" (*Loving* 83).

In the second part of the *Native Country of the Heart*, it is the sisters – JoAnn and Cherrie – who have to deal with their mother's progressing illness, yet it is their brother James, who visits his parents maybe twice a year – American-like style – and is married to an American woman who disrespects her mother-in-law, that is listened to by Elvira, who talking to him "puts on that same coquettish face she had for the stranger-doctors" and leans to him "like a lover" (121). Subsequently, Cherrie observes:

My brother's authority, as the eldest and a male, went unchallenged within our family. In this respect, James remained inextricably Mexican; for it was my mother who had crafted my brother into the role of patriarch, the same

role her elder brother and father had occupied in her life. His long absences notwithstanding, my brother's word was law. In all aspects of our cultura, James was, as he once described it, "just passing through." (122)

Moraga traces this female devotion to their men in Mexican culture to the threat from the outside that the Anglo world is posing to it. In the "Long Line of Vendidas," she writes: "The Chicana's sexual commitment to the Chicano male – is proof of her fidelity to her people" (*Loving* 97), and continues:

The family, then, becomes all the more ardently protected by oppressed peoples, and the sanctity of this institution is infused like blood into the veins of the Chicano. At all costs la familia must be preserved ... We believe the more severely we protect the sex roles within the family, the stronger we will be as a unit in opposition to the anglo threat. (*Loving* 101)

Hence, she sees the heterosexism of her family and community as intrinsically tied to preserving the culture, which makes the life of Chicanas really hard. This reinforced male privilege resurfaces again at the end of Moraga's mother's life when her brother James wants to make all the decisions around Elvira's illness and death, though he was little present in the whole process. At the same time, Cherrie knows that to be critical of one's culture does not mean betraying it and that "it's the daughters who remain loyal to the mother, although this loyalty is not always reciprocated" (foreword to the second edition of *Loving* xiii), which is illustrated in the third part of *Native Country of the Heart*, that is the story of Moraga's mother's last months, first in the psychiatric ward of the hospital and then in the institution for elderly people which Elvira desperately tries to escape and return home. Realizing how fast her amnesia is progressing Cherrie wants to preserve as many of her mother's stories as possible. Yet, she discovers, as Alice Walker did, that "ostensibly in search of my mother's history, it was my own buried remains I sought" (*Native* 174) and subsequently dwells on some events from her own life vis-à-vis Elvira's story.

In the fourth part of the memoir when the mother dies on 29 July 2005, Cherrie dares her brother and provides a truer to life history of Elvira Moraga Lawrence in her eulogy, than the romanticized version of James', whose speech was "a love treatise to our mother" (*Native* 227). Yet, despite his praise of "the history in her hands, her hardworking ways ... and her dignity of bearing" all the relatives are confused with his eulogy and wonder: "Had he felt that way, why had he never told her so? Why had he spent a lifetime separated from her? Why had he allowed her to suffer his absence?" (227). At first, Cherrie feels betrayed and speechless by the falsehood of her mother's and hence all Mexican women's depiction presented by James which she describes the following way: "I'm staring not only on my mother's portrait, but at the portrait of my own prison: my absolute impotence as a Mexican woman under the ultimate authority of my brother's words. They render me guilty and shamed" (237). Nonetheless, despite this initial numbness and the feeling that

James stole something from her and her sister JoAnn, she decides to challenge him and her own eulogy becomes her rebellion. It is a heartbreaking moment that ends the relationship between brother and sister, but at the same time, Moraga also discloses and fights against this “impossible patriarchy” interwoven in her culture. She writes:

The amazing efficacy of patriarchy is that it is a covert operation. It is entre nos, just between us – man and woman, sister and brother, father and daughter, queer and not so queer. It takes place behind closed doors, inside la hacienda and back there in the slave quarters. It is so seamlessly woven into the fiber of our lives that to pull at the dangling thread of inequity is to rip open an entire life. (223)

Therefore, the moment she is given the authority to speak she takes her chance and speaks for herself, JoAnn, and Elvira claiming “she was not requited in this life” (225), thus paying homage to all fierce fighter Mexican women.

Conclusions

To conclude, Lourdes Torres writes that Cherrie Moraga's work “has always been radical, ahead of its time, taking on complex topics and creating a space for us to have conversations that were not being had in different eras” and that her writing is “intimately personal while simultaneously broadly structural” (220). Therefore, her memoir *Native Country of the Heart* is not only a personal attempt to come to terms with the loss of a beloved, though problematic, mother, but a conscious endeavor into the Mexican and indigenous past with a gendered dimension. When in the Epilogue to the memoir Moraga writes: “To disappear into Mexicanism is not enough; to disappear into Latinidad is even less of who we are; to disappear into AngloAmerica, our colonization is complete. We were not supposed to remember” (238), she links her family story to the ancestral memory of her people.

Similarly, Toni Morrison claimed that: “These ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of *timeless people* whose relationship to the characters is benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (496) and that “If we don't keep in touch with the ancestor we are, in fact, lost When you kill the ancestor, you kill yourself” (497).

Consequently, in the beginning of her memoir, Moraga says: “Elvira's is the story of our forgotten, the landscape of loss paved over by American dreams come true. And maybe that's the worst of it (or what I fear) – that our dreams *can* come true in ‘America,’ but at the cost of a profound senility of spirit. *If we forget ourselves, who will be left to remember us?*” (*Native*, 5-6) only to conclude the book with a statement “I return with these pages” (238), yet who she means by the “I” is not so evident – the mother whom she paid homage to, herself or the whole panorama of generations of Mexican/indigenous women, silenced, but not mute, thanks to their daughters who did not let them “disappear quietly.”

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***Domesticana Rasquache:*
Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* (1993)**

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Abstract: This essay focuses on *So Far from God* (1993) by Ana Castillo, one of the most celebrated Chicana writers from the Chicana literary movement of the 1990s. Seeking an alternative to the American mainstream feminist aesthetics of the 1980s, which relegated spirituality and vernacular female culture to the margins, and challenging the patriarchy of Chicanismo of the Chicano Renaissance, Castillo consciously constructs her own aesthetics. The baroque aesthetics of the female vernacular culture developed in *So Far from God* can be seen as a manifestation of Castillo's aesthetic and epistemological investigations. On the one hand, it is indebted to the Chicano vernacular *rasquachismo* of everyday kitsch and on the other, it anticipates a distinctly female version of *rasquachismo* codified by Mesa-Baines as *domesticana rasquache*.

Keywords: Chicana literature, rasquache aesthetics, Ana Castillo, Chicana feminism

The 1993 publication of Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* – a novel that conquered the American publishing market – coincided with the debates on *rasquache* aesthetics going on in Chicano/a intellectual circles. The setting of Castillo's second novel in abandoned beliefs and rituals can be interpreted as a conscious turn towards *rasquachismo*, which identifies with the folk aesthetics of baroque excess and, on the surface, appears to be aesthetic kitsch. However, *So Far from God* not only relies on the aesthetics of *rasquache* prose but at the same time modifies it by embedding it in the traditional Mexican American feminine culture. Castillo immerses her prose in the original, though forgotten, folk aesthetics identified with the feminine world. Thus, she sets a new trend in *rasquachismo*, which was codified a few years after the publication of *So Far from God* as *domesticana rasquache*.

Ana Castillo is one of the leading female prose writers and poets of the 1990s Chicano generation, as attested by the Fuller Award for Lifetime Achievement that she received in 2022. Her rich literary output comprises eight novels, a collection of short stories, seven volumes of poetry, two theatrical plays, two books for children, collections of essays, titled *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (1994) and *Goddess of the Americas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe* (1997). Her first novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), received the American Book Award from the Before the Columbus Foundation, her 1990 *Sapogonia* was acclaimed an exceptional book by *The New York Times*, and *So Far from God* was compared by Barbara Kingslover to Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1). Castillo's works are not only set in the traditional beliefs of Mexican American culture but also explore the traditions of the pre-Columbian world. They

demonstrate the author's immense erudition and her inspiration drawn from the prose of South America, which also puts Castillo's work in line with the poetics of Pan-American *Latinidad* (Herrera). And thus, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* is dedicated to Julio Cortazar and draws on *As três Marias*, a novel by Brazilian writer Rachel de Queiroz (El Saeta). At the same time, Castillo's works are founded on solid aesthetic analyses and intellectual cosmopolitanism. She feels particularly close to female theorists and writers exploring the new paths of feminist artistic production and criticism. Castillo praises the importance of the works by African American author and Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison and Anaïs Nin, an American prose writer of Cuban origin, who shocked with her explorations in female sexuality. In *Massacre of the Dreamers*, based on her doctoral dissertation defended in 1991 at the University of Bremen, Castillo easily navigates the world of feminist literary theory, citing Luce Irigaray, a leading representative of the French school of *écriture féminine*, or Nawal El-Saadawi, an Egyptian writer and one of the first advocates of Arab feminism.

Given Ana Castillo's intellectual refinement, her drawing on the aesthetics of *rasquache*, based on Mexican American folklore and present in *So Far from God*, can hardly be interpreted as other than a result of conscious aesthetic explorations. The turn to tradition is at the same time a manifestation of solidarity with other Chicana theorists and artists of the late 1980s and 1990s. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera*, published a decade earlier than *So Far from God*, draws on the aesthetics of hybridity associated with Mexican *mestizo* culture, and the poetry and theatrical plays by Cherrie Moraga, who published the Spanish-language version of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* jointly with Castillo, show nostalgia for the past and respect for the traditional beliefs and superstitions of Mexican Indian folk culture.

Rasquache aesthetics was codified for the first time in 1989, when art critic Tomás Ybarra-Frausto published an essay titled "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility." Looking for a term that would describe Chicano aesthetics and underscore its distinctness from mainstream aesthetics, Ybarra-Frausto turned to the term *rasquache*, devalued by the Mexican American middle class. *Rasquache* is the anglicized spelling of *rascuache* – a word from the Aztec language of Náhuatl, which was used in Mexican Spanish to refer to social discredit or aesthetic disgrace. The use of a term associated with the margins of language and social life was Ybarra-Frausto's conscious strategy employed to describe Chicano/a aesthetics. When Ybarra-Frausto ironically remarked that "[o]ne is never *rasquache*; it is always someone else of a lower status who is judged outside the demarcations of approved taste and decorum" (5), he linked Chicano/a aesthetics to the perspective of the lowest social strata. *Rasquache* is "an underdog perspective – a view from *los de abajo*," where, paradoxically, no one is ashamed of their marginalization. According to Ybarra-Frausto, a position of marginalization can also be a source of strength, since "[t]his outsider viewpoint stems from a funky, irreverent stance that debunks convention and spoofs protocol" (6). For Ybarra-Frausto, "*rasquachismo*

presupposes the worldview of the have-not," and its foundations are the Mexican folklore tradition" and the hybrid "bicultural sensibility among Mexican Americans." *Rasquachismo* means "vulgarity and bad taste," plastic kitsch associated with shrines to *Virgen de Guadalupe* decorated with artificial flowers and photographs of loved ones, "pink plastic flamingos or plaster animal statuary". *Rasquache* is an aesthetics of excess and baroque celebration of form, because "[t]o be *rasquache* is to be unfettered and unrestrained, to favor the elaborate over the simple, the flamboyant over the severe" (5).

According to Ybarra-Frausto, *rasquachismo* is not an imitation of the postmodernist fashion for kitsch but a continuation of an abiding tendency in Chicano/a art. The critic cites the example of *carpa* – plays staged in the 1930s in makeshift tents put up by itinerant theatrical troupes, whose tradition was resumed in the 1970s by *El Teatro Campesino*, or vaudevilles entertaining the audience with vulgar slapstick humor. He also gives examples of modern art drawing on *rasquachismo*. These include Guillermo Gómez-Peña performances, guided by baroque irony and an intention to provoke. One of them can be the famous performance "Couple in the Cage," in which Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco, scantily clad in animal skins and bird feathers, placed in a cage in the center of museums in New York and Madrid, pretended to be representatives of a newly discovered tribe of Indians from Latin America. In Ybarra-Frausto's register there are also references to literary prose. The works identified as *rasquache* include Daniel Venegas' novel *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote* (1928) and Oscar Zeta Acosta's *Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973). While *Las Aventuras* fits into *rasquache* aesthetics due to its picaresque form and due to the impoverished and defiant protagonist daringly moving on the margins of life in Los Angeles, Acosta's novel explores the potential of the aesthetic and social rebellion of invisible Chicanos, who are indestructible like the cockroaches mentioned in the title. The literary examples provided by Ybarra-Frausto make it possible to understand how Castillo's *So Far from God* not only aligns with *rasquache* aesthetics but also rewrites it in its own way. Entering into dialog with the Chicano/a tradition and aesthetic theories, Castillo develops her own interpretation of *rasquachismo*, drawing on the beliefs and rituals of female folk culture and strengthening the anarchic and ironic character of *rasquache*. She thereby confirms what is essential to the underdog aesthetics: plasticity and openness to change.

**"The woman who lived alone with her four little girls
by the ditch at the end of the road"**

The very choice of subject brings Castillo's novel close to the aesthetics celebrated by Ybarra-Frausto. The plot of *So Far from God* revolves around the life of Sofi, an impoverished American woman of Mexican origin, and her four daughters, abounding in miraculous and tragic events. Abandoned by her husband and left with nothing to live on, but resourceful, hard-working, and intellectually independent, Sofi brings up her adolescent daughters in a small low-profile town of Tome, on the

outskirts of New Mexico. Spun in the convention of magical realism, the narrative unfolds the key stages in the five women's lives: the apparent death of the youngest La Loca and her miraculous awakening at her own funeral; Esperanza's decision, made after graduating from college, to take up a job as a war correspondent for a prestigious TV station; Fe's nervous breakdown and her scream lasting for days after her fiancé suddenly canceled the wedding, then a new relationship and a job in a chemical plant; finally, the miraculous rescue of beautiful Caridad after a sexual assault and her decision to practice as a local herbalist and *curandera*. The novel addresses a topic that tends to be marginalized in literature: struggle against fate as experienced by a single mother living on the fringe of the community in a state that is not popular with mainstream writers, though chosen as the backdrop for novels by Chicano/a authors, such as Rudolfo Anaya. Living a life of poverty "at the end of the road," far from people, Sofi brings to mind Hester Prynne from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Indeed, the perspective of *So Far from God* is a perspective of America's new outcasts of the late twentieth century – those who have been cast by fate and ethnicity to "the far end of the world" and to the very bottom. "Dishonored" in the traditional Catholic community and left with nothing to live on, Sofi struggles for her own and her four rebellious daughters' survival.

Sofi's life is a streak of misfortunes: she loses her battle for the survival of the family and outlives each of her daughters. The oldest daughter, Esperanza, is kidnapped and killed on a journalistic assignment in Saudi Arabia. Fe loses her battle with cancer, which she developed when working in a chemical waste plant; Caridad, stalked by her cousin Francisco, commits suicide together with her beloved woman, and La Loca dies of AIDS. Recounting the fate of Sofi and her daughters, *So Far from God* not only gives a voice to forgotten and abandoned women, but also pays tribute to their humanitarianism and will to fight. If *rasquache* aesthetics is based on sympathizing with social outcasts, Castillo's novel undoubtedly aligns with it.

The structure and narration of the novel also intensely draw on *rasquache* aesthetics. As in the case of *Las Aventuras* the logic of *So Far from God* is grounded in the vernacular. The principle of episodes being linked in a chain of cause and effect, governing realistic novels, gives way to building narration based on narrative associations. The loose episodic structure throws the reader from episode to episode, where narration, following the narrator's memories, suddenly changes direction. Breaking the fourth wall enhances the oral character of the narrative. The narrator directly addresses the reader and frequently throws in self-referential comments.¹ The voice of the narrator, or rather the narratrix, is clearly audible in the novel, and the bond built with the reader becomes similar to the intimacy between guests at a party devouring fascinating stories told by one of them. At the same time, as Ybarro-Frausto would have it, the novel's narration aligns with the tradition of hybridity and bilingualism, offering rich baroque prose cited as an example of "a multicultural,

1 The text abounds in self-referential remarks, such as: "whose name it is best not to reveal here for this reason as well as some others that we shall soon see" (131), or "because as I said, the conference of M.O.M.A.S. Was very serious business, hombre!" (250).

political version of postmodernism" (Mermann-Jozwiak 113). The novel richly draws on the traditions of the European family saga (for example, by alluding to John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* in chapter titles), Latin American soap opera, and Mexican *cuentos* (folk tales). At the same time, it offers an excellent example of Spanglish. The novel's English-language prose is full of Spanish references and phrases or even imitates Spanish syntax.

Even though the subject matter, the language, and the structure of Castillo's novel position it close to the *rasquache* novels cited by Ybarra-Frausto, the choice of protagonist modifies this tradition. While the picaresque novels – *Las Aventuras* or *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* – revolved around a picaro character modeled on Don Quixote, a rebellious and naive anti-hero who believed in his lucky star despite the adversities of fate, Castillo's novel places the female collective protagonist in the center. It is difficult to decide who, in fact, is the main character of the novel: although it is Sofi's point of view that opens and closes the narrative, the stories of the four daughters are sketched with clear lines too. And even if the narratrix devotes the least space to Esperanza (perhaps thus showing her own limitations, being ignorant of the world outside New Mexico), she depicts the fates of the remaining three daughters evocatively, with a large measure of solidarity and empathy. Given the feminine subject matter of the novel, the replacement of a male picaro with a female collective protagonist can be interpreted as an attempt to achieve a narrative that would reflect the feminine world, with high value placed on relatedness. Sofi does not exist without her daughters, just like her daughters do not exist without one another – even if, like Esperanza, they desire to escape from the town for good, each of them convinced that "some of her personal sense of displacement in society had to do with her upbringing" (39).

The tradition Castillo draws on is also associated with the feminine world. The novel's female protagonists build a separate system of beliefs and rituals, in which the central place belongs to female figures: *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, Catholic female saints, *La Llorona* – a legendary figure from Mexican folklore, or *curandera*, a healer from the Mexican folk tradition. In times of trial, Sofi prays to Our Lady of Guadalupe; Loca is treated by her neighbors as a local saint, "La Loca," after her miraculous awakening; and Caridad discovers that she has the gift of *curanderismo*, helping others through herbal healing and psychological advice. The traditional female spiritual world is based on advanced syncretism: Catholicism is mixed with pre-Columbian beliefs, and the women easily switch between different spiritual and philosophical orders. They rewrite religious canons and widely held narratives, replacing the logic of patriarchy with that of matriarchy. This is the case, for instance, with Sofi, who reworks a myth unfavorable for women – the myth of *La Llorona*, a woman mourning the children she has murdered on a river bank:

Unlike her sister, Sofi was not afraid to go to the rio alone to swim She didn't believe in *La Llorona*, in other words

Once, *La Llorona* may have been *Matlaciuatl*, the goddess of the Mexica who

was said to prey upon men like a vampire! Or she might have been Ciuapiltin, the goddess in flowing robes who stole babies from their cradles and left in their place an obsidian blade, or Cihuacoatl, the patron of women who died in childbirth, who all wailed and wept and moaned in the night air. These women descended to earth on certain days which were dedicated to them to appear at crossroads, and they were fatal to children.

Her mother's mother had been from old Mexico and Sofi knew a little about the antiquity of this tale, but mostly she just knew what her father had told her, that La Llorona was a bad woman who had left her husband and home, drowned her babies to run off and have a sinful life

Sofia had not left her children, much less drowned them to run off with nobody. On the contrary, she had been left to raise them by herself. And all her life, there had always been at least one woman around like her, left alone, abandoned, divorced, or widowed, to raise her children, and none of them had ever tried to kill their babies. (161)

The message about the unpredictable and frequently destructive female nature, emanating both from Aztec beliefs and from Mexican folk tradition, is at odds with Sofi's experience of observing maternal love and strength. The woman reworks the myth of La Llorona, and when the figure is said to appear to La Loca after Esperanza's death, Sofi accepts her presence as a benevolent "interstellar astral body."

An excellent example of revisionist cultural syncretism is the story of the intellectual and spiritual life of Doña Felicia, a nearly hundred-year-old friend of Sofi's family. Born before the revolution in Mexico, an "orphaned daughter of mestizos," she travels across continents and countries, as a Mexican seasonal worker in the USA (*bracero/a*) on some occasions and as an American medical orderly at the French front of World War II on others. An illiterate peasant woman, she turns into a polyglot with a command of English, Spanish, and French. Just like she "mixed two or even three of the languages, still making herself somehow quite understood by all," she mixes customs and religious orders, building an original and coherent spiritual system. The one "who as a child was said to have no faith" turns to the Catholic Church and to "Tatita Dios en Sus Cielos" (62) in order to heal the sick. She does not hesitate to go on a pilgrimage to the local Marian shrine in Chimayo, seeking spiritual support and the restoration of her gift of healing. Her treatments use Catholic prayers and pre-Columbian beliefs; they are based on herbalist traditions, homeopathy, purification rituals, and divining. Fascinated with the tradition of *curanderismo* and religious as well as cultural syncretism, Castillo includes a subchapter in her novel that is titled "On the subject of Doña Felicia's remedies" and devoted to the most often identified health problems, such as *empacho* (indigestion) or *aigre* (rheumatic disease). Citing the cures with humor and indulgence, the narratrix takes her hat off to the wisdom of the grandmothers, who struggled for survival using oral tradition, local herbs, and their own imagination and intuition.

In Search of the Roots of *Domesticana Rasquache*

Castillo's modification of *rasquache* aesthetics reflects her cultural revisionism based on feminist theory and her respect for feminine folk culture. The basic principles of Castillo's social philosophy are set out in *Massacre of the Dreamers*. Experiencing inferior treatment in the USA together with other Mexican Americans, observing the ambivalence of Chicanos/as about mainstream culture rooted in a fear of "foreign-like identity," and aware that, for Mexico, Chicanos/as are *pochos*, "either among the traitors or trash of Mexico because we, or previous generations, made the United States home" (39), Castillo sought a theoretical language that would liberate the Mexican American experience from complexes and "schizophrenic-like existence" (39). In an attempt to design a coherent intellectual system that would be a counterbalance both for the archaic understanding of Catholicism in traditional Mexican culture and for the secular tradition based on the American dream of financial success or on orthodox Marxism hostile to spirituality, Castillo chose her own way. She challenged the domination of patriarchy in Mexican society and American culture but retained folk tradition in the name of social change. Believing in the distinctness and strength of the Chicana culture she had been raised in, the author turned to pre-Columbian feminine beliefs and liberal Catholic spirituality under the banner of liberation theology, underscoring the significance of the female element to the survival of Chicano/a culture.

In a gesture that may have been intended to imitate the activities of Black female intellectuals of the 1980s, Castillo proposed to set the foundations for a Chicana feminist movement that would be an alternative to white women's feminism of the 1970s. Combining the Náhuatl word *Xica* and the ending of the word *machismo*, her *Xicanisma* brings to mind Alice Walker's womanism. Like womanism, *xicanisma* aims not only to describe the unique feminine culture, but also to empower the future generations of *Chicanas*. Using visionary language, Castillo defines the objectives of *Xicanisma* thus:

today, we grapple with our need to thoroughly understand who we are—gifted human beings—and to believe in our gifts, talents, our worthiness and beauty, while having to survive within the constructs of a world antithetical to our intuition and knowledge regarding life's meaning. Our vision must encompass sufficient confidence that dominant society will eventually give credence to our ways, if the world is to survive. (149)

Essays on *Xicanisma* do not devote much space to feminine aesthetics, but even the few comments found in them are enough to understand the direction of Castillo's aesthetic explorations. In her manifesto, aesthetics reflects traditional feminine beliefs and accounts, in which the central figures are the witch/healer (*bruja/curandera*) and the mother/daughter. The new *Xicanisma* aesthetics proposed by Castillo is meant to reflect the shift from the patriarchal paradigm to the matriarchal

one, as is the case in *So Far from God*. As such, it is not merely a change in the way of perceiving reality but a change in the way of constructing it. Castillo's new aesthetics goes beyond epistemological explorations and proposes a new ontology.

Such a radical understanding of the roots and significance of the feminine Chicana aesthetics along with its embeddedness in the female experience and rebellion against mainstream culture and Chicano patriarchy brings to mind Amalia Mesa-Bains' discussion of the feminine version of *rasquachismo*. Her 1999 essay "Domesticana': The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache" seems to be a response to Castillo's call for creating art based on *Xicanisma*. Writing about the feminine version of *rasquache* (*Chicana rasquache*), Mesa-Bains argues that it originates in the need to revise traditional gender distinctions and female roles in the American and Mexican American communities:

Chicana rasquache (domesticana), like its male counterpart, has grown not only out of both resistance to majority culture and affirmation of cultural values, but from women's restrictions within the culture. A defiance of an imposed Anglo-American cultural identity, and the defiance of restrictive gender identity within Chicano culture, has inspired a female *rasquachismo*. . . . With new experiences of opportunity, Chicanas were able to challenge existing community restrictions regarding the role of women. Techniques of subversion through play with traditional imagery and cultural material are characteristic of *domesticana*. (161)

Sketching the critical contours of *domesticana rasquache* aesthetics, Mesa-Bains draws attention to its four features: the reconstruction of what she calls the domestic space, combining the sacred with the personal; the "canonization" of female figures, such as historical figures or one's own grandmothers; "[t]he juxtaposing of patriarchal polarities of the good and bad woman" along with the "masculine gaze (166) intrinsic to it; and a feminine version of "anecdotal history" (159). All the four features of *domesticana rasquache* aesthetics discussed by Mesa-Bains in relation to visual art created by herself, Patrica Rodriguez, and Patssi Valdez can be traced in Castillo's novel. The author places high value on the domestic space and attributes social significance to it; she creates a system of female saints, liberates the novel from the patriarchal system of evaluating femininity, and depicts a world full of humor and anecdote.

Domesticana Rasquache and So Far from God

The reconstruction of the domestic space, so strongly emphasized by Mesa-Bains, is clearly present in Castillo's narrative. The novel's protagonists are often presented in Sofi's home or in other domestic spaces, such as the interior of Doña Felicia's or Caridad's trailer. Moreover, the difference between private and sacred space is often blurred. For example, Doña Felicia's trailer is not only a location where delicious

meals are prepared, but also the territory where Caridad's initiation into the system of *curanderismo* takes place. It is also inside the trailer that Doña Felicia prays to Saint Anthony after Caridad's disappearance, convinced that "la inocente was lost like a broken compass" (83). When prayers supported by requests to El Santo Niño de Atocha fail to bring results, also in the privacy of her home, the woman uses a divining stick and "her dog-eared deck of Tarot cards given to her by a woman in Veracruz back in '27" (83).

The domestic space reconstruction is even more radical in the ninth chapter, presenting Sofi's decision to start a women's business in Tome. "While Sofi was putting another load of laundry into the washer out in the enclosed back porch" and struggling with the door that would not close properly, she came to the conclusion that time had come to take the initiative. Inside her home, together with her friend, she makes a decision to revitalize the town as mayor of Tome. After "pour[ing] the *comadre* a cup of coffee from the pot on the stove" (136), Sofi presents her business and social plan to Domingo. Inside the house that has so far been reducing her to the role of a mother of four children and a housewife worn out by life, a change in the woman's consciousness takes place:

"You know, Domingo", Sofia said solemnly. "Our 'jita, Esperanza, always tried to tell me about how we needed to go out and fight for our rights. She always talked about things like working to change the 'system.' I never paid no attention to her then, always worried about the *carneceria*, the house, the girls But now I see her point for the first time. I don't really know how to explain myself right yet, but I see that the only way things are going to get better around me, is if we, all of us together, try to do something about it. (142)

Home ceases to be associated with the oppression of women and becomes the place of awakening and the locus of strength needed to save the impoverished Tome. After years of lobbying, neighbors' meetings, and efforts, together with her neighbors, Sofi starts "a sheep-grazing wool-weaving enterprise 'Las Ganados y Lana Cooperative'" (147).

The revision of the way of presenting and thinking about the domestic space in Castillo's novel, so important for *domesticana rasquache*, resulted in a different perspective on the novel's female protagonists. Capable of crossing the boundaries between the private, secular and the sacred, and finding energy inside the home to fight for other people's good, the women in *So Far from God* cease to be weak ones, passively accepting fate's decrees. Castillo's novel celebrates strong, independent, and unique women. Portraying some of them as local saints, even if this is done with a pinch of salt and not without irony, can be regarded as a "canonization" of femininity, which has its source in the cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe and is described by Mesa-Bains as one of the pillars of *domesticana rasquache*.

Two of Sofi's daughters came to enjoy the status of local saints during their lifetime. After she decided to live in spartan conditions in a mountain grotto, and after she resisted "with passive yet herculean strength three men who tried to carry her

back home" (87), beautiful Caridad has crowds of people visiting her. Convinced of her holiness, local inhabitants worship her, and "during Holy Week, instead of going to Mass at their local parishes, hundreds of people made their way up the mountain to la Caridad's cave in hopes of obtaining her blessing and just as many with hopes of being cured of some ailment or another." It is noteworthy that the crowds coming to see Caridad are both "the nuevo mejicano-style Spanish Catholics" and "Natives from the pueblos, some who were Christian and some who were not" (87).

The youngest daughter, Loca, is also an object of worship. This happens for the first time when she awakens at her own funeral as a two-year-old child, and then again when she dies of AIDS as a young adult woman. The local community refuses to accept that "Loca's miraculous resurrection" may be simply a case of awakening after an epileptic fit misdiagnosed by a provincial doctor. They believe that the girl not only rose from the dead but also rose to the sky straight from her coffin to sit on the church tower. The girl's miraculous awakening and her subsequent eccentric behavior (avoiding contact with people, recognizing them by smell) or gifts (culinary talent, extraordinary intuition and skill in making abortions, communication with animals) earn her the nickname of La Loca. The girl is treated as a "mad saint," and her falling ill with AIDS is treated as incredible even by the local doctor, considering her social phobia.

The novel's gallery of saints also includes Doña Felicia, practicing as a *curandera*, and the intrepid Sofi. The conclusion of the novel, departing from the convention of magical realism in favor of surrealism, presents Sofi as a female pope and head of a women's religious association. Having lost four daughters, "encouraged not only by *vecinos* and *comadres*, but by the hundreds of petitions she received in the mail everyday, asking for prayers" (246), Sofi resolves to unite the mothers who have lost their daughters. She becomes "the founder and la first presidenta of what would later be known worldwide as the very prestigious ... organization M.O.M.A.S., Mothers of Martyrs and Saints" (247).

Even if it is interpreted in surrealist terms and with humor, the shift of holiness from male characters to female ones obviously turns upside down the male-dominated canon of saints and the canonical way of thinking about sainthood in Catholicism. In the novel, the one who follows in the footsteps of Saint Francis of Assisi, Francisco la Penitente, turns out to be Caridad's mentally ill stalker. Suffering from PTSD, which he developed during the war in Vietnam, Francisco is not an ascetic sculptor making holy figurines but a deranged man, whose obsession with Caridad leads her to commit suicide together with her beloved woman.

The role reversal in the sacred system is consistent with Castillo rejection of "masculine gaze" – a gesture that Mesa-Bains considers necessary for *domesticana rasquache*. As promised by the novel's title, the reader enters a world "distant from God," and this distance refers not only to the forgotten regions of Mexico, as once remarked by the Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz². The

2 The novel's motto cites Porfirio Díaz's famous words about Mexico: "Poor Mexico. So far from God and so close to the United States."

novel's pages take us to the world far from the masculinized understanding of religion, where the old sacred and secular orders are turned upside down. The consequence is the rejection of the paternalistic ethical dualism characteristic of traditional Mexican society. The division into good, asexual women, identified with La Virgen de Guadalupe, and "sinners" driven by carnality is rejected in Castillo's novel. Saint Caridad is a former "sinner" generously sharing her body before the brutal assault. She rediscovers carnality a decade later, when she develops a feeling for a young Indian woman she meets at the Marian shrine in Chimayo. Her sexually liberated sister Esperanza, or La Loca, who performs abortions, do not meet the traditional morality criteria, either. And yet, their readiness for sacrifice, their love for their family and friends, and their ethics based on respect for the weak make the sisters likable to the reader.

Interestingly, Castillo's subversion of social orders in the novel is free of the tiresome didacticism that frequently plagues feminist manifestos and that *Massacre of the Dreamers* is marked by. The writer builds on the last pillar of *domesticana rasquachismo*: anecdotal history. The novel's bantering, sometimes ironic, and ambiguity-packed tone makes *Xicanisma* a diet that is light and at the same time nourishing for intellectual reflection. And even though, according to Mesa-Baines, carnivalesque humor and fun are features of both masculine and feminine *rasquachismo* (Mesa-Baines, 159), the humor in *So Far from God* has a feminine tinge to it. It accompanies the tales told by the narratrix when she intersperses the narrative with rumors and anecdotes and when she laughs at folk superstitions and the widespread tendency to use hyperbole.

At the same time, the narrator's humor is free of sarcasm or verbal aggression. It is marked by benevolence towards the members of the community she is describing and by understanding for their shortcomings. Although the male characters of the stories told do not come out particularly well, the narratrix is able, in her narrative generosity, to show humorous benevolence towards them as well. This concerns not only Domingo, a professional gambler who abandons Sofi with four little daughters only to return after 20 years, hoping for a peaceful life earned by his industrious wife, but also the mentally ill Francisco, whom poverty forced to enlist in the American army and fight in Vietnam. The romantic myth of ennobling poverty, popularized by the American counterculture of the 1960s and beguiling poor Francisco, is ironically summed up by the narratrix as follows: "material things, like money, ... 'just didn't matter' as so many youth felt in 1969—at least those who did not go to Vietnam, or who did not live in barrios and housing projects" (99).

The use of benevolent humor towards the characters attests to the willingness to open to difficult otherness, manifested both by the narratrix and by the author herself. The humor supports the novel's magical realism in building an extraordinary narrative world that, despite revisionist ambitions, is free of doctrinaire judgments. The rejection of the limitations of the masculinized Anglo-Saxon world does not mean changing one domination to another but aligns with

the writer's belief that building a positive alternative is possible. Castillo's narrative shows that a world without a masculinized god does not have to be the world of the last judgment or doomsday but can actually be a world friendly to everyone sharing the underdog sensibility.

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**A Queer Romance, Queering the National Romance:
LatinX Narratives of Belonging from *The Squatter*
and the Don to Red, White, and Royal Blue**

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Abstract: This paper is a preliminary exploration of LatinX literary, cinematic, and television narratives which attempt to situate LatinX persons in the national discourse of “America” through romance tropes. These narratives, often veering towards fantasias, use love between opposing forces (class, race/ethnicity, nations) as an allegory for a better nation. They imagine a utopian vision of America that heals the oft-ignored rifts tearing at the fabric of the nation.

Keywords: national romance, queer, LatinX, colonialism/imperialism, racism, reconciliation.

A note on terms: I want to clarify some terminology I will use. First, I use “queer” as a blanket reclamation of a slur to refer to the broad spectrum of sexual orientation expression and gender diversity of the LGBTQIA+ community, though I focus primarily on gay/bi male centered narratives, and, when appropriate, will use more specific terms of reference when necessary. Secondly, I use LatinX or the gendered variations when necessary to refer broadly to subjectivities from the LATAM diaspora, bearing in mind the fraught usage of the term, the generational and regional complexities of the term relative to Hispanic, mindful of the term Chicano, and also the ever-malleable nature of inscribing the genderedness of these words. I also use the term *sexile* to refer to someone who immigrates because of sexuality.¹ And finally, I use the term “rom-pol” as a play on rom-com, to refer to romance narratives that are also deeply political.

On Mexican-American Rom-Pol Narratives of Reconciliation

Doris Sommer’s 1993 study, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*, explores the national romance genre in the context of Latin American foundational fictions during the age of independence in the 19th century.² These narratives are structured around the romantic entanglements of politically, socially, ethnically, oppositional lovers whose romantic attachments and ensuing struggles to be together mirror national historical moments of trauma and separation, and the need to form new narratives of union, within new nations. They have a

1 See Guzmán; also Mizzi.

2 For most of Latin America that was from 1810-1825 –with several hiccups along the way— while some did not gain independence until 20th century.

political agenda of national consolidation, and burgeoning patriotism, wrapped up in heterosexual passion with the goal of engendering productive citizens for new nations.³

In many cases in the 19th century, these novels were written by women for whom political discourse was unseemly and from which they were cut off, and so they found ways to narrate politics through sentimentality. On the one hand, this narrative strategy gave women a political voice, and sometimes galvanized political action (perhaps the most famous of these in the American context being Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). On the other hand, the romance genre then, as now, allowed these political narratives in romantic drag to be dismissed as mere sentimentality. The way current rom-pols are critically assessed continues the trope of viewing them as escapist fantasy, rather than political tracts, often also because the themes are either narrated from a female or a queer perspective.

In the absence of meaningful social or political solutions to pressing problems, culture often comes to the rescue to narrate alternative, hopeful future memories, or attempts to rectify the past, pointing out where things went wrong, offering a fantasy of what-if to compensate for past sociopolitical traumas and their current manifestations.⁴ These rom-pol narratives are often fanciful, utopian adjacent fantasies, which means, on the one hand, they are easily ignored as political or as fantasy, dissociated from reality, and on the other, they are spaces of intense creative imagination where we are forced to confront reality, through desired fantasy, to imagine a better way and place to live.⁵

- 3 Expanding from Sommer, in some cases, based on varying reactions to US imperial expansion, particularly after 1898, these narratives seek to find a way forward with new alliances, with new imperial powers (US), while other narratives seek to reunite former frenemies (say, for example, former colonies with the decadent former imperial power--Spain) against bigger enemies (US). In Latin America this has often meant forging new relationships with Spain through romantic nostalgia, to combat the rising threat of US imperialism, or, finding ways to navigate with, rather than against, the new American Empire. In other instances, the political romantic narratives (rom-pols) sought to reclaim an Indigenous legacy wedded with a whitewashed and sanctified Spanish ancestry as a well-spring of creative, linguistic, and social resistance and identity against US imperialism. We should note, however, that these indigenismo narratives often exculpated Spanish genocide or conveniently erased the indigenous present, or reframed historical indigenous political histories of resistance or alliance--whether that is Mexico post 1910-1920 Revolution and the reimagining of Malinche, or the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío after 1898 laying claim to a scientific and literary history in contrast to the US in his essay "El Triunfo de Calibán" or in his poem "To Roosevelt" written in 1904 in response to the US machinations to separate Panama from Colombia. In the US or the UK these political romance narratives have served to justify or grapple with the emotional and political difficulties of colonialism, empire, civil war, and immigration.
- 4 "Where the political terrain can neither resolve nor suppress inequality, it erupts in culture. Because culture is the contemporary repository of memory, of history, it is through culture, rather than government, that alternative forms of subjectivity, collectivity, and public life are imagined." Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996 (22).
- 5 As Gordon observes "We need to know where we live in order to imagine living elsewhere. We need to imagine living elsewhere before we can live there " (5).

I will frame this paper of political romances around two historical moments of political and social catastrophe, the Mexican American War, and the rise of MAGA politics and its virulent context of anti-immigrant sentiment, to explore how LatinX rom-pol narratives of belonging have navigated these traumas.

For many, the first “Chicano” or Mexican American narrative was a political romance by María Amparo Ruiz de Burton (1832-1895) called *The Squatter and the Don* (1885). There are several problems with defining it as LatinX, Chicano, or anything else, given that it was written prior to these terms’ usages, and the novel has to be evaluated with the flaws typical of its time and place (classism, racism) and understood as a romantic political text. However, the novel is unique and interesting as it attempts to provide a romantic template for (heterosexual) union to address the change in political, social, and economic power in California after the Mexican American War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848).⁶ Ruiz de Burton writes following a pattern of sentimentalist novels that use emotionally charged narratives to shape political perspectives. *The Squatter and the Don* explores the union of the cultured Californios, or “Spano-Americans” as the novel calls them, with the pragmatic, practical gringos to create a new nation, a new identity, where the sum is better than the parts.⁷ The novel attempts to control a narrative of dispossession and changed political and social landscapes that resulted from the Mexican American War, which, though for narrative purposes in the US was about freedom, was really about resources: land and railroads. The novel critiques American legal corruption, religious hypocrisy, racism, and the illusion of democracy as a solution to inequality. The Spano-Americans of the novel are also labelled as “orphaned” as a result of the Mexican American War.

The author’s own life story parallels the fictional account: she was a *Californio* who married a US Captain (later General) and spent much of her financial and social capital after his death advocating to keep her family’s territorial possessions in the face of American incursions onto their family land justified by squatter’s rights laws.⁸

6 The result of this treaty forced Mexico to cede vast amounts of territory to the US (what is now California, Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of several other states, having lost the Texas territory ten years prior). Under the terms of the treaty, Mexican citizens had one year to leave or accept a new identity as US citizens. Property rights/ownership were also subject to revalidation that was often used as a legal chicanery to dispossess.

7 Californios is a term used to refer to Spanish then Mexican landowners/hacendados, the settlers of the territories of New Spain and, after Independence, Mexico, including those who were part of the *ranchero* system, as well as the *presidios* and mission systems. The term used more frequently in the novel is Spano-Americans. It generally excludes *mestizos*, as well as indigenous populations. For Ruiz de Burton it also generally excluded the unlanded. In the novel, Ruiz de Burton outlines this history of hacendados, land grants, and processes of settlements and the agenda of “civilizing” the Indigenous populations and building up settlements under both Spanish and Mexican authorities.

8 Squatters’ rights basically argue that “unoccupied land” can be possessed by squatters who have a right to the property, and the purported original owner bears the burden of proof of ownership (and the cost to prove it); and until such proof is accepted by the courts, the squatter can stay. This legal structure is convenient to dispossess, say, indigenous land rights or Californio land rights, or other minority land rights, but in a curious irony, it is becoming a plague to homeowners today, forcing changes to the law. The California Land Act of 1851 stated that “all Mexican land

This was essentially legal chicanery to dispossess the “other” of property, which proved particularly useful throughout the Southwest.

Ruiz de Burton advocates for the political and social marriage of the US and its industrial and pragmatic ingenuity with the grace and culture of the Spanish descendant landowners to keep the baser instincts of American capitalism and greed at bay, to civilize the wild, untamed Americans. A product of its time, the novel does not take into this consideration the unlanded peasant population who worked the hacendado lands, nor does it consider the indigenous, or mestizo populations, or even the squatters, other than to indicate that if the hacendado class is abused by the new system, these groups of peoples will fare far worse. The novel intends to navigate a successful integration, based on class and a construction of whiteness, of the former landed elite with the new political-military power. Unsurprisingly, this romantic navigation is conducted around the heterosexual framework of the California elite female (the embodiment of grace and culture) marrying the US military male in a power sharing arrangement that will secure the Californio family’s future. In some ways this novel embodied the romantic political hopes of uniting Latin Americans with the US against European neocolonial interests and model of democratic virtue expressed by many in Latin America until the 1898 Spanish-American War, and then the US intervention in separating Panama from Colombia in 1904, actions which shifted these political perceptions, and Latin American nations saw themselves under threat from the US.⁹

The Squatter and the Don is a romantic fantasia of marital union¹⁰ of Californios’ virtues, traditions, manners, and class with the entrepreneurial, capitalist, exploitative gringos, taming Americans and civilizing them, while guaranteeing the familial status (property, whiteness) of the Californios. It remains, however, racially problematic as it attempts to align class with the whiteness of Californios as natural allies of gringos against indigenous, mixed race, and black peoples, in order to solidify class/property claims, while ameliorating the baser instincts of the gringos who are cheating the traditional “Spanish” settlers out of their feudal landholdings, to bring this new union into a modern era of civilized enterprise. The lesson is that those who fail to adapt to inevitable American conquest, perish. In fact, as Don Mariano says, “We must sadly fade or pass away” (164), a sentiment echoing James Fennimore Cooper’s sentimental approach to Native Americans. Ruiz de Burton also argues that if the Californios are victimized, it will be worse for everyone else, including the

grants are public domain and available for resettlement until a federal land commission could verify the legitimacy of land titles.” Despite having married an American Citizen and soldier, Ruiz de Burton was forced to go to court to fight for her land, and these legal fees drained her savings, and she was forced to mortgage her land.

- 9 These acts prompted the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (1867-1916) to decry the US as a voracious hunter, as exemplified in his poem “To Roosevelt” (1904) and his political essay “El triunfo de Calibán” (1898). Where heretofore the fledgling Latin American nations admired US democracy and resistance to Europe, and saw in her a leader of freedom, the Spanish American War, and its main hero Teddy Roosevelt rapidly changed their minds.
- 10 Even somehow overcoming the Protestant/Catholic divide –which in Ruiz de Burton’s own experience required a Bishop to intervene.

squatters. Throughout the text, the racist disdain many of the squatters hold toward the Spano-Americans, is on display as they repeatedly call even the wealthy, landed Alamar family “greasers” who are repeatedly described as “lazy, thriftless, ignorant”; aspersions that are still dominant in social and political discourse in the US.

Ruiz de Burton was friends with Mary Todd Lincoln, but her access to the White House did not save her, particularly once her husband passed. Ruiz de Burton fought for title to her land for over 20 years, dying before it was resolved, leaving her poor and dispossessed, despite her novel’s more hopeful outcome.¹¹ She attempted to use realism, naturalism, social reform narrative (writing against railroad monopolies, and government corruption), dressed in sentimentalism to create an emotional bond with her readers (which is why she also wrote in English, as gringos were her target audience) to persuade them to her cause through empathy.

Ruiz de Burton’s novel stands in sharp contrast to Isabel Cañas’ 2023 novel *Vampires of El Norte*. If Ruiz de Burton’s novel was full of sentimentalist tropes, in a narrative intended to shape a different future, Cañas’ novel focuses on speculative fiction, attempting to rewrite that past of the catastrophic annexation of Mexican lands. *Vampires* is not at all about finding common ground with gringos. Cañas’ research discovered how Mexican landowners in the northern territories about to be overrun by Americans described gringos as uncivilized, barbaric, vampiric, violent, avaricious, and morally corrupt in their destructive greed to consume people and land leaving devastation in their wake.¹² Here, the romantic drama unites Mexicans (soon to be Mexican Americans) across class lines in a battle against demonic Americans who use vampires as weapons, and even though the battles are lost and Santa Anna defeated, the novel unites the main heterosexual protagonists across class lines to preserve land and family against the invaders, to survive despite annexation and gringo invasion. It is worth noting that Nena (Magdalena), the daughter of the hacendado, carries the scar of her childhood encounter with a vampire, a metaphor for the scar that remains of the open wound of that historical moment in US/Mexican history. If we look at these two romantic political novels written by women as bookends to an arc of Mexican American narrative, we note two very different approaches to the historical facts of US conquest, though both women write these narratives of resistance and reconciliation through the lens of romance.

Cañas rejects the Anglo-LatinX union fantasy of Ruiz de Burton and redirects our attention to resistance against the vampiric invaders. Ruiz de Burton saw the

11 Many Californio and Tejano landowners were rather quickly disenfranchised and legally robbed of their properties often through means of “lost, destroyed, damaged” land grant records, and legal maneuverings which often bankrupted them. One can find records of these throughout the archives in the Southwest. The fate of the non-elites was worse, with the establishment of armed agencies such as the Texas Rangers –which today are mythologized—whose main charge was the eradication of Chicanos. Extensive lynching of the Spanish/Mexican descendant inhabitants was not uncommon. This phenomenon gave rise to the corrido tradition of ballads celebrating resistance, such as the Ballad of Gregorio Cortez, among others.

12 I should note in the novel the vampires are not the gringos, they are imprisoned by the gringos/Texas Rangers (true to their calling) and used as a weapon of war, terror, dispossession, and forced exile.

positive possibilities of Anglo-Californio unions, and the inevitability of American imperial presence. It should be noted she was not alone in seeing possibilities as many Tejano and Californio landed gentry had issues with the central government in Mexico City and not all necessarily uniformly or aggressively resisted American presence and intervention, and initially saw some hope or opportunity in the new dynamics, some even siding with American interests. Quickly enough, however, the realities of their situation became obvious, as American exploitative economics, greed, and racism raised its ugly head. Any romantic notions of intercultural and interethnic reconciliation and love that others in Latin America may have had vis-à-vis the United States as a safeguard against European neocolonial interests, and democratic ideals were finally quashed by the Spanish American War of 1898 and then the 1904 American Intervention to separate Panama from Colombia (for the purposes of building the canal). The scar of the US-Mexico border remains an open wound, as Gloria Anzaldúa describes it, calling it a “1,950 mile-long open wound ... *una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (24-25).¹³ Unlike Anzaldúa, however, narratives like Ruiz de Burton and others discussed here, look to stitch the wound closed through political romances. The queer rom-pols I discuss here return to the tropes outlined by Ruiz de Burton: political romance narratives that call out the problems and traumas of these divisive wounds while also applying the sentimental balm of love to heal the scar. The question to consider is how successful the queer rom-pol is in suturing the wound.

Queer Political Romances of US Imperialism, Briefly

Queer rom-pols, similarly to women's writing, are often ignored by the heterosexual majority and queer romance writing is dismissed as frivolous, the way women's writing historically has been. Furthermore, even if read or celebrated, the queer coding is often lost on readers and critics, and if one points it out, one is “reading too much into things” which I am about to do.

In the context of the US, queer romantic political narratives have, in fact, a fairly revealing presence, beginning with the asexual but romantic friendship narratives of indigenous men ceding the American landscape to their white male friends. James Fennimore Cooper's novels can be read as gay-adjacent foundational fictions that justify the romantic bond between indigenous peoples and white colonial settlers, resulting in the indigenous hero gifting the land and the future to his white friend, the trope in James Fennimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking* series, particularly *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) where the indigenous peoples conveniently die off or assimilate.

In a similar vein, the same can be found in American romantic novels exploring the burgeoning expansion of the US into the Pacific, such as the homosocial relationships in Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840)

13 Gloria Anzaldúa's work is replete with the discourse of the wound, as evidenced in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

and Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) where, quite literally, there is a marriage between the narrator Ishmael (after the Biblical outcast) and a native Pacific Islander Queequeg who cares for him, teaches him the ropes, with whom he shares a bed, and upon whose floating coffin our narrator survives the shipwreck of the Pequod. If that is not a queer national romance justifying US Imperial expansion in the Pacific, I do not know what is.¹⁴ Potential queer readings of Westerns as metaphors of Manifest Destiny are similarly abundant, but fodder for a different article.

Queer Political Romances, Broadly

While the aforementioned narratives are queer-adjacent, their function is imperial justification of conquest, rather than healing narratives of unity (the other always dies). It is important to note the pitfalls of rom-pols which can, as Mary Louise Pratt argues in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, legitimize colonial exploitation and inequality as natural and inevitable, erasing legitimate struggle through the white-washing of sentimentalism. Romance is often used to eliminate the underlying problems that remain unresolved. But perhaps, because the queer is still rejected and marginalized, there is some avoidance of this trap, since there are still issues to overcome that can not be pink-washed away nor obfuscated behind gauzy romance tropes. I would also argue that these queer national romance narratives are very consciously fantasy and stand in contrast to, though engage with, realism.

Alexandra Barron argues in "Fantasies of Union: The Queer National Romance in *My Beautiful Laundrette*" that the queer political romance with a goal of crafting a more perfect union has an established history that I would elaborate on briefly. Barron situates her argument in postcolonial narratives, primarily focusing on the Indian Subcontinent and Britain. However, I would argue that the romantic political allegorical narrative is also used to address other national wounds. We can see the political and romantic tropes of this type in novels about British class and imperial reconciliation throughout E.M. Forster's works, particularly his 1924 novel *A Passage to India* (film 1984) and *Maurice* (uniting class differences –published posthumously in 1971 because of its obvious homosexual content) this last being made into the 1987 film by the gay binational couple Ismail Merchant and James Ivory. As Barron mentions, the same pattern of exploring national union and reconciliation through fantasies of queer romance is evident in *Borstal Boy* (navigating the Irish/British divide through a queer romance).¹⁵

In her essay, Barron explores the queer national romance fantasy of Hanif Kureishi's film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) as an attempt to navigate, through an unlikely gay couple, the economic, social, and ethnic stratification of post-colonial Thatcherite England. The fraught but ultimately successful, though fantasy-imbued, queer romance of Johnny, a white British youth (formerly nationalist, anti-immigrant)

14 This is, of course, not Melville's only queer coded narrative of imperial expansion, as his novella Benito Cereno operates quite similarly, though with a focus on anti-slavery, and the righteousness of US Imperial Expansion at the expense of Spanish imperial decline in the Pacific.

15 Memoir 1958, film 2000.

with Omar, a UK born Pakistani, unites the youths in a hopeful alternative reality to Thatcherism, class division, and racial segregation and discrimination. This narrative fantasy of union also informs Francis Lee's 2017 film *God's Own Country* exploring the fraught romance between a closeted British farmer with a Romanian immigrant laborer in a pre-Brexit fantasia. Their union, essential to the continued running of the family farm, runs counter to the nationalist rhetoric of Brexit, just as the fantasy of Johnny and Omar's relationship runs counter to the postcolonial racism and neoliberal classist rhetoric of Thatcherism. In both films, the relationships are framed by violence from their communities and themselves, because of the transgressions of race, class, ethnic, and gender categories.

Taking the British queer political romance of national healing one step further is Waleed Akhtar's 2022 play *The P Word*, which takes us back to *My Beautiful Laundrette* territory, but here the play explores the complex relationship of a white-identified Pakistani (whose identity is shaped by assimilation, as are his erotic desires for white boys) whose world is reshaped by an unlikely romance with a Pakistani sexile, an asylum seeker fleeing death at the hands of his family and community for being gay. The play ends with a fantasy wherein the British assimilated Pakistani man boards a plane to rescue his lover from deportation, getting the passengers, and the audience, involved in stopping the plane that will take his lover to his death. The play grimly reminds us that this fantastical happy ending isn't real, and that every day Britain is deporting people to their doom, particularly queer asylum seekers. If *My Beautiful Laundrette* offered a brief glimmer of hope, *The P Word* reminds us that nearly 4 decades later, the romantic fantasy of *Laundrette* remains illusory.

Queer LatinX National Romances of Belonging

Now, I want to turn my attention to queer national romances involving the LatinX experience in the US. Many of these narratives tend to focus on group politics, group identity as resistance and survival, with a strong focus on the family, usually in opposition to individualism and capitalism, viewed as American vices. This focus on the family is, in fact, the power behind most queer LatinX rom-pols of belonging in the same way it was for Ruiz de Burton and Cañas. There is, of course, an irony here, considering how often the queer is ejected from both the political body and the family unit.

In LatinX narratives, there are queer and inter-ethnic narratives exploring possible futures or wished-for pasts, of national identity through queer national fictions of unity in a vein similar to that explored in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Sadly, I fear, such queer rom-pols are ignored as being merely mostly romance and fantasy, without legitimate political stakes, precisely because they queer the romance genre. In the national allegory trope, they remain outsiders, and their sexual, romantic resolution across the great divide remains mostly in the realm of what should be, not what is; as a consequence of which they are not viewed as serious narratives.

Despite these contemporary works being viewed as simply fluffy storylines focused on “inclusion” (a hot button term in the US right now), these narratives can be read as much more political than the romance or rom-com genres may initially indicate, requiring the viewer to grapple with a reconsideration of immigration, the rapidly evolving demographics of the US, and the inevitable social transformation against which current political and legal forces are presently arrayed.

The film *Los Jornaleros/The Day Laborers* (2003) is among the first to attempt to narrate LatinX fantasies of belonging confronting issues of immigration and assimilation through a queer romance lens. Three cousins (or brothers) Pillo, Tura, and Quique cross the border from Mexico without appropriate paperwork, believing they can find financial success in the US, though they struggle to find work to survive since their lack of legal paperwork to be in the US denies them all but day laborer employment.¹⁶ The film explores how each navigates a hostile system. Pillo gets frustrated with precarious manual labor and opts to deal drugs – while also scamming the supplier which nearly results in his death. Tura tries to keep up hope, and even develops a relationship with María, a female immigrant, but eventually takes on the role of sexual boy toy for a bored rich white woman, though he believes he has it made. Quique slowly discovers his queer sexuality and develops a relationship with a white man who, in somewhat typical fashion, is an art gallery collector named, too obviously, West.

The drama comes to a head when the family is broken apart over the drug dealing violence of Pillo, the pregnancy of Maria (Tura’s former girlfriend), Tura’s eviction from his gigolo apartment after being caught *in delicto* with the white woman who accuses him of rape (another typical trope); and everything comes to a near calamitous head when Quique is shot and nearly dies.

It is worth noting that the cousins reject Quique for being queer, particularly for being with West, a white man who is financially secure, because they see him as feminizing himself coupled with class and racial subjugations that have a peculiar resonance in Mexican discourse related to Malinche and the Conquest. Quique is a traitor because he doesn’t work like a real man, or as a Mexican. The family is only reunited and “saved” by the sacrifice of Quique who, while in the hospital hovering on the edge of death, forces the family to confront their precarity.¹⁷ The only one who manages to survive and thrive is Quique who, thanks to his white male partner, has obtained legal status – which suddenly makes him valuable. One cannot be brown and queer – until that is what saves the day. This film is, of course, pure fantasy, since, at the time of the film, gay marriage was not federally recognized so Quique couldn’t have gotten legal status that way.¹⁸ The film’s romantic, political

16 The characters alternate these terms, and we should note that in Latin American cultural practices, cousins --or aunts, uncles, grandparents-- may not be direct blood relatives, but rather, these are honorific titles, or titles designating close bonds, which, at times in the film are rejected, as when Tura claims Quique is a very distant relative, but when Quique survives and Tura reconciles with West for a green card, Tura refers to Quique as his brother.

17 Pillo opts out of the drug trade which nearly cost him and Quique their lives; Tura reconciles with Maria.

18 Gay marriage was briefly legal in California in 2008 before the passage of Prop 8 outlawing same

queer wishful thinking results in the happy, albeit unreal resolution as, hat in hand (literally) Pillo and Tura ask West to help them gain legal status.¹⁹

The film concludes with a happy ending: the LatinX characters get legal status, honest work, and reestablish the family structure, and are model immigrants contributing to the American society, all thanks to Quique, the rejected queer, and his white lover.²⁰ Obviously, the white savior trope is problematic, but the film still shows an interesting fantasy of a national reconciliation project both around gay marriage and immigration.²¹ Deviating from the trope used by Ruiz de Burton, it is the white gay man who is artistic, sensitive, with the poetic soul that civilizes the brusque, laboring LatinX Quique.²²

This trope of queerness as the purview of whiteness and class, and as antithetical to LatinX identity, dominates the film *La Mission* (2009). Here Che, the father, sees queer as white and violently rejects his son Jesse's queer identity as particularly anti-Chicano. Meanwhile Jesse navigates the seeming contradictions of his identity until he comes to realize he can be both queer and Chicano; that he can have a white boyfriend, and get an education, and not compromise his ethnicity nor his masculinity. The father finds himself obligated to navigate the racial assumptions that a white boy is "making him [Jesse] his bitch" –feminizing him, emasculating him, and thus making him a "malinche" and no longer Chicano.²³ The father's mantra of identity is "stay brown" reflected in his "vato" clothing, his low-rider culture, the food he cooks, and his devotion to the Virgen de Guadalupe which all stands in seeming contrast to his son's desire to leave the barrio of San Francisco's La Mission, to go to the Castro, the gay district of San Francisco, to attend college, and to live as a gay Chicano man with a white boyfriend.

sex marriage. It is also important to note that immigration is a federal jurisdiction so a state law on gay marriage would have had no bearing on immigration status. In addition, the fact that Quique crossed the border illegally would further have hampered his pathway to citizenship, even with a hypothetically legal gay marriage.

- 19 Such legal status would have been fraudulent because there was no gay marriage path to legal standing at that time, and they crossed illegally, so, even if Quique could have gained legal status through marriage, he could not have sponsored his siblings (though they are not his siblings), and even if he could, the processing time would have taken decades.
- 20 The film is framed by a series of snapshots of the men before crossing the border, and then at the end, at Quique and West's wedding.
- 21 Unlike the other LatinX/White heterosexual pairings in the film, we are meant to see this relationship as egalitarian, whereas Tura with the white woman is clearly a case of white erotic objectification fantasy.
- 22 It is worth noting that the problem with Quique is that being gay is viewed as antithetical to LatinX/Mexican identity, and masculinity. And yet it is the queer, rejected Quique who saves the family through an admittedly fanciful solution through his relationship with a white guy. And, although utterly fanciful in the time context and the legal realities, it is nevertheless revealing that the entire extended immigrant family can only come to achieve legal status and middle-class success through the marriage of the LatinX immigrant with a white man. But in the process Quique, like others we will see, initially loses his family and seemingly his Mexican identity because one cannot be brown and queer – until that is what saves the day.
- 23 Malinche, Cortez' translator (whom he called "mi lengua/my tongue") during the Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlán, has been vilified as la chingada, the fucked one, the great betrayer.

The relationship between the white boyfriend Jordan and Jesse is infused with gang-inflections, from the romantic role playing they engage in, to Jordan confronting gang members which results in Jesse getting shot. As with Quique in *Day Laborers*, Jesse's near-death experience slowly cracks Che's resolve, and he eventually reconciles with his son who has left home with Jordan to go to school (education being seen as another way of becoming less Chicano).

The TV Series *Rescue 9-1-1 Lone Star* (which launched in 2020 with an agenda to address diversity in all its forms) features a wildly popular M/M interracial couple composed of TK who is white and Jewish, and Carlos who is Mexican American, and they are collectively known as Tarlos.²⁴ Carlos is played by openly gay actor Rafael Silva, a Brazilian-American actor, whose family immigrated to the US in 2007 (when he was 13). TK is played by bisexual actor Ronen Rubinstein, an Israeli-born American actor who immigrated to the US in 1998 (when he was 5). In this series, the two men are out (to varying degrees), and they navigate queerness and heroism within the hyper-masculinized environments of firefighters, police officers, and paramedics. Harkening back to the trope of the LatinX as civilizing force, family values, and responsibility seen in Ruiz de Burton and others, in this narrative arc it is the Hispanic Carlos who saves the white TK from self-destruction. The vast series franchise includes other queer characters, but so far this couple is the only one that navigates queer relationships between a white character and a LatinX character, while also positioning the LatinX character as the more stable, mature, and responsible partner whose love saves the day, in the midst of an obscene amount of macho death-defying drama, sprinkled with romance, and seasoned with some magic realism, just to remind us, perhaps, that it is all still fantasy.²⁵

Finally, I want to explore the queer national romance of belonging in the novel (2019) and film (2023) *Red, White & Royal Blue* – which has multiple queer characters and engages in the romance of the princess fairytale narrative, while also deconstructing the notion of monarchy, and explores the queer national romance of class, of uniting UK/US, and of LatinX/US and second generation LatinX with the whitest of the white symbolically represented by Prince Henry. Based on a novel by Casey McQuiston, the wildly popular guilty pleasure has skyrocketed the careers of the lead actors, and garnered significant profits for Amazon.²⁶ There are many aspects

24 In some respects, their story has opened up discourse to more accepting approaches to queer people, though that in large part is due, I suspect, to the way in which the 911 franchise deals with all its queer characters: they always retain the stereotypical qualities of masculine adoration; the men are never queeny, and the women are never too butch – in other words, they don't betray the gender performance a straight audience needs, lest they become the object of derision or humor, as is too often the case in media portrayals of "the queer". However, social media commentary shows that whenever the initially perceived straight male characters are proven to be bi or gay, some viewers feel the show has been ruined (e.g., the response to the bi journey of Buck in another 911 franchise spin-off).

25 Magic realism elements include TK's conversations with his dead mother while he is in a coma and Carlos holds vigil beside his hospital bed; and the mother's ghost attends their wedding.

26 As per Wikipedia: "For the first three weeks after its release, it was the top watched film worldwide on the platform and provoked what Prime Video described as "a huge surge" of new subscribers. On the Review Aggregator website *Rotten Tomatoes*, 76% of 116 critics' reviews are positive,

to this success, from the actors' own clear chemistry to the oft-overlooked narratives that at once reassure us of fantasies (princess fairytales can come true, immigration always has a happy ending) and also requires us to question these same fantasies.

The film is directed by Matthew López, a gay Puerto Rican playwright deeply influenced by the works of E. M. Forster.²⁷ And while it may seem odd that a gay Puerto Rican would find himself in the white closeted works of E. M. Forster, if we look beneath the surface, Forster's works are obviously quite queer, but all his characters are looking for one thing: to belong, to love. As *Howard's End* articulates simply: "Only Connect" which is the antidote to the current state of vitriol, hatred, and division against which these queer political romances fight. In fact, one of López' most important works prior to *RW&RB* was the play *The Inheritance*, a revisioning of *Howard's End* exploring queer history and addressing the fear resulting from the 2016 election, much like *RW&RB* does. The novel and the film represent a clear shift in narrative representation vis-à-vis positionality (sexual, social, political) of the queer LatinX body. Matthew López, an openly gay Puerto Rican writer/director politicizes queerness, staging queerness and *Latinidad* as a political act of power, reconciliation, and belonging – even if it is just a fantasy.

If *The Squatter and the Don* used the emotional trope of a cultured Californio civilizing the baser instincts of the gringo for a collective greater good, united across a perception of shared class and whiteness, then *RW&RB* flips that script in several ways: enacting a romance between two men; setting it among the highest echelons of class; and reversing the trope of who civilizes whom.²⁸ In ways similar to the trope of Squatter/Don, there is a civilizing character (Prince Henry) who liaisons with the crasser, baser American (Alex, the son of the first female US President); their personal gain in this is resolved also in a greater public good –the monarchy becomes relevant again, and Alex's mother (and by extension the Democrats) win the election. Here, however, the civilizer is the whitest of the white, Prince Henry, the "spare" to the throne, who is deeply constrained by royal protocols in the exercise of his personal life; he himself says the monarchy is an outdated institution, and complicit in the problem of colonialism. Prince Henry civilizes the rough and rather undisciplined First Son Alex.²⁹

Unlike previous narratives, *RW&RB* doesn't unite the LatinX with the gringo in a national reconciliation narrative, since that was done in Alex's parents'

with an average rating of 6.4/10. The website's consensus reads: "Amusing and endearing, Red, White & Royal Blue is a cheerfully formulaic rom-com that embraces inclusion without falling back on stereotypes." The Observer's Wendy Ide praised the charisma of Perez and Galitzine and credited it for the film's appeal: "It turns out that watching two impossibly beautiful boys making cow eyes at each other might be just the escapist pulp we need right now."

27 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/09/09/how-matthew-López-transformed-howards-end-into-an-epic-play-about-gay-life>

28 Though for the young men their class is not of their own, but of their parentage.

29 The book and film get the surname wrong, as in Spanish the patronymic precedes the matronymic, and he should be Alex Diaz Claremont ... the question is why? To privilege the white name, or the mother's name Claremont over the Mexican name Díaz? Or because gringos don't know how Spanish surnames work and assume the father's last name is last? Or to simplify it in terms of Ellen's last name?

generation; but rather, it unites transnationally, American with British. This fantasia alliance is also echoed in the political friendship of the UK/US, which is symbolized by the political alliance of the US President (a white woman married to a LatinX) and her counterpart, a black female Prime Minister. If the LatinX/Gringo alliance has been established in the previous generation (where the white woman has united with the LatinX immigrant) then the next generation unites US/UK in a new romantic, sexual, and political relationship.

The film deviates sometimes significantly from the book.³⁰ But if the film is less direct about some of the diversity present in the novel, it does insert the diversity in other ways if one is in the know.³¹ For example, Alex's body guard is played by an Indian trans actor: in the novel it is clear the bodyguard is trans, but if the viewer does not know the actor Aneesh Sheth, they would be unaware of the wink to the book's trans Secret Service Agent; and Prince Henry's rather old-fashioned grandfather is played by gay actor Stephen Fry, and the president's aid and Alex's BFF Nora is played by Rachel Hilson who is known among queer audiences in particular as the "beard" in the series spin-off of the 2018 film *Love, Simon*, the hispanized *Love, Victor* (2020-2023), which also navigates belonging as queer, and explores relations between LatinX and whiteness, though it is not particularly political, and pays little attention to LatinX belonging through a white/LatinX romance.

Nevertheless, the film retains the novel's harsh criticisms of the US, particularly the political conservatism of the right vis-à-vis women, queers, Latinos, and African Americans. Most of this critique is subtle and visual, like a White House adorned with images of Harriet Tubman, and other visual and narrative references to diversity which would send any MAGA acolyte into apoplectic fits. The novel spends much more time reinserting the queer histories of royal monarchs and founding fathers of America, the "off-brand England."

Alex is played by Taylor Zakhar Perez, an American of mixed ancestry, including Mexican, who studied Spanish culture and community at UCLA. The character of First Son Alex is rather complex, because he is an outsider in the US as a Mexican American, and yet, from Henry's point of view, and the viewers, he is also quintessentially American: brash, uncouth, loud, thoroughly Texan. If historically LatinX have been viewed as "neither here nor there" neither belonging in the US nor any longer pertaining to the country of origin, the persona of Alex attempts to have it both ways...both Mexican (culturally, linguistically, culinarily) and All-American.³²

30 Alex's older sister June is absent in the film, the bisexuality of some characters is removed, Alex's parents are divorced in the novel, and trans and pan identities that are more obvious in the novel are invisible in the film; and the film significantly tones down the critiques of UK and US imperialism and genocidal histories, though those critiques are still there.

31 In the novel, Amy the secret service agent is described as a trans woman and former Navy SEAL, with the juxtaposition of her no-nonsense attitude and rumored kill count with her love of embroidery providing an ongoing source of comedy.

32 Any number of reviews and social media posts indicate that the film's popularity has to do with the likeability, attractiveness, and chemistry of the actors, and social media further seems to indicate that it is a gateway narrative into more accepting conversations about queer rights with straight counterparts (probably because there seems to be something recognizable in them?), but I argue there's more to it than that.

Curiously, some have called Alex a prototypical “Yank” erasing the very thing that motivates Alex, and the film, and the healing fantasia: being a *Mexican* in Texas.³³

Alex identifies as Mexican (his father was brought over the border as a child by his parents – though how he became a citizen is unclear). If Ruiz de Burton held up the “Spano-Americans” as the virtuous souls who wed the brawny white future of America in a civilizing, moderating gesture, here we have the trapped uber-cultured, virtuous Henry wedded to the LatinX who, interestingly, is both LatinX and emblematic of the American dream of rags to riches. Alex is from Texas, the most “American” of Americana (as the film visually reminds us) and yet he still feels discriminated, marginalized, and oppressed because, as he says to Henry, “My father was 12 when my abuela brought him and his sister over from Mexico. You may not understand this, but in America, if you’re an immigrant with a ‘Z’ in your last name, there’s not a lot of people in positions of power that look like you or sound like you. I’ve been given a chance to be someone in the world that my father didn’t see when he was growing up.” This statement is also true for director Matthew López who said that “As a queer Puerto Rican, I would’ve loved to have met Alex a lot earlier in my life.”³⁴ This representation of both the LatinX and queer bodies in spaces of power, who believe they have legitimate and realistic access to those spaces and such power, and that the conversation happens in bed is, actually, important, because, as Barron argues relative to *Laundrette*, “It is sex then, interracial queer sex ... [that is used to] allegorize healing national collective traumas.” It is used to heal multiple collective traumas, the US from its recent election history, its anti-LatinX and anti-queer histories, even its misogyny (electing a female President, twice!), and it heals Henry from his nation’s anti-queer and colonialist histories. Furthermore, this postcoital conversation solidifies their commitment to change the world they live in.

It is, at its heart, a narrative of hope, a wishful revision of the immediate past (Trump’s election), a belief in a possible better future. It’s all very fluffy and very utopian, an imagined America, and the novel/film are meant to take us to this imagined US/UK through an emotional rollercoaster of youthful idealism in search of our national better selves. These narratives want to show us that different histories are possible, even one as seemingly fantastical as claiming that Texas can vote blue. Both the novel and film stand as oppositional histories to the MAGA movement, rejecting the choice made to move backward, instead reminding readers and viewers that United States can be a place of belonging for immigrants and queers and women in a hope-filled future. They both also serve as critiques of Britain’s monarchical fantasies and colonial legacies. As the author herself writes, this novel, written in the aftermath of the 2016 election “needed to be escapist, trauma-soothing, alternate-but-realistic reality. Not a perfect world –one still unbelievably fucked up, just a little better, a little more optimistic ... to be a spark of joy and hope” (419). And yes, it is a gauzy fantasy fairytale dream of hope interrupted by ugly social and political realities of homophobia, misogyny, classism, and racism (with the implication that

33 See Nicholson.

34 See Walsh.

the Mexicans even stole the first family job from white people). It rewrites a future history, with echoes of past and current reality that make it true enough, an antidote to the current reality. A fantasy, yes, but with emotional truths.

Another curiosity of these narratives is that they place the margins (a woman politician, a bi Mexican, and a queer prince) centerstage, having their drama play out in the White House and the Palace. No longer private dramas, as we see in the earlier films and TV series mentioned, these characters are fully front and center in spaces of power, but also demonstrating that they belong in these places of power, in these spaces that are the marks of identity, the peoples' spaces, the symbolic "residence" of their respective nations.

Much like many of the other narratives, this fluffy, sometimes corny, yet oddly endearing romantic comedy at once fulfills stereotypes of successful immigration and prince/ss fairytales, and political underdog victories, the stuff American dreams are made of. And yet, it also shows us the dirty underbelly of American and British exceptionalism and forces us to contend with current political policies in both countries that undermine the stories these nations like to tell about themselves.

Unlike in other films and novels about LatinX queerness, Alex's "Mexican" identity is never questioned nor rendered inauthentic due to his eventually revealed queerness, his masculinity is never doubted, and his education does not emasculate or un-brown him, as we have seen in many other narratives, and both his white and his LatinX family fully accept his bisexuality and his relationship. However, we should note that Alex is not the "vato or pocho" of earlier narratives – his father has already overcome those barriers. Alex has the privilege of navigating spaces of privilege, in and between ethnic identities, as he has a white mother (who becomes the first female president of the US), and a Mexican immigrant father.³⁵

At the same time, his participation in his mother's reelection campaign highlights the racism of the US; and, when he is outed, it is feared that his queerness will jeopardize his mother's too-close reelection campaign. The outing of Alex and Henry, the spare royal prince also seems to jeopardize the British Monarchy. While the romantic drama fulfills and queers the "Prince Charming" motif, it also participates in a romantic reconciliation of uber-whiteness and elitism of the British Royal family with American brashness and self-made rhetoric best exemplified by, of course, Texas, eventually demonstrating that even a Prince can become a Texan, and thus free.

If Alex's parents show the success of the heteronormative reconciliation romance of a white woman with an immigrant man (reversing the outcome in Ruiz de Burton), Alex's relationship with Henry queers this narrative trope, and takes it a step further, uniting across an ocean, across class, and across history, the rogue colony and the motherland, the epitome of whiteness and class with the biracial (and bisexual) child of a Mexican Immigrant.³⁶

35 His status is glossed over – was it afforded under the Reagan amnesty? Through marriage? We don't know.

36 These complexities are further manifested in the person of the black, female, British PM.

Furthermore, Henry himself decries the monarchy (though he does enjoy the financial and class privileges, while also coming to understand how the monarchy and the weight of the institution also inhibits his own freedom as a gay man –though the novel takes pains to demonstrate that Henry’s financial wellbeing are from his inheritance from his dead actor father, not the monarchy, as a way of disentangling him from those obligations and associated guilts). Henry gets to have his cake and eat it too: he remains a prince, critical of the monarchical institution, in love with a Democratic politician, who is the son of an immigrant, as a result of which he transforms from the “Prince of Shame” to the “Prince of the Queers” ... and at the same time Claremont-Diaz wins reelection, and all is well with the world: the queers and the immigrants save the day: the US and UK are re-united, and the US is saved from its current political dystopia.³⁷ The narrative rejects homophobic nationalism, isolationist policies, anti-immigrant politicking, and the whitewashing of history. To quote Omar’s father from *Laundrette*, in this narrative, history is given a “pink rinse” as an antidote to prejudices, to make things right in the world.

In conclusion, bringing us full circle, *Red, White, and Royal Blue*, like *The Squatter and the Don*, engages with sentimentality (successfully, it seems, by viewership numbers and other rubrics of financial success, including the greenlight to make a sequel) to advocate for a cause. While Ruiz de Burton’s cause was the rights of Californios, and women, in the territories ceded to the US, Matthew López’s cause is an expansion of that: queer empowerment, and LatinX belonging, in those same territories, more than a century later. It is true that for some, these narratives advocate for assimilation and betray “authentic” Mexican identity because they marry and enact whiteness. However, this belies that there are many ways to be LatinX (which the X itself indicates), and here, there is no “white savior”, and Alex still speaks Spanish, still cooks and eats Mexican foods, and still feels fully Mexican and fully American. It is not a question of either/or, but of both/and, of creating a more perfect union, and convincing the rest that LatinX belong.

Both narratives are fantasias, which, while advocating for a utopian ideal, do not hesitate to point out the continued political corruption, disenfranchisement, problematic imperial histories, and the misogyny, homophobia, and classism that, apparently, nearly 150 years later after Ruiz de Burton, hasn’t changed all that much. If in Ruiz de Burton the squatters were the gringos who had to be accommodated in the face of the inevitable march of history and American Manifest Destiny, in the *RW&RB* fairytale, there are plenty on the American right, as evidenced in the movie and novel, who would view Alex, the Mexican, as the squatter, occupying the White House. In McQuiston’s and López’s candy dream, the Mexican American isn’t just visiting the White House, as Ruiz de Burton did in her friendship with Mary Todd Lincoln, he lives there.

Laundrette opens with one of the film’s main protagonists Johnny, the white former fascist, being evicted as a squatter in a London flat owned by Pakistanis. Similarly, *Squatter* explores the rifts and romance between a squatter (also

37 Here are clear echoes of Harry/Meghan.

white) and the daughter of the *hacendado* (Californio). For many in the US, the character of Alex in *RW&RB* would be perceived as a squatter, occupying a White House that doesn't belong to a queer brown man. Nevertheless, the emotional connections of these narratives, as well as the others discussed, are designed to make the audience want to invest in this hopeful reimagining of the nation and its citizenry. As Barron argues, "At their most visionary then, queer national romances contest homophobic nationalisms as they revise imperial fantasies of domination, re-imagining citizenship in radical new ways." I would expand that to say that queer inter-ethnic national political romance fantasies, in the vein of McQuiston and López, give us hope. The fact that there is to be a sequel to *RW&RB* shows the power of, and desire for, this fantasy, the imagined space, and we can only hope the sequel, like the country, will continue to move us toward a more hope-filled, inclusive future, with only the memory of a scar.

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**Food and Crime in Raquel V. Reyes' Culinary Mystery
*Mango, Mambo, and Murder:
A Caribbean Kitchen Mystery* (2022)**

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Abstract: “Culinary mystery” describes the subgenre of crime mystery fiction that brings together food and crime. This article explores the connection between knowledge about Caribbean food and crime detection skills in Raquel V. Reyes’ culinary mystery *Mango, Mambo, and Murder: A Caribbean Kitchen Mystery* (2022). The novel accentuates the pan-ethnic Caribbean heritage by combining the cuisines from Haiti, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. The main Latina character is a food anthropologist who becomes an amateur sleuth and uses her culinary skills as prime detection tools. Her cooking style corresponds with the traditions of Floribbean Cuisine, pioneered by a group of South Florida chefs known as the Mango Gang. Finding ingredients, adapting the proper instructions, and preparing meals are metaphors for the investigation leading to the culprit’s identification. The amateur/academic sleuth employs the analytic skills she has developed through her scholarly pursuits.

Keywords: culinary mystery, Floribbean cuisine, food anthropology, amateur sleuth

This article explores the connection between knowledge about Caribbean food and crime detection skills in Raquel V. Reyes’ culinary mystery *Mango, Mambo, and Murder: A Caribbean Kitchen Mystery* (2022).¹ In an interview with Teresa Dovalpage for *Latino Stories* (20 Dec 2021), Reyes explains that the book is dedicated to her stepmother, who taught her to cook Cuban dishes. The novel accentuates the pan-ethnic Caribbean heritage by combining the cuisines from Haiti, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. This essay analyses how a food anthropologist becomes an amateur sleuth. Examining the culinary recipes, selecting the ingredients, following the instructions, and preparing the dishes become prime detection tools. Food anthropological knowledge and cooking skills help the amateur sleuth trigger the chain of reasoning, identify the clues, and investigate the crime mystery of the apparent murders. The article outlines the generic conventions of culinary mystery

1 Raquel V. Reyes is a Cuban American from Miami. She is a co-chair for SleuthFest and the author of three novels in the *Caribbean Kitchen Mystery* series: *Mango, Mambo, and Murder* (2022), *Calypso, Corpses, and Cooking* (2022), and *Barbacoa, Bomba, and Betrayal* (2023). The first novel won a LEFTY for Best Humorous Mystery, was nominated for an Agatha Award, and optioned for film adaptation. Reyes’ short stories exploring colorism in the Latinx community were published in various anthologies, including *Ellen Hart Presents Malice Domestic 15: Mystery Most Theatrical* (2020) by Ellen Hart et al., and *The Best American Mystery and Suspense 2022: A Mystery Collection* (2022) by Jess Walter. Biographical details of Raquel V. Reyes are available at <https://rvreyes.com/>.

and examines the interconnectedness between food and crime in the first novel from the *Caribbean Kitchen Mystery* series.²

The themes of food preparation and consumption are frequently explored in literature and film. Charles Camp defines “foodways” as “the system of knowledge and expression related to food that vary with culture” (29). Food may communicate various concepts, such as love, grief, nutrition, social standing, ethnicity, acculturation patterns, and cultural identity (Christou 116; Abarca 206; Michelis 30). Descriptions of food, its smell, and its taste enhance a text’s realism and shape the pace of a plot (Franks et al. 41; Leotta 40). The term “food voice” has been coined by Annie Hauck-Lawson in her article “Hearing the Food Voice: An Epiphany for a Researcher” and defined as “the dynamic, creative, symbolic, and highly individualized ways that food serves as a channel of communication” (6). Eugene N. Anderson elaborates on the communicative aspect of “food voice.” He argues that “Food is used in every society on earth to communicate messages,” for example, offering food can substitute a verbal greeting (6). Sarah Sceats examines the metaphorical meaning of food and states that “the giving of symbolic bread and wine” is “a token of love and trust” (11).

The term “foodscape,” a contraction of food and landscape, is defined by Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis as “a physical space connected with food-related activities (foodways)” (13). Food exhibits a multitude of literary contexts, including the domestic sphere, and frequently refers to culinary venues, such as diners, restaurants, or hotel bars. Those are the places where characters meet, celebrate special occasions, and create social bonds between family members and friends (Hynynen 71-72; Grünewald 88). Food can reveal a character’s personality (Henderson 55; Leotta 41), as in the case of Nero Wolfe, a detective created by the American crime writer Rex Stout.³ Wolfe is a connoisseur of fine cuisine who eats for pleasure rather than sustenance, and his sophisticated tastes reflect his extravagance. Culinary whodunits link food to women and present cooking as an expression of female independence, especially in the case of professionals, paid for their skills. Hence, food provides women with the self-sufficiency needed to support themselves financially. Food can also be a social marker because access to various types of food differs depending on social class (Grünewald 89; Battaglia 110; Crawford 127);⁴ thus, consumption of gourmet dishes conveys messages of wealth and privilege (Franks et al. 41). As stated by Anderson, “Elite groups always try to mark themselves off by consumption of special status or prestige foods” (136). A high position in the social hierarchy is indicated when dining takes place in luxurious venues (Bourdieu 185; Goody 103).

The acts of cooking and eating play a special role in the lives of diasporic communities. Dallen J. Timothy claims that foodways are significant markers of

2 The theme of Cuban food is also explored in Leonardo Padura’s tetralogy: *Havana Blue* (1991), *Havana Gold* (1994), *Havana Red* (1997), and *Havana Black* (1998), featuring the Detective Mario Conde. Padura uses food and drink to convey his views on Cuban national identity (Garcia 482; Battaglia 99-100).

3 Between 1934 and 1975, Rex Todhunter Stout wrote 33 novels and 41 novellas and short stories featuring the character of Nero Wolfe (Nyren).

4 Pierre Bourdieu claims that with social advancement, the proportion of income spent on heavy, fattening foods diminishes, whereas a higher budget is spent on lighter foods (177).

ethnic identity because immigrants settling in the new land carry memories of ethnic cuisine and recipes, which they try to adopt in the new circumstances (6). This process is also described by Psyche Williams-Forsen, who states that migrating cuisines evolve into new hybridized forms articulating elements of their ethnic and mainstream culture (37). Zilka Janer underscores the relationship between fusion cuisine and cultural identity: "Food plays an important role in the construction of identity, and as a new identity is being forged, a new food culture is created" (102). Many cooks create transnational recipes by combining local ingredients with the ones sent by relatives from their home countries. The contemporary cooking techniques used in Florida are influenced by those in Cuba, Jamaica, and the Bahamas (Nenes 137, Gabaccia 207). When Hispanics cook their traditional dishes based on indigenous ingredients but prepared in the American environment, the cooks frequently accentuate the bicultural nature of the meals by using Spanish or Spanglish terms. Spanish is also used when the recipes include ingredients that do not have corresponding American equivalents.

Culinary Mystery

"Cozy mystery" is a subgenre of crime fiction in which violence takes place off-stage, and a murder is committed "in an ordinary, domestic environment of which food is an indispensable part" (Baučeková 44). The crime-solver is usually an amateur sleuth who investigates the case in a closed community (Martin). Cozy mysteries are often written in series; thus, the reader becomes emotionally involved with the reoccurring characters. Mysteries featuring a culinary theme have proven to be popular in recent years. The subgenre of crime mystery fiction that combines food and crime is called "culinary mystery" (Franks 3-4). Those novels are created mainly by women and feature women as the main protagonists. The primary female characters take on the roles of amateur sleuths, which disrupts the hard-boiled tradition of noir detective fiction (Hynynen 64). Culinary mystery novels feature financially independent protagonists working in food-related occupations, such as café owners, restaurant chefs, bakers, caterers, herbalists, hoteliers, store owners, and other entrepreneurs. The places where community members talk freely, like restaurants or small shops, become crime scenes. The main characters possess skills required for food preparation and crime detection capabilities, which facilitates the transition of cooks into amateur sleuths. Their personality is often revealed through first-person narration.

The idyllic settings of culinary mysteries include villages and small towns or self-contained communities, such as islands or hotel resorts; nonetheless, urban localities are featured as well. The genre features no violence, profanity, or explicit sex, and the crime takes place "off stage"; instead, the plot revolves around domestic settings and pets. Another generic convention requires that no children or animals are harmed during the story (Young). In most cases, the mysterious death involves a murder case, but sometimes it relates to other types of law-breaking, such as theft

or blackmail. As summed up by John Cawelti, “The fundamental principle of the mystery story is the investigation and discovery of hidden secrets” (42).

The authors of culinary mysteries intertwine food with the main plot of a whodunit, and the solution to the murder case is encoded in the dishes served. The novels combine food and crime, recipes and murder. As claimed by Silvia Baučėková, the contradictory nature of food involves life sustenance and termination, nourishment and death (35-36). The female sleuths investigate the cases and find solutions to crime mysteries while preparing and serving delicious dishes. The recipes for those dishes are frequently attached in an appendix to the novel, like in Julie Hyzy’s *White House Chef Mysteries*, or integrated into the narrative, like in Cleo Coyle’s *Coffeehouse Mysteries*. Some readers contribute to food tourism market by visiting restaurants and bars where they search for meals presented in the novels (Franks 6). Many publishers offer samples of dishes prepared according to the recipes from the text at public readings by the author. Moreover, bookstores may display the novels in the cookbook and the mystery sections, appealing to a broader range of customers (Henderson 59).

The female sleuths in the mystery genre use culinary skills as detection tools. Finding ingredients, adapting the proper instructions, and preparing meals become metaphors for the investigation, leading to the culprit’s identification. As Anderson observes, “Solving crime requires skills that can equally be used to discover hidden truths about food” (Anderson et al.). Culinary whodunits expose similarities between the skills required for food preparation and those needed to solve a crime. Rachel Franks draws a connection between the worlds of crime and cookery, stating, “Working with cooks or crooks, or both, requires planning and people skills in addition to creative thinking, dedication, reliability, stamina and a certain willingness to take risks” (2). The amateur sleuths conduct criminal investigations while performing jobs in culinary occupations. Their success in the food industry exposes a quality of resourcefulness, a characteristic helpful in solving criminal mysteries. The female sleuth is on good terms with the investigating police detective, but she usually solves the crime without too much help from the police.

Food can add a sinister undertone to crime stories. As Baučėková clarifies, food “can conceal the criminal, distract the victim, or it can even be transformed into a murder weapon” (36). Food and drinks may be used to administer poison (Leotta 40) or trigger an allergic reaction; thus, nutrition products become deadly weapons. The same applies to kitchen utensils, such as sharp cutlery. Eating places may not only be the setting of the crime scene but also provide an alibi when the suspect consumes a meal in the company of other people. Someone’s absence at a mealtime can indicate that something terrible has happened, and the individual is missing in connection with the crime committed.

Literary killers from culinary crime mysteries tend to use deadly poisons as effective murder weapons: the almost undetectable arsenic, the more toxic cyanide, and strychnine. Such cases are presented in Emily James’ *Poison-Spiced Cupcakes: Cupcake Truck Mysteries*. Identification of the poison allows the detective to establish

the time of death and provides clues to the crime committed in the context of the dishes and drinks consumed by the victim. Poison-related crime gives some clues about the murderer, as most poisonings are done deliberately with harmful intent, involving premeditation and preparation. When poison becomes a murder instrument, it means that the crime was committed without violence or physical strength, possibly by a woman. Poison is considered a woman's weapon because it does not require physical force to succeed. Additionally, poison is frequently related to homemade food, which makes women primary suspects due to their association with nurturing and domesticity (Baučeková 45; Abarca 206; Hynynen 68). An additional tragic element of murder by poisoning refers to the fact that the individual consuming the poisoned dish or drink unknowingly participates in his/her own fate. In this way, poison becomes a "devious way to commit murder" because the danger is not as apparent as with guns or other murder weapons (Franks et al. 41). Poisoning exhibits the two contradictory aspects of food: the nurturing and the lethal.

The genre of culinary mystery has received a multitude of literary depictions. Most of those books are set in the USA and written by American authors. The crime committed is always related to food, but the food itself does not always become a murder weapon. Vivien Chien's *Death by Dumpling* (2018) features a Chinese-American character, Lana Lee, working in her family's restaurant in Cleveland's Asia Village. The protagonist investigates the suspicious death of a customer who had a severe shellfish allergy. Ellery Adams chooses a vacation resort in rural western Virginia for the setting of her novel *Murder in the Cookbook Nook* (2021). The resort's manager, Jane Steward, starts her investigation when one of the cooking contest's competitors is stabbed to death. Chien's novel illustrates the use of food as a murder weapon, whereas Adams' book depicts a crime committed in a culinary context.

Novels within the same series usually exhibit a permanent location as the primary setting. This tendency is presented by Cleo Coyle's *Coffeehouse Mysteries* series, with the female protagonist, Clare Cosi, who runs a coffeehouse and investigates murder cases committed in New York City's Greenwich Village. Another example is Olivia Matthew's *Against the Currant* (2023), featuring the character of Lyndsay Murray, who works in a family bakery in Brooklyn, where she conducts investigations involving neighborhood crime. Occasionally, the setting of the novels from the same series changes when the character of an amateur sleuth conducts her professional activities in several towns. This case is presented by Josi S. Kilpack's *Culinary Mystery* series, featuring a baker, Sadie Hoffmiller, who solves murder cases in various American states. When searching for clues, she cooks up her favorite dishes, which are not gourmet foods but home-cooked meals. Another exemplar is *The Biscuit Bowl Food Truck Mystery* series, created by a couple writing under the pseudonym J. J. Cook. The series focuses on the character of Chase, who investigates murder mysteries in the competitive world of food truck owners operating in the American South. The culinary mystery novels usually depict realistic American locations; however, on rare occasions, the setting represents a fictional site. This

case is illustrated by Diane Mott Davidson's *Goldy Bear Culinary Mystery* series, featuring Goldy Schulz, a caterer and an amateur sleuth who solves mysteries in a fictional Colorado town, Aspen Meadows.

Although American culinary mysteries depict characters performing a variety of food-related occupations, the baker's job receives the most frequent portrayal. This case occurs in Joanne Fluke's *Hannah Swensen Mystery* series, with a small-town baker in Minnesota as the main protagonist. Another example is Jenn McKinlay's *Cupcake Bakery Mystery* series, featuring the characters of Melanie Cooper and Angie DeLaura, who run a bakery in Scottsdale, Arizona. A similar case refers to Bailey Cates' *Magical Bakery Mystery* series with the main protagonist Katie Lightfoot, an amateur sleuth who works for a family bakery in Savannah, Georgia. Baking requires some qualities and skills compatible with the detective's job, including patience, dedication, creativity, and precision. Moreover, bakers need to be detail-orientated and organized when inspecting ingredients and making cakes. Hence, culinary mystery writers tend to choose professional bakers, among other food-related occupations, to take on the roles of amateur sleuths.

Food and Crime in *Mango, Mambo, and Murder:* A Caribbean Kitchen Mystery

The novel's main character is Miriam Quiñones-Smith, the wife of Robert Smith and mother of Manuel (Manny) Douglas Smith. Other key protagonists include Miriam's Cuban friend, Alma Dias, and her Anglo-American mother-in-law, Marjory Smith. Miriam raises her son to be a bicultural Cuban-American; she speaks with him exclusively in Spanish, while Robert and Marjory communicate in English. Ms. Quiñones-Smith grew up in the working-class town of Hialeah and obtained a doctoral degree in food anthropology at New York University. In the interview for *Latino Stories*, Reyes explains that her motivation to create a Latina character with a doctorate was to counter the underclass images of Hispanic females: "Latinas are underrepresented in academia. And the few that there are often maligned. So, I want to help normalize a Latina with a Ph.D". The main character's personality is revealed through the first-person narration, and she describes her professional activities in the following way, "I study how food, culture, and history intersect" (47-48). Her research interests concern the importance of Caribbean cuisine in retaining the cultural identity of the diasporic populations. Miriam's cooking style corresponds with the traditions of Floribbean Cuisine,⁵ pioneered by a group of South Florida chefs known as the Mango Gang.⁶ The novel's setting is Florida's Fort Lauderdale,

5 The term "Floribbean" was coined for regional Florida cuisine, combining Cuban, Jamaican, Puerto Rican, Haitian, and Bahamian influences. Floribbean cuisine frequently uses tropical fruits, like limes, mangoes, and pineapples; the standard sauce is mango salsa. The influx of Cuban immigrants to South Florida after the Cuban Revolution was essential in the development of Floribbean cuisine because traditional Cuban food culture inspired Floridian chefs (Sands).

6 The Mango Gang is a group of South Florida chefs that includes Norman Van Aken, Mark Militello, Douglas Rodriguez, and Allen Susser. In the 1980s, these chefs pioneered the idea of innovative regional cuisine based on fresh local ingredients (Simmons).

Coral Shore neighborhood, which Miriam calls a "Village." Upon arriving in Coral Shore, she discovers that her surname denotes a privileged status because the Smiths are one of the founding families of her new town.

The narrative explicitly accentuates food as the key theme guiding the plot development. Ms. Quiñones-Smith perceives the world from the perspective of a food anthropologist who appreciates the plethora of multicultural foodscapes. While staying in New York, Miriam lived with her family in the Puerto Rican and Dominican neighborhood where "The streets smelled of rice, beans, and platanos" (15) and the local bakery served a *bizcocho de pasa*, a raisin pound cake, at breakfast time. They did not restrict their culinary choices to Caribbean dishes and frequently went to eat in Chinatown or Little Italy. As a food anthropologist, Miriam seeks to understand the world from the perspective of other cultures rather than her own. She intrinsically links New York's multiculturalism with ethnic cuisines: "I wanted to stay in the city with its vibrant ethnic communities that fed my work and passion" (16). Upon returning to Florida, Miriam plans to continue her anthropological research in the Caribbean communities of Creoles in Little Haiti, Puerto Ricans in Wynwood, and Cubans in Calle Ocho (16).

The culinary motifs usually appear in the Caribbean context, with occasional mention of the food eaten by the white characters. The scenes involving the consumption of meals facilitate the characters' meetings and provide the setting for the plot. When invited for lunch at the Women's Club, Miriam is served a chicken salad, a bland dish she finds particularly tasteless, since "It had more mayonnaise than meat. And the celery was mushy when it should have been crunchy-crisp. My taste buds rioted after the first bite, and I set my fork down" (6-7). The white ladies' food served in the club for the privileged elite differs tremendously from the ethnic cuisine researched by Miriam. The club's theme for the year is the Caribbean, and the annual fundraising focuses on feeding "the children stricken by the hurricanes that had hit the islands of Puerto Rico, St. Maarten, and Dominica" (11). The narration juxtaposes the white ladies' exclusive club with the notion of feeding the Caribbeans, accentuating the superior status of the Anglo-Americans and the inferiority of the Latinx. Nonetheless, Hispanic food is depicted as more delicious than the poor-quality dish served for the whites. Miriam also values the high quality of food ingredients sold at the Latin supermarket. She is willing to drive a few miles for grocery purchases instead of buying products at the local shop (77).

The novel accentuates that the characters identify with the Anglo-American and Hispanic cultures. The complex cultural identities of Hispanic Americans are frequently expressed through a linguistic code-switching⁷ variety called Spanglish.

7 Code-switching means going back and forth from one language belonging to one grammatical system to another. There are different versions of code-switching, e.g., one speaker speaks in one code, and the reply comes in another, or conversation participants code-switch inter-sententially or even intra-sententially. It can be a straightforward Spanish-English blend, where sentences can begin in English and end in Spanish, or vice versa. However, it can also be more complex, including words created by the collision of the two original languages. Sometimes, code-switching involves regional variations within the same language. The English-Spanish code-switchers tend to focus on phrases in one language that would be difficult to substitute

This code emerges from the context in which English and Spanish are in constant contact and requires from its speakers a certain degree of fluency in both languages (Fought 44-45). The use of Spanglish raises controversies, being criticized for delaying the acculturation of Hispanics and praised for its dynamic creativity (Stavans ix). Code-switching enables speakers to broaden their communication ability and requires expressive skills in both languages (Osorio 26). In an interview for *CrimeReads*, Reyes explains her motivation for using Spanish in her English-language novel: “I want to use the occasional “foreign” language (especially Spanish) to be normalized in American-English fiction. That is why I insist that my Spanish not be italicized.” The author also accentuates her motivation to use Spanglish in an interview with Richie Narvaez for *Latino Stories* (18 March 2022), stating, “I live in Spanglish. From home to workplace and everything in between, my life is a mash-up of English and Spanish.”

Spanglish appears in the novel in culinary contexts, illustrated by way of introducing a Caribbean culinary show to Ms. Quiñones-Smith, “*Cosina Caribeña* is normally a five-to-seven minute spot” (50). When offered participation in the program, Miriam doubts her show-making potential: “I am not a celebrity chef. I am an academic” (2). The juxtaposition of a food anthropology specialist and a celebrity chef seems contradictory initially; nonetheless, both occupations involve research in food and ingredients, formal training, patience, and collaboration. Located in Florida’s Latinx town of Hialeah, the UnMundo TV station broadcasts in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. The idea behind the culinary show is to present it in Spanglish to target the Latinx and Anglo-American audience. At first, Miriam makes a Spanish-version recording of *Cosina Caribeña*, and then the English subtitles are put for the *Caribbean Kitchen* YouTube version. The Spanglish version on YouTube has a tagline “Abuela⁸ Approved,” which is a reference to the respected role of Hispanic grandmothers as the transmitters of ethnic heritage, including Latinx recipes (Norat 98). Meredith E. Abarca accentuates that remembering family recipes and recreating them in public settings is a way of honoring family traditions (194). Cooking the dish and presenting it within the Florida context is a way of reinterpreting it to preserve it. “The Abuela Approved” version targets a younger audience who may not have learned to cook yet or are not fluent in Spanish. The idea behind the show is that no one is such a good cook as one’s grandma, and not everyone can learn from an elder. It could be a language barrier with only a Spanish-speaking person or the distance when the elder has not joined the diasporic community and stayed in the home country. When Miriam watches the papaya milkshake demo with Robert and Manny, her son insists on playing the tagline “Abuela Approved” again. The culinary show demonstrates its family-unifying force when the nuclear family members sit together and watch the visual presentation of the recipes approved by the hypothetical Latinx grandma.

in another. Code-switching also softens formal language and evokes an emotionally positive response (Martínez-Brawley et al. 59-60; Osborne 19).

8 “Abuela” means “grandma”.

The positive aspect of Spanglish is its potential to pan-ethnically unite diverse populations from Anglo and Hispanic cultures (O'Connor 8). Miriam Quiñones-Smith presents her hybrid Latinx-American identity when she switches between English and Spanish and speaks in both languages simultaneously while narrating the grocery shopping: "And I'd purchased a yerba Buena plant, a seven-quart calendro, tons of spices, fresh bread, a twenty-pound bag of rice plus a ten-cup rice cooker, and a decorative tinajón. The yerba Buena, a Cuban variety of mint, and the pint-size terracotta tinajón were designed for the kitchen windowsill." (77). The list of purchases for the Caribbean dish accentuates the use of spices, termed in Spanish, which creates a dose of tropical exoticism. While presenting the ingredients for the tropical fruit smoothie, Miriam also uses English and Spanish fruit names, "Tamarino, mamey, mango, and my son's favorite, fruta bomba" (49). This tactic aims at reaching a broader, pan-ethnic audience. All ingredients presented in Spanish are translatable into English, but Miriam chooses to communicate in Spanglish to target the Latinx and Anglo-American viewers. Using mixed codes may be essential in marketing a recipe or a cookbook (Kusumaningrum 402).

Depending on the context, bicultural bilinguals may exhibit different verbal behaviors in their two languages (Ożańska-Ponikwia 204). In emotional moments, bilingual people tend to switch back and forth between languages, choosing the one that more appropriately expresses their feelings at the time. Spanglish is an expressive lingo with an emotional force. The Latina protagonist switches into Spanglish to convey anger, joy, love, or anxiety because this dialect is more descriptive and convenient for individuals with dual heritage. Such a situation occurs when she is informed at the last moment about Robert's family coming for dinner: "Normally, I'd have replied with *besos y cariño*,⁹ but just then I wanted to shoot" (61). When Miriam's friend Alma gets arrested, she worries about her friend and the poor quality of food served to people in custody: "Jailhouse food, *pobrecita*¹⁰" (124). Interestingly, Spanglish-expressed emotions denote culinary contexts.

The *Cosina Caribeña* becomes the platform for Ms. Quiñones-Smith's expertise in food anthropology when she combines presented recipes with their Latinx heritage. Miriam tells the story of each recipe by stating precisely who gave it to her and the specific occasion for cooking the dish. Recipes inform about familial practices and shifts in culinary tastes. However, their primary function is to "guide readers in the selection, measurement, and preparation of ingredients in order to produce a tasty dish" (Hoffman and Kytö 261-262). Preparing a meal according to a family recipe and sharing it with family and friends contribute to community building (Abarca 196-197). The transmission of knowledge from the older generation demonstrates respect for the Caribbean legacy. Christine Folch claims that "There is an inherent nostalgia to the recipe: it involves a remembering, a recapturing of an event that happened before. The imagined 'iterability' of a recipe is its defining characteristic" (208). The sharing of recipes evokes the idea of continuity

9 "Besos y cariño" means "Certainly, with love and kisses".

10 "Pobrecita" means "poor baby".

and repetitiveness in various culinary contexts. “The sensory-logic, or knowing through senses” (Abarca 196) is essential to recreating family recipes. Cooks have to use their sensory memory to accomplish this task. The sensory skills are developed while cooking with a family member, and the process is recreated numerous times.

By combining storytelling and food, Miriam indicates the pan-ethnic character of the dishes originating in the Caribbean and popularized in the USA. This approach is illustrated when she considers whether the papaya fruit recipe should be presented in the context of Oviedo’s Spanish expedition in 1526 or with the tale of Christopher Columbus’ encounters with the indigenous population (78). Another instance occurs when Miriam prepares the meat stew called *sancocho*, including squash as its vital ingredient. She denotes that the squash is called *ayama* in the Dominican Republic and Colombia, and *calabza* in Cuba and Puerto Rico (130). Ms. Quiñones-Smith also highlights that the recipe for this special baptism stew (126) was shared by a Dominican lady Doña Adela. While cooking this dish for the culinary project, Miriam asks for some Caribbean music, “Delvis, is there any chance I can play a little music to get me into the mood? It’s a Dominican recipe, so maybe a merengue or bachata?” (145). The protagonist is not simply a cook but also a food anthropologist and an artist who creates Caribbean dishes intrinsically embedded in Latinx culture. Her sensory perception of Latinx cuisine encompasses the senses of taste, smell, and the sound of ethnic music. As a food anthropologist, Miriam understands that food is inextricably linked to its cultural heritage.

Ms. Quiñones-Smith links her professional interests with her childhood experience of working in her aunt’s restaurant. While visiting this familiar place, she orders the stewed beef, known as *ropa vieja*¹¹ (53), a signature dish of Cuban cuisine with regional variations in other Latin American countries. The mention of *ropa vieja* demonstrates that the foodways of the narrative are not restricted to Caribbean cuisine and pan-ethnically encompass the broad culinary traditions of Latinx. Donna R. Gabaccia connects culinary traditions and ethnicity in the metaphorical title of her book *We Are What We Eat*. Miriam makes a similar anthropological association using a *ropa vieja* example, “The socioeconomic legacy of colonialism in the Caribbean was in that pot of peasant stew . . .” (172).

The themes of food intertwine with spiritual motifs in the narrative. The Cubans are known for syncretic religious beliefs, combining Catholicism with Santería rituals. Worshiping orishas, the divine spirits ruling over the forces of nature, is the central element of Santería practices. Santeros and santeras believe that the orishas must eat like all living creatures, and animals die so that humans may live. The animal sacrifice is offered to orishas to show “the relationship and interdependence of living things” (Murphy 44). Orishas appear under certain circumstances, such as ritual rites and festivals. Miriam’s Aunt Elba is a Santería practitioner who honors the orisha of Elegua, a deity supposed to open the doorways

11 “*Ropa vieja*” translates into English as “old clothes.” An old legend says that a poor man boiled his clothes to feed the family. During the cooking process, a guardian angel turned the clothes into a delicious meal of meat and vegetables. According to the legend, the dish represents a man who supports his family (Jones).

for opportunity. Elegua is known as the ruler of crossroads, protecting homes and controlling people's destinies (Canizares 30). Elba keeps the orisha's statue in the kitchen and shows him respect by making tamales the restaurant's special because she believes this dish is Elegua's favorite. While having lunch with Detective Pullman, Miriam immediately recognizes that the server is Cuban after seeing her gold medallion of Caridad del Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba (160). When the investigation is over, the amateur sleuth organizes a party for family and friends. Celebration with food and thanking La Caridad for the blessing (295) becomes the means of restoring calm after the inquiry into the crime. The narrative draws a connection between Latinx food culture, festivity, and spirituality.

The novel demonstrates that Ms. Quiñones-Smith is a specialist in food anthropology and Latinx cuisine, and those two fields provide the crucial background for Miriam's investigative capabilities. As the literary critic Rosemary Herbert points out, "the reasoning processes that facilitate productive academic research closely parallel the reasoning processes necessary for successful detection" (3). The novel manifests belonging to the genre of culinary mystery when the main protagonist becomes an amateur sleuth who investigates two suspicious deaths occurring in food contexts. The narration accentuates that Miriam's preparations for the *Cosina Caribeña* parallel her inquiry into the crime. Hence, a connection appears between the skills required for food preparation and those needed to catch a criminal. Nonetheless, it is herbology,¹² not food anthropology, which is the critical field for solving the novel's crime mysteries. As a scientist, Miriam is open-minded and ready to accept new research tools. She demonstrates a similar attitude when dealing with crime mysteries and new scientific problems. Herbology is introduced with the character of Dr. Mario Fuentes, who "combines Western medicine with ancient herbal practices from the West Indies" (40). He claims to have studied with herbalists from Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, and Brazil (48). The acquired knowledge has helped him create a unique teabag mixture, which he successfully promotes among the elite circles of Coral Shore. However, the narrative creates some doubts about Fuentes' professionalism when mambo-cise instructor Jorge Trujillo calls him "a New Age herb doctor" (184).

The herbal context occurs again with Miriam's visit to the *botanica*, where she buys a hex-removing *despojo*. There is a longstanding tradition of spiritual healing within the Caribbean communities involving unique healing practices, such as herbal medicines, baths, and performing exorcism (Glazer 199).¹³ The herbal bath mix is supposed to give Miriam protection against a curse or evil spell after performing the hex-breaking spell ritual. There, she finds a book *Yerbas de Cuba*, which is an interesting addition to her home library collection, containing "textbooks, cookbooks, fiction, Caribbean history, island travel guides, two poetry books (José Martí and

12 Herbology is the study of plants, herbal medicine, and their relationship with humans. *Collins Dictionary*. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/herbology>

13 The colloquial term for traditional plant medicine in the Caribbean region is "bush medicine." Plants and herbs with medical properties are used to treat various medical conditions despite a lack of scientific research regarding their safety and effectiveness (Alexis).

Julia de Burgos), and many reference encyclopedias” (207). The new book describes the medical and culinary qualities of the herbs with their detailed botanical drawings (165). One herb featured in the encyclopedia becomes the key to solving the novel’s crime mysteries.

Although Ms. Quiñones-Smith becomes an amateur sleuth who occasionally disturbs the police investigation, Detective Pullman appreciates her deductive skills. Additionally, her assistance becomes useful because of her dual belonging to the whites and people of color. By saying, “Coral Shores society doesn’t talk to Black men unless they’re the help. Sundowner towns don’t change their stripes that quickly” (163), the detective implies that conservatism and racial segregation are still part of Southern life. On several occasions, Pullman makes explicit references to the crime mystery genre by calling Miriam “Mrs. Fletcher” (261) and “Veronica Mars” (272), the characters of amateur sleuths from popular detective drama series. In the interview for *CrimeReads*, Reyes explains the unique status of the sleuth in a crime mystery: “The Sleuth in cozy/traditional is an insider-outsider. They have access but perspective.” With her Anglo-American family and Latinx friends, Miriam becomes an ideal informer for Detective Pullman.

The novel features two victims who died in suspicious circumstances and intertwines the supposed crimes with culinary contexts. The first death occurs in the novel during the meeting of the Women’s Club. When one of the ladies, Sunny Weatherman, faints, everybody suspects her dietary and athletic regime has caused it; however, the collapse turns out to be fatal. The narrative implies some connection between her death and food as the victim’s head lands in the chicken salad. The autopsy reveals that Sunny died of a cocaine-induced heart attack. Miriam begins searching for information with the mission of revealing the suspicious circumstances of Sunny’s death and soon finds out that she was a woman of poor health and a recovering anorexic. The second victim, Elliot Truman, collapses at the fitness center and dies of asphyxiation after choking on her vomit. The autopsy reveals that Mrs. Truman had undiagnosed liver disease, “Alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency” (261). The circumstances of her death also imply some culinary context because vomiting may result from food poisoning. Miriam soon discovers that Elliot had experienced multiple miscarriages, and Doctor Fuentes had treated her for infertility, which puts his name on the list of persons to interrogate.

The amateur sleuth’s search for hidden secrets is primarily an intellectual reasoning activity, involving the discerning of clues, making deductions, and completing the scheme of cause and effect. The connection between two suspicious deaths and Dr. Fuentes’ treatment is the first step in her chain of reasoning. However, the prime suspect has no apparent motive to commit the crimes, which triggers the next stage of Miriam’s unofficial investigation. The conflict between Elliot and the mambo-cise instructor Jorge is the next clue for the amateur sleuth. Avenging a rival seems a good motive. Miriam immediately makes a metaphorical reference to revenge as food, “revenge is a dish best served cold” (116), implying that vengeance is more satisfying if not inflicted immediately. The protagonist demonstrates

particular creativity for metaphors involving food and crime when she considers the amalgamation of suspects, motives, and means to be “more muddled than the mint for a mojito” (190). Nonetheless, she can examine the clues thoroughly, ignoring the useless information and finding the relevant evidence.

Ms. Quiñones-Smith demonstrates inquisitiveness, accuracy, and open-mindedness in her academic research and crime investigation, because, as she admits, “To explore the hows and whys of Sunny’s and Elliot’s deaths, I should be looking at behavior, culture, and expression” (192). Her academic specialization guides her investigation when she accentuates the cultural factor as the key to solving the case. After seeing the rue plant in the herbal encyclopedia, she immediately recalls that it is the same herb she noticed at Doctor Fuentes’ clinic. Further investigation reveals that rue is an ingredient of the unique tea mix formula that Fuentes used to treat Sunny and Elliot, his deceased patients. Miriam conducts anthropological research on “the Cuban ethnopharmacological history of the herb” (262) and discovers that rue is used in traditional and herbal medicine; however, due to its toxicity, it can be applied only externally. If used internally, it can cause vomiting, liver damage, or, in severe cases, even death (“Herbal Safety”). The protagonist also finds out that despite Fuentes’ belief in rue’s fertility powers, the consumption of the herb has the opposite effect. The toxic herb wrongly prescribed to Elliot caused poisoning and accelerated the deterioration of her liver, finally leading to her suffocation. Although Doctor Fuentes did not poison Elliot intentionally, he demonstrated a negligent attitude towards his patient’s medical history.

The solution to the second suspicious death does not provide the answer to the death of the first victim, Sunny Weatherman, who was officially no longer a drug addict. Hence, Miriam continues her inquiry and searches for the culprit, who must have added cocaine to Sunny’s drink or food. The police treat Miriam’s friend Alma as the prime suspect because of the cocaine traces left in her purse. Alma resorts to the spiritual aspect of Cubanness and performs the hex-breaking spell ritual with a *despojo*, which effectively refreshes her memory. The herbal bath makes her realize that the powder with cocaine was planted because a local cocaine dealer was trying to frame her for Sunny’s death. The dealer attempted to make Sunny relapse into cocaine addiction and killed her unintentionally. Sunny died of a heart attack resulting from the combination of cocaine and rue-infused tea mix, which together proved fatal for this weak and anorexic woman. The rue plant did not kill her but contributed to her death. Identification of the toxic herb does not provide the answer to ‘whodunit’ but explains the circumstances of the crime. In a way, the herb substitutes for poison, the traditional murder weapon in the culinary mystery.

Conclusion

Mango, Mambo, and Murder connects cookery and crime, and numerous aspects of the narrative confirm the generic conventions of the culinary mystery. The novel’s author and the main character are both female. The amateur sleuth makes numerous

mistakes but actively supports the police in their work, gradually earning the trust of the leading detective. The story gives a more thorough depiction of the investigation than the crime committed; it focuses on the mystery aspect of the crime, not the violence of it. The suspicious deaths occur in culinary contexts, and the primary detection methods constitute cooking and researching ethnic cuisines. The focus of the crime story is placed solely on the character of the amateur sleuth; therefore, she receives an accurate portrayal.

The book's originality lies in the construction of the main Latina character as an academic who employs the analytic skills she has developed through her scholarly pursuits. Unlike a typical crime mystery sleuth, who tends to be a baker, Miriam never manifests any baking ability. The amateur/academic sleuth broadens her specialist knowledge and eagerly embraces the field of herbology as a valuable tool in crime-solving. Crime mystery fiction usually features murder investigation and only occasionally depicts other crimes. *Mango, Mambo, and Murder* constitutes a rare example of the genre in which the murder was committed without deliberate harmful intent. The solution to the culinary whodunit is usually encoded in the food served. However, in this novel, the suspicious deaths are connected with unintentional toxic herb poisoning.

The novel follows the typical practice for culinary mystery of attaching recipes at the end of the book. The element of novelty is exhibited when Reyes demonstrates the interconnection between food and cultural anthropology. Apart from the list of ingredients and instructions, the recipes presented by the novel's main character include the food's history. The author accentuates the pan-ethnic and Creole context of the dishes cooked in Cuban-American and Puerto Rican homes and enriched by French and African influences (304-306). In Reyes' novel, Caribbean food is a collective reflection of *Latinidad*, and traditional recipes emphasize cultural roots.

The mystery is solved in the classic closure of crime fiction, thanks to the combined effort of the police and an amateur sleuth. The narrative shows the protagonists festively celebrating the closing of the case, emphasizing the role of food in the plot development. At the party ending the story, Robert gives his wife a mango tree as a gift. He intends to plant it in the backyard garden to accentuate the permanence and stability of their marriage. This tree has a broader meaning, highlighting the tropicalism of the Latina hostess who is keen to use mango fruits as ingredients for her elaborate meals. The mango fruit is an apparent reference to the novel's title and South Florida's food culture, enriched by the Mango Gang, whose recipes frequently use tropical fruits.

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Curating *cubanía* Through the Lens of Visual Culture

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Abstract: This article focuses on a multimedia event titled *Cuba Transnational*, which took place during the fall of 2011 in various locations across Colorado's Front Range. The implicit, overarching goals of *Cuba Transnational* were to introduce a public largely unfamiliar with the subject matter to Cuban diasporic cultural production outside the island, and simultaneously "preserve the nation's artistic and cultural identity." While *Cuba Transnational* confirmed the idea that a flourishing tradition of Cuban cultural expression was being produced outside the island, contrary to a counter narrative which suggested otherwise, ultimately the various exhibitions and corresponding events presented a mediated version or idea of Cuba to a foreign audience and thereby destabilized and disrupted the idea that one can fully capture cultural or historical reality and access or grasp another's culture.

Keywords: Cuba, transnational, diaspora, cultural expression

During the summer and fall of 2011, I collaborated with colleagues at art and cultural institutions across Colorado's Rocky Mountain Front Range in coordinating and facilitating a series of interrelated events, which highlighted Cuban diasporic artistic expression.¹ Collectively titled *Cuba Transnational*, this ambitious project had several moving parts, including:

- five art exhibitions presented at various venues across southern Colorado;
- a corresponding, open learning experience offered as a three-credit course at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs (UCCS). Titled *The Cuban Diasporic Experience*, the course was team taught with Cuban colleague Maura Rainey and open to the campus and Front Range community;
- two symposiums at the Sangre de Cristo Arts Center in Pueblo, Colorado featuring nearly twenty of the participating artists as well as several local artists, an art historian and a cultural critic, both of whom specialized in Cuban Studies;
- a reception featuring Cuban artist Victor Caldée and his musical ensemble *Cuban Connection*;
- a theatrical performance of Cuban American playwright Carmen Peláez's semi-autobiographical one-woman show *Rum and Coke*;
- and poetry readings, which included Cuban poets Lourdes Gil, Iraidá Iturralde and Ricardo Pau-Llosa, as well as local artists such as Native American poet Janice Gould.

¹ I wish to specifically acknowledge the unflagging faith, support, and generosity of Karin Larkin (former director of the Sangre de Cristo Arts Center) and Liz Szabo (former director of the Manitou Arts Center). This essay is dedicated to the memory of my brilliant and beloved colleagues and friends Leandro Soto, Lourdes Gil, Raúl Villarreal, Rosario "Chary" Castro-Marin, Liz Szabo and Janice Gould.

Four exhibitions were presented at the Sangre de Cristo Arts Center in Pueblo, Colorado: *CAFÉ XII: The Journeys of Cuban Artists and Writers of the Diaspora*² (which featured Jamaican guest artist Albert Chong); *woman.embodied* (which focused on an array of feminist themes, highlighted the art of female Cuban artists residing on and off the island, and included local artists Senga Nengudi, Melanie Yazzie, Margaret Kasahara, and Carol Dass as well as selected works by Cuban poets Lourdes Gil and Iraida Iturralde); *Cuba in the Southwest: The Art of Leandro Soto* (a solo exhibition of artwork Soto created during his sojourn in Phoenix, Arizona); and *FACES: 100 Cuban Artists* (a series of portraits by Cuban photographer Carlos Cárdenes, which was also presented at the Pikes Peak Library in Colorado Springs); and *Un Cafecito* (a smaller and more intimate version of *CAFÉ* located at the Manitou Arts Center in Manitou Springs, Colorado).



Leandro Soto tomando un cafécito.

CAFÉ and *Cuba in the Southwest* were co-curated with Cuban artist Leandro Soto—who famously participated in the provocative art exhibition *Volumen Uno* in

2 *CAFÉ* is an acronym for Cuban American Foremost exhibitions and was curated, until his untimely death in 2022, by Leandro Soto and directed by his wife, Griselda Pujalá.

Havana in 1981—and, respectively, his wife, Grisel Pujalá.³ All events were free and open to the public with the aim of reaching a range of economically, ethnically and generationally diverse audiences, which generally do not interact with the university or local art institutions. In this way we engaged a variegated audience in a complex conversation regarding migration, memory, history and identity formation in the context of displacement and movement. A specific effort was made to collaborate with local organizations that work primarily with underrepresented or marginalized populations, such as the public library, local public schools, and museums or art centers. Wishing to directly involve community members, the exhibitions and symposiums included local guest artists (as indicated above) representing various racial and ethnic roots. In the same vein, several of the exhibitions featured Cuban artists residing on the island as well as multigenerational groups of diasporic artists, including several from the *Avant-garde* as well as other art movements in Cuba, and others who either left the island as infants or children, or were born outside Cuba.

The springboard and inspiration for *Cuba Transnational* was the release of my monograph *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora: Setting the Tent Against the House* (U of Texas P, 2011), which explores diasporic identity formation through the lens of visual cultural, and poses a theoretical framework that is structured on a principle of multi-locality and movement. According to the advertising materials for *Cuba Transnational*, the participating *Cuband*⁴ artists were “seeking to preserve the nation’s artistic and cultural identity through their work.” Purportedly the implicit, overarching goal of the exhibitions was to introduce a public largely unfamiliar with the subject matter to Cuban cultural production outside the island. In the process, each respective exhibition confirmed the idea that a flourishing tradition of Cuban art was being produced outside the island, contrary to a counter narrative that argues (among other things) that the participating diasporic artists cease to be authentically Cuban simply because they were not creating art on the island. In other words, I was engaged in the act of curating *cubanía* or what it means to be Cuban for a largely U.S. audience through the lens of visual art.

Much of the artwork overtly treated themes regarding migration, displacement, and cultural adaptation, translation and transformation. In this way a preponderance of the artists, including those raised or born outside the island,

3 *Volumen Uno* was what many consider to be a radical and dissident exhibition that marked a distinctly new moment in Cuban art and challenged reigning political and cultural ideologies. The exhibition opened in 1981 at the International Art Center in Havana and included Cuban artists Leandro Soto, José Bedia, Juan Francisco Elso Padilla, José Manuel Fors, Flavio Garcíandía, Israel Leon, Rogelio López Marín, aka Gory, Gustavo Pérez Monzón, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, Tomás Sánchez, and Rubén Torres Llorca participated in the exhibition. For more information, see: <https://cubanartnewsarchive.org/2011/01/14/volume-i-or-the-big-bang-of-contemporary-cuban-art/>

4 *Cuband* is an elastic, radically inclusive term O’Reilly Herrera first developed in the introduction to *ReMembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), to take account of the layered ethnic presences that constitute Cuban cultural identity while acknowledging the diverse, complex identities of those who identify as Cuban including the offspring born and/or raised off the island.

posed specific questions regarding what it means to be Cuban in the context of displacement, and who can lay claim to a Cuban—albeit vicarious or second hand—identity.

In general, the artwork presented in all the exhibitions also contained visibly identifiable Cuban elements and themes, which first appeared in the work of the Cuban *vanguardia* artists and authors following the island's independence from Spain at the turn of the Twentieth Century. For example, much of the artwork included distinct cultural forms, such as bright colors, patterns and Baroque rhythms that came to typify Cuban art and, in the case of the latter, writing. Many of the participating artists and writers also treated subjects that were also characteristic of the Cuban Avant-garde Movement, such as *criollismo* and vernacular art (which put into relief a range of social themes) and thematic trends, such as the exploration of Cuba's suppressed Indigenous and African roots.⁵ In this respect, the exhibitions purportedly presented some idea or mediated version of Cuba to a foreign audience. However, elements within the exhibits also put into relief the idea that the Belgian surrealist René Magritte made explicit in his 1929 world-renowned painting *The Treachery of Images* (also known as *This is not a Pipe* or *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*), which undermines the public's assumptions about the nature of reality and what has been termed *cultural competence*—the ability to apprehend and fully understand a culture outside one's own.



Many of the elements that appeared in the *Cuba Transnational* exhibitions served to destabilize and disrupt the idea that one can fully capture cultural or historical reality, and in the case of the viewer, access or grasp another's culture. *FACES*, for example, is an ongoing photographic, documentary archive of a primarily Miami-based community of Cuban visual artists, who began leaving the island during the late 1950s and whose numbers continue to increase in the present day. In addition to serving as a testimony to the vital presence of Cuban artists outside the island, Carlos Cárdenes' series—by nature of its form—simultaneously raises fundamental questions about the representation of culture and personal or communal history. In spite of its ability to capture and thereby immobilize or arrest

5 For more information, see *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora: Setting the Tent Against the House*, pp. 51-92.

its subjects or given moments in time—thereby serving as what Susan Sontag termed “an instrument of memory”—the portraits in *FACES* are manipulated by Cárdenes, for following a conversation with each artist and researching their work and artistic process, the former *builds an image* of how each artist should be represented which *seeks out the inner essence of the subject* and reflects their personal experience and essential elements of their work. “Once I gained their trust,” Cárdenes observed in a personal interview, the artists “gave me the freedom to express myself as an artist and choose the set-up for the portrait, as well as the background and lighting. In this way, I place the creators and their creations in the same frame” and thereby “conflate the work and the artist into a single image.”⁶



Leandro Soto

Despite its claim to historical and cultural veracity, the images presented in *FACES* are framed and edited, thereby providing the viewer only partial glimpses and insights into their subjects and the culture(s) and histories they represent. Though the cultural and historical context of the photographs featured in this series are clearly defined and located, ultimately each image is an open referent whose meaning is contingent upon an interchange with the viewer that cannot be fixed. “A photograph,” Susan Sontag corroborates, “passes for incontrovertible proof that

6 Quotes are taken from a personal interview conducted on 1 March 2015, Miami, Florida. See, also, my forthcoming essay “Cuban Portrait,” *Cuban Studies* 53 (2024), pp. 127-145.

a given thing happened. The picture may distort, but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist . . . a presumption of veracity” (5-6). However, she continues, “photography is an elegiac art” (5-6). Among its functions, therefore, is to make its subjects historically meaningful, conserve a vanishing past, and confirm a present that is obscured or denied, thereby heralding a future that would otherwise be altered or deferred. Yet at the same time, photography as a media contains what Jacques Derrida termed its own *aporias*—the unresolvable contradictions and paradoxes *texts* may internally contain—for it raises fundamental questions about the ability to capture reality.⁷



Tómas Sánchez

Dedicated to Ana Mendieta (whose work was featured in the exhibition), the art presented in *woman.embodied*, on the other hand, envisioned the female body as the site at which the cultural past and present, which is often located in new geographical contexts, converge—a place where memory, imagination and desire intersect, and woman acts as creator, inventor, progenitor and guardian of culture. Presenting an anthropological approach to cultural expression, several of the participating artists pursued an interest in their multilayered heritage by infusing their work with Indigenous, Creole, African, Spanish and Chinese cultural forms and references to affiliated spiritual practices. Others, however, reinterpreted and transformed archetypal Western and Eastern religious symbology, therefore visually

⁷ *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit, Stanford UP, 1993.

linking their art to other cultural signifying systems, and integrated and combined new cultural elements into their work. Although the art presented in *woman. embodied* did not represent a single or unified aesthetic, it fundamentally treated the interconnecting, intersectional themes of oppression and survival, loss, physical, psychic and/or spiritual displacement as expressed by the concept of *insilio* (a sense of non-belonging experienced by those who have not left the island) and, perhaps most significantly, the interstitial cross-pollination of cultural exchange, which engages at once the themes of cultural continuity, resonance and transformation.



Ana Flores, *Soul of Exile* (2004)

Among the *Cuba Transnational* exhibitions, *CAFÉ* and *Cuba in the Southwest* most overtly and intentionally integrated paradoxical and disruptive elements that challenged the concept that culture can be translated or conveyed in a transparent and seamless manner. *CAFÉ* intentionally defied traditional western modes of curation, which tend to comply with more strictly formulaic codes and regulations regarding the way in which artwork should be installed in the exhibition space; the way in which the audience interacts with the art; and how long the exhibition runs and where it will be exhibited. Every manifestation of the exhibit, for example, was curated and installed by Leandro Soto and, in the case of *CAFÉ XII*, me despite the fact that neither of us was formally trained as curators.

Functioning as an ideal metaphor for the fluid continuum of cultural identity formation, each manifestation of *CAFÉ* presented a different combination of works, therefore, no two exhibitions were exactly the same, yet each was linked to the other in a non-linear chain that pointed to a larger narrative about the nature of movement and dislocation, belonging and unbelonging, and rooting and re-rooting. In addition, each manifestation of *CAFÉ* conformed to, or was literally integrated into, the physical space where it was presented, rather than adhering to a set plan or predetermined arrangement. In addition to the fact that Soto spontaneously determined how the artwork should be installed upon seeing the work for the first time and consequently deciding upon its relationship to the exhibition space; virtually none of the artwork was framed, thereby suggesting the idea of transience, fluidity, change and impermanence in the context of movement and dislocation. Yet paradoxically, selected pieces were literally integrated into the exhibition space as Soto mimicked each respective work and extended it onto the walls or gallery floor with the artists' permission to suggest the ways in which the artists became rooted into new cultural contexts. Every showing of *CAFÉ* also included artwork that was performative and designed as a collaboration between the artwork and those who came to view it, as participants were invited to physically interact with certain pieces and actively participate in the exhibition in a variety of ways. Finally, *CAFÉ* was itinerant or ongoing in that it had no set or terminal itinerary but rather continued to manifest itself indefinitely unlike traditional art exhibitions, thereby mirroring Cuba's long and ongoing history of in-migration and outmigration.

In many respects Leandro Soto's aesthetic approach and his personal history of displacement embodied these disruptive elements. One of the first prominent artists of his generation to address fundamental issues regarding *cubanidad* or Cubanness, inter-culturation, and transculturation through an exploration of Afro-Cuban cultural forms and practices that directly reflected his own heritage, Soto left Cuba at the age of thirty-three and resided for significant periods of time in multiple locations including Mexico, Spain, Miami, Massachusetts, Buffalo, Phoenix, India, Barbados, and Mérida (Yucatán). His work in visual theatre, performance, set design, painting, sculpture and installation freely aligned African and Afro-Cuban religious symbols with newly acquired elements that reflected the various cultures and artistic traditions in which he had taken root in exile. Rather than

focusing upon difference, Soto—like many of the artists in *CAFÉ*—consistently stressed points of connection as well as difference he discovered during his sojourn outside of Cuba. As the exhibition statement for *Cuba in the Southwest* suggests, Soto persistently “incorporate[s] new elements into his art and re-contextualiz[es] his work according to where he is at any given time...the distinctive form of cultural eclecticism that emerges in his art is, according to Soto and other [participating artists in CAFÉ], fundamentally Cuban. I work with the complexity of being Cuban, a cultural heritage that is composed of diverse cultural presences,” Soto observed in a personal conversation (2011):

In my view, that which is apparently dispersed or diffused is also linked to the magical...I hold a vision of the world [in which] reality is conceived as a tapestry of transpersonal energies. My work is a constant exploration of aesthetics and cultural systems of representation, which have largely determined what it means to be Caribbean.

Cuba in the Southwest revealed explicitly the way in which the artist translated, integrated and transformed new cultural elements in his work in a chameleonic fashion, and simultaneously expressed his affinity with the desert environment in which he was surrounded. Commenting upon his residency in the U.S. Southwest from 2002 to 2009, Soto continued, “Cuba is geographically opposite to what we have . . . in Arizona—[the island] is green and surrounded by water. Being in Cuba is the opposite of being in the desert. Yet . . . I was absolutely connected in Arizona . . . I found the island in the desert.” Expanding upon this idea in his Artist Statement for the exhibition Soto commented:

I relocate and re-root myself in contexts far from my land of origin. I welcome the experience of movement, although often I look back and connect with my mother-culture and realize how much of it still lives in me. I name this process *redefining displacement*, and my art creations are simultaneous *space entries* in the travel journal that is my life. My art is the result of finding creative relationships among things: nature, spirit, society, the individual, and the cosmos. I respond to these relationships by engendering responses closer to the poetic, the mythic, and the sacred ways of perceiving reality. The work can be figurative or abstract, however, the key here is the inner organization of the work and its metaphoric implications. In my artwork, the personal anecdote has been displaced, leaving plenty of room to attempt at understanding not only the purely aesthetic necessity, but also the desire to understand those key symbols and rituals that transcend the individual. My approach to art includes multi-cultural and inter-disciplinary components that are the result of my traveling, living, and experimenting with a variety of art forms and living in different cultures. Always aiming for synthesis and the integration of values, my overarching purpose is to generate cross-cultural understanding.⁸

8 The unpublished exhibition statements were written in 2011 by Andrea O'Reilly Herrera. The quotations are based on personal conversations with Leandro Soto during the spring and summer of 2011.

The curatorial methods implemented in the *Cuba Transnational* exhibitions were modeled on a theory regarding diasporic identity formation, which positioned itself against the impulse to locate Cuban culture solely according to geographical coordinates, thereby contesting corresponding essentialist definitions that put forth static definitions of nationhood or national or cultural affiliation. More specifically, the theoretical paradigm I proposed respecting transnational, transcultural diasporic identity formation posited a more expansive and inclusive understanding of the paradoxes of migratory stability and rooted mobility that had been percolating since the outset of my career—as evidenced in the collection of testimonial expressions *ReMembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora*⁹—and was rooted in my own personal inquiry regarding my enigmatic relationship to the island and its culture.

Conceived in Havana during my mother's final trip to the island and born the first week of January 1959 into a small but tight-knit Cuban diasporic community in Philadelphia, I was acutely aware at an early age—although I could not articulate it at the time—that I was a member of this community though I was not displaced in any literal sense. From earliest childhood, moreover, I recall feeling a profound and perpetual sense of un-belonging in spite of the fact that I was born and bred in the U.S. In effect, my sense of *cubanía* was based in large measure on an 'idea of a nation' rooted in absence—a displaced nation of word and memory. In effect, I had inherited "a weightless world—a world without scapulars and monuments, without physical ruins and sacred stones" (*Cuba, Idea of a Nation Displaced* 176).

A curio case of memory, *ReMembering Cuba* served as a petri dish for a theoretical approach to diasporic identity formation, which I continue to develop throughout several creative, curatorial and scholarly projects. Emphasizing the idea that I—as editor—was selectively re-member(ing) fragmented and disparate memories, I consciously acknowledged the idea that the various *testimonial expressions* in the collection—which manifested in different genres, media and forms—represented a very particular constellation of experiences and perspectives unified by the unstable, overarching concepts of dislocation and/or unbelonging. In addition to including (and acknowledging) my own, embodied experience, the intentional aim was to present a more inclusive range of perspectives, and thereby problematize and rethink the diverse and sometimes divergent ways Cubands residing outside the island self-identify—or are categorized by others—in the context of movement and flux.

This approach culminated in *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora: Setting the Tent Against the House*, and consequently reflected in the curatorial approach to

9 (U of Texas P, 2001). From the outset, as evidenced in *ReMembering Cuba*, I never felt compelled to present a unified or single narrative respecting cultural identity. On the contrary, my work aimed to present a range of diverse perspectives, as manifest in the range of genres represented in this collection that reflected a complex intersectional approach to social identity. My creative and critical writing, therefore, simultaneously served to explore my own personal relationship to Cuba and Cuban culture, at the same time that it enabled me to contemplate the frequently contradictory relationship among displacement, loss, memory, history and imagination.

Cuba Transnational. Arguing for a more nuanced, malleable paradigm in which to understand diasporic identity formation, *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora* moves away from traditional testimonial formats, and essentialist, and static territorial and linguistic-based concepts of racial and/or ethnic, national, or cultural identification. On the contrary, it posits a poetics of movement, and indeterminacy, which is grounded on a principal of multi-locality found in quantum physics. In this manner, it takes account of the fluid and shifting aspects of situated or contextual subjectivity. In the same vein, it troubles traditional concepts of spatiality yet remains rooted in the local and the historical.

This approach to curation is rooted in a concept articulated in *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora*, the idea that “Cuba—as an island—a geographical space with mutable and porous borders—has never been a fixed cultural, political, or geographical entity. Just as Cuba and its people have absorbed and been transformed by diverse presences and cultural elements, it has also become a moveable nation, a traveling, prismatic site of rupture and continuity resulting from continuous out-migrations and scatterings” (*Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora* 1-14). Like all forms of cultural expression that lie outside of our direct, personal experience, *Cuba Transnational* ultimately served as a stark reminder of the paradoxical affinity with, connection to, and proximity and distance from the cultures we wish to experience and seek to understand—a perennial lesson for students of any form of multiethnic cultural expression.

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**Calafia and Ramona in the Garden of Freeways:
Carlos Morton's *Los dorados*
as the Wasteland of Memory and Alethic Frontier**

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Abstract: The article is situated within the field of Chicana theater history and is part of a larger project dealing with the question of Indigeneity in the Chicana theatrical practice. The paper appraises the significance of Carlos Morton's early play *Los dorados*. It is argued that, unlike other, more famous examples of Chicana works using Native elements the play does not call up nor romanticize Indigenous roots of Mexico. Rather, by revisiting the history of a specific place in California, by using reflexivity and irreverent discursive dialogism, and by calling attention to the Indigenous absent presence Morton offers an autopsy of California's historical imagination and contemporary identity as a wasteland of memory and alethic frontier.

Keywords: Chicana theater, Carlos Morton, alethic, wasteland, Calafia, Ramona, coloniality, epistemic rupture, prophetic love

What are the roots that clutch, *what branches grow*
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for *you know only*
A heap of broken images
.... Only
There is shadow under this red rock
T.S. Eliot *The Waste Land* [my emphasis]

Indigeneity has been at the heart of Chicana culture at least since the Chicana renaissance of the 1960s. The concept of Aztlán was derived from Indigenous roots, the Aztec mythology, and became the central signifier of Chicana cultural production. Popularized by poet Alurista in "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" (1969) it became Chicana identity's central figure which Rafael Pérez-Torres interprets as, "a metaphor of connection and unity" (213) but also, in Eric Avila's summary, "a call to 'brotherhood,' a link to the indigenous past, a reminder of territorial conquest, a symbol of future glories, or a metaphor for other kinds of oppression" (Avila 27).¹ Although Chicana people are products of the mixing of cultures or *mestizaje* the Indigenous roots were prioritized. Building on theater critic Jorge Huerta, Karen Mary Davalos says that, "[t]his articulation of Chicanas/os as a people with roots in pre-Columbian times, or indigenous historical continuity, is a tactic in 'strategic

1 For more on the complexity of the concept of Aztlán, see Pérez-Torres.

essentialism' that functions to legitimate representations of the traditional and acknowledge the ability to survive US social hierarchies" (269). In other words, assertions of Indigeneity served partly a function of cultural self-(re)invention and were suggestive of legitimacy and resilience. In later years, especially in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, attention to the Indigenous roots would also serve as a healing practice against the legacies of colonization (Hartley 237).

Chicanx Theater became an important site of articulation of these concerns. Chicano Movement's most famous theater company El Teatro Campesino (ETC) was founded by Luis Valdez in 1965 during the farmworkers' strike in Delano, California. Its initial plays called *actos* (short didactic/satirical pieces developed to illustrate the problems of the strikers) were only indirectly involved in the question of Indigeneity; if California's Native Americans were the state's first *campesinos* "the original Teatro wasn't a Chicano theatre—it was a *worker's* theatre" says the current producing artistic director of ETC Kinan Valdez (Valdez in Huerta "El Teatro's Legacy" 32). As such, ETC's early pro-union messages were internationalist. After a few years however, the teatro left the United Farm Workers and developed a genre called *mito*. If *actos* dealt with the Chicano reality through the "eyes of man" *mitos* approached it, in the words of Luis Valdez, "through the eyes of God" (Valdez in Huerta, *Chicano Theater* 97) and the God in question was rooted in Native spirituality. *Mitos* are allegorical pieces using primarily Mexican Indigenous symbols such as, according to Huerta, "the pyramid ... conches, jade, and feathered serpent head" (Huerta *Chicano Theater* 97) and syncretically merge them with Catholic religious symbolism.

As these examples illustrate the initial Chicano Movement although attempting to advance "the invention of Chicanas/os as distinct from those Mexicans del otro lado" (Davalos 269) it did so primarily by prioritizing concepts and symbols of Mexican origin: Aztec and, later, Maya elements dominated the imagination of the first generation of the *Movimiento*. Indexing grand civilizations of Mesoamerica served the purpose of cultural validation in the context of Eurocentric education and racist discrimination. It also allowed neutralizing "anti-indigenous discourses" (Pérez-Torres 226) of both nation states.

Huerta's essay "Feathers, Flutes, and Drums: Images of the Indigenous Americans in Chicano Drama" claims that "the evolution of a Chicano dramaturgy ... shows a fascination with and respect for the Chicanos' indigenous roots" (Huerta "Feathers" 182). The theater historian frames this evolution with two texts – "Estela Portillo Trambley's *Day of the Swallows*, first published in 1972, and Luis Valdez's *Mummified Deer*, first produced in the year 2000 and published in 2005" – and adds that, "the Indio (Native American) has been an almost constant presence in the plays of many of the Chicana and Chicano playwrights" (Huerta, "Feathers" 182). His other examples – Cherrie Moraga's *Giving Up the Ghost* (1982), Edit Villareal's *The Language of Flowers* (1991), Octavio Solís's *Man of the Flesh* (1988) and Josefina Lopez's *Unconquered Spirits* (1997) – confirm the observation from the previous paragraph; all make direct or indirect references to Mexican rather than North American Indigenous traditions. When in 2000 Valdez staged *Mummified Deer* at the

San Diego Repertory Theater the show also used Mexican elements, but it marked a shift as well: exploring his mother's personal roots Valdez decided to focus not on the Aztecs or the Maya but on the history of the Yaqui people of Sonora and Arizona.

Considering the trajectory outlined by Huerta one could conclude that Mexican Indigenous civilizations began to lose their dominance over the Chicano theatrical imagination and that playwrights started to look at more immediate Native cultures only at the close of the twentieth century. Carlos Morton's *Los dorados* (1978) stands in this regard as an early exception. First, because produced at the time when Chicano nationalism encapsulated by Aztlán was very much alive, it does not call up the Mesoamerican context but grounds its plot on the history of the Kumeyaay people of the San Diego region also known as the Diegueños; in other words, it prioritizes a North American, local Californian to be precise, Native perspective. Secondly, although it deals with Indigenous history and features prominently Native characters it does not use flutes, drums or dancers to evoke Native spirituality or build its appeal through Indigenous mystique.

Perhaps Huerta omits the play in his sketch because Morton is not concerned here with the Chicano identity. Rather, he acts as California's public intellectual who ponders the ramifications of its history as well as offers an autopsy of the state's collective consciousness and the unconscious. How he does this and to what effect is my subject. Before I can tell this story however, I need to provide definitions of the terms in my title which form the conceptual and metaphoric apparatus of the essay.

Definitions

Calafia is a character from *Las sergas de Esplandián* (*The Adventures of Esplandian*), a chivalric romance by Garci Ordóñez Rodríguez de Montalvo written shortly after the voyages of Columbus and first published around 1508 (Cutter 233). Calafia is a virgin warrior queen "large of body, very beautiful, in the prime of her years." Her queendom is the island of California. "Know that," writes Montalvo, "on the right hand of the Indies, very near to the Terrestrial Paradise, there is an island called California, which was peopled with black women, without any men among them, because they were accustomed to live after the fashion of Amazons" (Montalvo in Moriarty). From Donald C. Cutter's own translation of Montalvo: "Their arms were all of gold, as were also the harnesses of the wild beasts on which, after having tamed them, they rode, for in all the island there was no other metal" (Montalvo in Cutter 235). In Montalvo's tale, Queen Calafia raises an army for the siege of Constantinople. Defeated, taken prisoner, she is absorbed into our world: she converts to Catholicism and marries a Christian. Eventually she sails away.

The book as well as its companion *Lisuarte de Grecia* in which Calafia reappears were best sellers in early sixteenth century Spain. By 1525 they were sold in book shops in Mexico City (Cutter 235) and by 1539 printed in Mexico. Hernán Cortés must have read it for when in 1535 he crossed the body of water west of Mexico he used the fanciful name to call what he believed was an island. "California"

is thus a misnomer with no relation to the actual place. "Some writers claim that the application of the name may have been derisive; others indicate anticipation; some would even credit clairvoyance" (Cutter 234). As a mythical toponym it reveals the Quixotic hermeneutics of the European colonists who usher in a new ontological condition of that place as always already preceded by narrative.

Ramona is another fictional character and another figure of absorption created by New English writer Helen Hunt Jackson, a writer from Massachusetts. Jackson authored *A Century of Dishonor* (1881) as an indictment against American government's Indian policy. She then travelled to California and discovered the ruins of Spanish missions. She used these settings to create *Ramona*, a sentimental novel about the end of the Spanish Era and the arrival of American settlers published in 1884. Inspired by the success of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Jackson intended the novel to stimulate readers' sympathy towards the lot of Native Californians. The eponymous Ramona is a young, beautiful mestiza. Her first husband Alessandro is an Indian. When he is killed Ramona, a single mother with a child, remarries to a Spanish aristocrat Felipe. In other words, like Calafia, she is incorporated into the European fold. As a tragic mestiza she is a figure of colonial fantasy.



"The Home of Ramona: illustrated with photographs," photCL 504, Photograph Album from Charles F. Lummis to Susanita Del Valle, 1888, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

The novel did not bring about what Jackson had expected. The lot of the Native Americans was quickly forgotten as the book, its publication coinciding with the boom of the architectural style of the Spanish mission revival and the mission preservationist movement, generated a *Ramona* mania which, as cultural

geographer Dydia DeLyser puts it, “saturated southern California’s landscape with new, Ramona-related tourist attractions” (886). *Ramona* became an essential part of the state’s new cultural apparatus and the founding block of “a new social memory for the region” (DeLyser 886). Carey McWilliams famously called the mythology that the state’s real estate boosters and cultural promoters devised the “fantasy heritage” (McWilliams, *North* 35–47), a legend of Old Spanish Californio Days where Indians lazed their days away under the tutelage of kind Franciscan padres. This “synthetic past” (McWilliams, *Southern* 21) is still strong today.

I use the term “garden of freeways” to render California as an oxymoron suspended between, on the one hand, the imagination of arcadian paradise and “a land of magical improvisation” (McWilliams, *Southern* 21) originated by Montalvo and Cortés and perpetuated by Jackson and other state’s “troubadours” (McWilliams, *Southern* 21) like John Steven McGroarty, George Wharton James, Charles Fletcher Lummis as well as the dream factory of Hollywood, and, on the other, the state’s actual history of Native genocide, boosterism, land grabs, real estate sprawl, traffic congestion, racism, labor exploitation, and environmental degradation.² These are, to use T.S. Eliot’s phrasing from the epigraph, “the branches growing out of this stony rubbish” (Eliot 5).

The phrase “wasteland of memory” serves me to signify that this oxymoron can be rendered as a public consciousness in which fantasies, skewed perceptions, imaginary phantasmata blur with and obscure true stories and actual memories. If looking at Disneyland Jean Baudrillard diagnosed “*the desert of the real*” (166), the same applies to missions, university campuses, Olvera Street, courthouses, hotels (i.e.: Mission Inn in Riverside), whole cities (i.e.: Santa Barbara). In fact, as I argue elsewhere, missions are the original American simulacra anterior to Disney’s invention (Welizarowicz, “Camino” 263). In California simulacra dance a perpetual fandango. In effect all memory is shattered, a “heap of broken images” (Eliot 5). Here only ghostly/ghastly specters shine through the cracks of fragmented consciousness, a “shadow under this red rock” (Eliot 5). Writing in his Berkeley home overlooking the San Francisco Bay Czesław Miłosz intuited: “Call it a delusion, but a demonic presence can be felt on this continent” (51).

The term “alethic” is commonly explained in relation to the concepts of truth, possibility and impossibility. It derives from the Greek *aletheia* which is translated as “truth” as well as, “*truth, reality, ... appearance*” (Liddell and Scott 272). Martin Heidegger renders it as “unconcealment” (67) and an “opening of presence” (69). Its antonym is “*lethe*” which means “oblivion,” or “forgetfulness.”

2 For more on the social problems in California see, for example, Carey McWilliams’ *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (1973[1946]) as well as Mike Davis’ *City of Quartz* (1992) or his *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998). On agricultural labor exploitation see McWilliams’ *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (1971[1935]) and Richard Steven Street’s monumental *Beasts of the Field: A Narrative History of California Farmworkers, 1769-1913* (2004). On California Indigenous genocide see, for example, Brendan C. Lindsay’s *Murder State: California’s Native American Genocide, 1846–1873* (2012) and Benjamin Madley’s *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe* (2016).

Thus, the phrase “alethic frontier” approaches discourses which determine what is thought and unthought. In California, discourse and its resultant acts are enactments of the alethic frontier. When in 2015 Pope Francis canonized Junípero Serra (1713-1784), the Mallorcan founder of the California mission system, he not only offered him eternal absolution and ensured the Catholic Church’s arrival at a deontological closure. He also pushed American Indian victims further into *lethe*, forgetfulness, impossibility of remembrance, and ungrievability (Welizarowicz, “Junípero” 287). When Governor Gavin Newsom issued an apology to the California’s Native peoples in 2019, he admitted and officially disclosed the legacy of genocide; thus, he advanced *aletheia*, unconcealment. The Camino Real trail which spans more than 700 miles of California’s freeways, highways and city streets announces itself with bells and Franciscan staffs bearing inscriptions of alethic certainty: “Historic Camino Real.” This is a misleading signifier for such a single land route never existed in the Spanish era (Kropp 62) and the trail was created in the early twentieth century by state promoters and “automobile scorcher” (Kropp 61) to, as Phoebe Kropp puts it, “[encourage] Southern Californians to put themselves in the padres’ sandals and imagine a direct lineage from the European colonizers themselves” (Kropp 49).³ But such commemoration and glorification of the padres has real consequences for California Indigenous communities. As Renya K. Ramirez and Valentin Lopez caution, “for many California Native peoples, they [mission bells] evoke the state’s violent mission history and symbolize colonial regimentation and widespread land theft, environmental devastation, and genocide. Seeing the bells can trigger painful and traumatic memories of colonial history” (Ramirez and Lopez 91). Thus, a process of taking the bells down has recently been initiated to break their work of concealing and to advance the process of healing.⁴ Similarly, statues of Serra, their gestures translating his saintly, moral purpose still stand here and there but many have been removed, toppled, and/or sprayed with paint in acts of alethic rebellion.

Battles over meaning and accountability reap collateral damage. The Golden Gate Park statue of Miguel de Cervantes dragged through the mud may seem the wrong target. But if representation is the culprit, if literature stands as the originary principle behind the alethic wasteland then why not kill the writer? The irony is that here is the author who was the first to diagnose the Quixotic condition, this mode of being and epistemic orientation which proceeds in the world (*reality*) by taking narrative (*appearance*) as its point of departure and its end. As we know from Tzvetan Todorov, Columbus was the first to take this attitude to the Americas

3 For more on the efforts to determine the historical existence of Camino Real see, for example, Joseph P. Sánchez’s *El Camino Real de California: From Ancient Pathways to Modern Byways*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2019. Rather than speaking of a single land route Sánchez uses the term of a “braided corridor” of ports, presidios, missions, ranchos, towns, and cities tied to “maritime lanes emanating from Baja California Sur and the associated Manila Galleon routes” (xii).

4 This reevaluation of the mission history has found home as a discipline at some institutions of higher learning like University of California San Diego and the University of California Santa Cruz. To explore Critical Mission Studies go, for example, to <https://criticalmissionstudies.ucsd.edu/> or <https://historyandcivicsproject.sites.ucsc.edu/the-critical-missions-project/>.

and his heritage is the otherness reduced to inferiority. In this, we are all his “direct descendants” (Todorov 5).

Los dorados

Consider in this context *Los dorados*.⁵ Morton wrote this farcical tragicomedy in a commedia del'arte style as a commission from San Diego On Stage, a public service theater project originated by the directors of San Diego Repertory Theatre and the California Pacific Theatre, Sam Woodhouse and Janet Rumbaut respectively. The goal of San Diego On Stage was to sponsor original dramatizations of little-known aspects of San Diego history. The project was funded by the Regional Employment and Training Consortium financed through a federal grant under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, Jimmy Carter administration's Public Service Jobs Program (U.S. Department of Labor). The play was produced by California Pacific Theatre and drew most of its members from students or fresh graduates of the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of California San Diego (UCSD). Larry Swerdlove, who had just a year earlier worked as a student sound designer in the UCSD production of Ed Bullins' *The Taking of Miss Janie*, performed in *Los dorados* what reviewer Mark McCaffrey assessed as a “judicious directing job” (90). The cast consisted of six actors (three men and three women) and three musicians. From June 1 through September 30 of 1978, the piece was staged fifty times during free outdoor and indoor performances at parks, fairgrounds, and streets of the San Diego County.

The play is set before and during the Spanish era; its time frame spans three centuries from before the first Spanish landing in 1542 to early 1840s. Its characters are both individualized and collective archetypes residing somewhere between authenticity and colonial fantasy. The play's sequel, *Rancho Hollywood*, was set at the time of the Anglo invasion. In the early 2000s Morton would rewrite *Los dorados* as *The Golden Ones* adapting it to the history of the Riverside county and foregrounding not the Kumeyaay but the Cahuilla people.

Reflecting larger trends in American theater of the time and the UCSD department's student body makeup the cast of the San Diego production was cross-racial and programmatically gendered. All members of the Kumeyaay (“Kemia” in

5 Morton who had previously worked as a journalist started writing plays inspired by El Teatro Campesino's show he saw at the University of Texas El Paso in the early 1970s. With a career spanning over five decades his oeuvre includes such landmark and widely anthologized titles as *Many Deaths of Danny Rosales*, *Rancho Hollywood*, *El Jardin*, *The Savior* and many others. Most of his works for theater are set on the U.S.-Mexico border. Even if they are not, the issues they discuss are usually related to cultural clashes, racism, myth making, representation of history, migration. He writes in a wry mix of stoic distance, humor and a deep understanding of human nature and our basic inner drives. In 2022, commissioned by the International Border Studies Center at the University of Gdańsk, he wrote *Trapped in Amber*, a play about Gdańsk as a border town. The play was translated by Julia Skuza as *Zakłete w Jantarze* and, directed by Irwin Appel, it received its workshop premiere in Polish at the Jerzy Limon theater at the University of Gdansk on October 11, 2022. An article discussing this project was published in the *Polish Journal for American Studies* (2023, vol. 17). The play was released in a bilingual edition by Cząści Proste in May 2024.

the script) were portrayed by women. A white actress, Claudia Swerdlove, played the innocent, gullible princess Tupipe. Simquale, the fierce chiefess of the tribe, was portrayed by African American actress C.J. Bharaka. Barbara Muir was Sinmuhow, a prophet elder and medicine woman. All colonists on the other hand were male: Mark Yavorsky played “the swaggering” (McCaffrey 89) Sergeant Solana/Laguna.⁶ Gregorio Flores, Chicano actor and member of El Teatro de la Esperanza, was the Spanish Captain whose names change as the play progresses to reflect the passing of time as marked in chronicles by a parade of consecutive conquistadors. John Wesley Houston Jr., an African American actor, was “the now lecherous, now devout” (McCaffrey 89) Padre La Jolla, a Franciscan missionary. McCaffrey praised the cast for their “snappy performance” (90).

Told in a metatheatrical, Chicano *acto* meets San Francisco Mime Troupe style the play at the outset announces itself directly to the audience as “a mixture of fact and fiction about the clash between Native Americans and Spanish Conquistadores” (Morton 88). Described as a “serious-minded farce” with “strong consciousness-raising intents” (McCaffrey 89) the 50-minute play is, on one level, a dramatized history lesson, a chronological albeit compressed didactic tale.

Foregrounding the Native perspective – the MC issuing first words is Sinmuhow – Morton intervenes into and undermines the master narrative of the fantasy heritage the state has spun about itself roughly from around the time of *Ramona* but in truth at least since Fr. Francisco Palou, Junípero Serra’s friend from Mallorca and his student/companion in the Americas, published Serra’s hagiography a century earlier (in 1787). As one critic observes, the play drives “a serious point of the devastating effect the arrival of Europeans had on Indians and their culture” (Garlington). In other words, Morton writes Indigenous history into the normative historical paradigm of California which had hitherto, in the fashion espoused by Herbert Eugene Bolton and his school of Spanish Borderlands, prioritized and valorized the role of Spanish frontier institutions (missions, *presidios* and *pueblos*) as “political and civilizing agents of a very positive sort” (Bolton 48). This intervention is performed by a series of conflicts which function as commentaries to the factual historical information; they render the events which history has enshrined through Native and down-to-earth perspective. Thus, in McCaffrey’s summary, Sinmuhow “must endure belches and other uncavalier approaches” of the Sargeant, Tupipe “gets more than she bargained for when she allows herself to be converted” and Simquale “finds herself trapped into a run-of-the-mill petit-bourgeois marriage” (89). And the intervention was also visual as the production’s set featured a backdrop of “a wall-size map of the hill and coastal area of San Diego” (McCaffrey 89). Only some toponyms on the map are Spanish. Captain says: “This isn’t San Diego?” to which Simquale responds: “No, the names we give this land are Otay, Jamul, Jamacha, Cuyamac” (Morton 93-94). By extension this is not California nor is Simquale Calafia although these are the Captian’s first words.

6 Yavorsky’s later life would inspire Werner Herzog to shoot the 2009 thriller *My Son My Son What Have You Done?*.

And here's the other level of the narrative. Morton is not simply interested in retelling or revising history from the Native point of view. Rather, he offers an autopsy of the state's convoluted consciousness. What the audience gets are historical episodes derived from archival research and contrasted, conflated, merged with re-readings of California's founding myths and their sedimented echoes in popular culture. Historical individuals are made into condensed types. Thus, Captain's name is Vizcaíno (Morton 88), Cortez Cabrillo (Morton 93), and eventually, "Capitán Cortez Cabrillo Vizcaíno" (Morton 95). Equally, the priest is a composite friar, his name eventually grows to be "Padre Junipero de La Jolla Serra" (Morton 101). Verbal and bodily slapstick, ribald, lower bodily stratum humor, sight gags and one-liners, "[c]hoice anachronisms and verbal acrobatics" (McCaffrey 89) are combined with archival quotations adapted from Columbus, Córtez, Serra, Montalvo, *The Tempest*, Mexican and American folk songs, etc. This is how Morton's imagination operates. Like Whitman's it encompasses multitudes. It is dialogic, heteroglossic, associative.

The result is a meta-discourse, a retelling of history which announces itself as myth and of myth masking itself as history. Thus, for example, the three women stand simultaneously for the real nation of the Kumeyaay and *are* the figures of Calafia and her Amazon warriors. Thus, writing for *Latin American Theatre Review* McCaffrey praised the female character's "zany costumes" which "[struck] a happy medium between Morton's research on the Dieguenos and what the Spanish chivalric literary fantasies of the times had envisioned" (89). The Spaniard who first sees Tupipe asks: "¿Calafia de California?" (Morton 88). Soon after, the Sargeant says: "We are somewhere to the right of Indies" to which the Padre replies, "But in very close vicinity to Paradise" (Morton 89). These misperceptions are built on earlier discourses. The first echoes Córtez's naming of California taken from Montalvo. The latter two reiterate Montalvo but also Columbus who asserted that "the earthly Paradise is here" (Columbus in Todorov 16). These are just two instances of many which render Captain's and his cadre's imperative drives and reveal the encounter's epistemic and hermeneutical foundations. They expose the founding moment not as a beginning but as a reiteration of the quest narrative which precedes and will engulf within itself this moment.

Changes in names, misquotations, misreadings, intrusions of different dialects (the Sargent's speech morphs into a Texan drawl, the Padre becomes a Baptist preacher) multiply and confuse logic and chronology, they move between high and low, backward and forward in time. If culture is, as Clifford Geertz argues, "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (89) then the colonial project is rendered by Morton not only as an invasion on the land, that is, as colonialism but equally as cultural coloniality, that is, an invasion by symbolic forms, by enunciation, by a system of signification. As we know, Geertz's definition of culture is "essentially a semiotic one. ... man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (Geertz 5). That web

blinds the Spanish colonists, conceals but also translates the reality in front of their eyes, offers them interpretative frames, determines outcomes.

The genuinely minded Kemia live in their own web of signs. They are deeply confused for they do not yet belong to the semiotic universe of the Europeans nor do they share their interested impulse. Thus, Sinmuhow says to the Sargent: "You speak with a forked tongue" (Morton 98) when he pleads with her to reveal where gold is and promises "to build Coronado Bridge in Logan Heights barrio, yeah, directly over Chicano Park" (98). Simquale calls out the Captain on his "contradictions" (Morton 96) and when he insists on calling her Calafia she quips: "Your words are sweet, but your actions are like thorns" (Morton 98). What both characters are trying to name, it seems, is what Homi Bhabha would call in *The Location of Culture* (1994) the "colonial mimicry" (Morton 86). Incidentally, echoing Sinmuhow, Bhabha explains colonial mimicry as speaking "in a tongue that is forked, not false" (Morton 85). He says that it operates by ambivalence, indeterminacy, and "double articulation" (Bhabha 86) between, on the one hand, history, "epic intention", and "high ideals" and, on the other, "*trompe l'oeil*, irony", and "farce" (Bhabha 85). It also negotiates, he adds, two types of temporal orientation: one "synchronic panoptical vision of domination – the demand for identity, stasis – and the counterpressure of the diachrony of history – change, difference" (Bhabha 86). Morton's dramaturgical strategy of clashing various registers and of constant collapsing of synchronic and diachronic temporal frames (references to popular culture trivia and structures yet to be built function as a tactic in the process) anticipates and exemplifies Bhabha's theoretical model.

As an enactment and critique of the colonial mimicry the play is not simply an entertaining piece of didactic theater. It is an operation on the audience's consciousness and the unconscious. The viewers are challenged to make sense of the confluences of names and points of reference. Their inherited historical, moral and hermeneutical coordinates are brought to their limits. The audience is drawn into an associative game for its members share frames of reference with the colonists, suspended in their culture's webs of significance they will recognize at least some lines, some other lines will reverberate in the echo chamber of their unconscious, will bounce off other concepts and juxtaposed in new configurations proposed by Morton they will also acquire new, unexpected shades of meaning provoking laughter but also rebellion, uncanny unease and eventually epistemic rupture. First confused, little by little the audience realizes the nature of the encounter as always already mediated by representation, they are thrown into a wasteland of memory or rather, their memory is revealed as a wasteland. In this way, viewers' imagination and epistemic orientation is foregrounded and indexed as implicated in the whole process. And in so doing the space-time of the show is produced as an in-between ontological hybrid, a third cognitive realm, an alethic frontier, where the division between the out there on stage and us the viewers is bridged. It is in this liminal space that the unconscious/imagination of the colonial settler society is brought forth from its usual backseat of normativity as an object of investigation and

transformation. What is normally hidden and operates from the background as the bedrock of certainty (alethic, axiological) is now exposed, made visible as a construct of discourse. Here is then revealed the potential of the play to transform human consciousness and social behavior. Jean and John Comaroff, building on Victor Turner, propose that ritual is a “symbolic mediation” and “signifying practice” which has a productive capacity and is, potentially, a “vehicle of history-in-the making,’ which ‘(re)makes social predicaments’ and ‘(re)casts cultural orders” (Comaroff in Elam 12-13). Thus, although it does not use feathers nor flutes the play, to adopt Harry J. Elam, Jr’s phrase, “*function[s] ritualistically*” (14).

If the script evinces a transformative potential this was only enhanced in the historic San Diego production. Consider the function of the colorblind or diversity casting which not only reflected the generational structure of feeling in American theater but also played a role in the play’s alethic intervention.

As stated earlier, Simquale, the leader, the strongest resister, the object of desire and the first Indian to be killed was played by Bharaka, a black actress. This added another layer to the symbolic mediation and signifying practice the play enacts. In the narrative of the play, she is Native. In the hieroglyphic universe of coloniality she is the black warrior queen Calafia, the embodiment of colonial desire. In the real world of the audience, she is decidedly *not* Indian however the viewers are informed that she *is*. Hence the perceiving audience is invited to both indulge the fantasy *and* resist it. On top of her being the colonial fetish and representing the elusive “not that” one must consider her stage presence in the context of the times and in the context of the American spectatorial culture’s production of blackness. In the post-Civil Rights America, her strong persona was suggestive of both literal and semiotic emancipation of the black population and of the transformations in American culture at large. In other words, Bharaka’s stage presence was evocative of multiple semantic planes the viewer was challenged to untangle. He/she was also invited to recognize what Michael M. J. Fischer has called “‘families of resemblance’ — similarities to the experiences and cultures of other groups—to fashion a ‘unity of disunity’” (Fischer in Lipsitz 149) between experiences of communities traditionally kept in separate compartments, i.e. Native Americans and African Americans. After all, both groups have suffered from skewed representations, double consciousness is not only the black condition.

Houston’s 1978 role as a Franciscan had strong ramifications and complicated the play’s points of reference further. On the one hand, according to Morton in a conversation with the author, the actor was asked to use a Baptist preacher’s intonation and mannerisms. In so doing he directly inserted black experience into the mix which spoke to the larger American constellation of signs and reasserted the synchronic, as opposed to the diachronic, temporal orientation of the play. At the same time, to cast an African American whose stage body, regardless of his personal history, is an index of victimization by colonial violence in the role of a perpetrator of that violence, potentially implicated him as an accomplice in oppression and diffused European responsibility. But that risk was perhaps neutralized by the

satirical, irreverent portrayal of California's founding father. Ishmael Reed famously criticized *Hamilton* for its cross-racial casting and its simultaneous romanticization and whitewashing of historical slaveowners. In the introduction to his play *The Haunting of Lin-Manuel Miranda* he says: "When I was a child, schools dressed children of color up and made us pretend to be Founding Fathers on the stage. I am tired of that bullshit" (Reed 14). When Morton and Swerdlove decided to task Houston with the padre's part, a part which is at the opposite end of heroization, they also intervened into this long tradition of celebratory national pageantry. Here, the likes of young and old Reed could relish a measure of their small subversive revenge against the dominant enunciation regime.

And in the specific San Diego County context another complexity to the show was revealed. In an interview with Phil Garlington Houston admitted to concern with his own safety when his character spoke about a "treacherous" Indian attack on a mission: "There were some Indians in the audience who strenuously objected to the good padre version of events ... The Indians began saying 'Oh, yeah, oh yeah,' and the hostility of the moment reminded me that in the street theater there's no orchestra pit separating you from somebody who might object to the character you're playing" (Houston in Garlington). The comment reveals importantly for this study, that not all members of the audience shared the same memories, frames of reference, their webs of signification differed. In other words, in the play's experience various imaginaries clashed, it became an alethic frontier. The "good padre" story had historically served to occlude Indigenous resistance in California which in San Diego began in 1769 and culminated in 1774 with the burning of the mission and the killing of padre Luis Jayme. The Ipai/Kumeyaay often refer to themselves as proud "mission-burning" Indians, that is, they underscore that act as a foundational moment for their identity. The fact that the priest was black and spoke like a Baptist minister may have created enough distance to offer him protection from anything more than calls and hisses.

In the central scene, the Padre is on his knees and prays citing famous lines of Serra "there are devils in the land" (Morton 99). Simquale's younger sister Tupipe confronts him and asks him to leave. He is able to coax her trust by claiming that he is "the voice of God!" (100). He then confronts her:

PADRE: Let God's love douse the bitter flames of hate. I say do you feel Him growing inside of you?

TUPIPE: Is God a man? (*They embrace*).

PADRE: Yes, he is the Father of us all. And he is about to enter your spirit! I now baptize you Ramona, after the famous novel yet to be written, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost!

TUPIPE: (*Struggling like a wildcat as he restrains her*) My name is Tupipe-Tunan!

PADRE: You gots to have a Christian name! My first convert! ... (*Dragging Tupipe away with him*) Come on, Ramona! (100-101)



TROUBADOURS—John Wesley Houston Jr. and Claudia Swerdlove perform in "Los Dorados" at Balboa Park. The street theater production, based on historical fact, is touring San Diego County.
Times photo by John McDonough

"TROUBADOURS", John Wesley Houston Jr. and Claudia Swerdlove perform in *Los dorados* at Balboa Park, San Diego. Photo by John McDonough for *Los Angeles Times*. Carlos Morton's private collection

The scene conflates rape with baptism. That is, we glean the darker side of religious conversion – domination, indoctrination, penetration, violent incorporation. And because the act coincides with the founding of the mission San Diego the baptism/rape is conflated further with the origin moment of the state's history. In other words, we are shown the shadows in the dust beneath the mission stones, we are shown the darker side of the romance of the state's Ramona mania. This is the show's disturbing climax. It punctures the audience's axiological, narrative, alethic certainties. In the sparsity of his lines Morton calls up his readers' imagination. After all the rape is not mentioned directly here and only later in the script do we learn that "the padre dishonored" (Morton 102) Tupipe. But the words, "do you feel Him growing inside of you?" and "about to enter" are suggestive enough and provoke a surge of the unthought. The scene leaves us speechless and has an uncanny aura. It calls for the director's skills to provide a visual illustration. In the 1978 staging, as seen in the photograph from the production, the rape was alluded to onstage. When the script was remounted in Riverside, Morton revealed in a personal communication with the author, the scene caused such controversy that the playwright was forced to remove it.

When Simquale finds out about the rape she demands: "I want his head!" (Morton 102) to which Captain replies: "This is not the way to do things!" (Morton 102). He belittles the gravity of the act, normalizes rape, and relativizes the moral logic of retribution. This is just one of many examples of axiological and epistemic borderlands that the play rehearses. The world of the Natives is on the collision course with the Spaniards'. Elsewhere, when Simquale says that the Native "guiding spirit is the force of nature, and her direction is not made up of lines or angles, but rather of circles that re-occur again and again" or when she asks with incredulity if land can be sold (Morton 97-98) she expresses a specific epistemic orientation which the Captain overwrites with Western logic of objectification. In another instance of panoptic vision, he promises condominiums, plumbing, commercial centers, toilets, bridges, freeways, overpasses, and even a correctional facility named Soledad (Morton 96). To sweeten the deal he gives away frisbees. Even though Simquale sees the contradictions in Captain's speech she still falls for him – like Richard Rodriguez who says that, "[w]ithin any discussion of race, there lurks the possibility of romance" (13) Morton believes in the supreme power of attraction, love – only to be rejected in a scene taken directly from *Seven Cities of Gold* (1955) in which Rita Moreno's character Ula is first seduced and then betrayed by Spanish Lieutenant Mendoza (Richard Egan). Like in the Hollywood blockbuster Morton's Captain wiggles himself out of commitment by applying the supremacy of a logic other than romance: restraint imposed by social norms, here, racial thinking.

The finale, which comes immediately after the chronology reaches the mark of the Gold Rush and the Yankee gold miners arrive, is a danced sequence:

All six actors are on stage now. Three dressed like Yankees, three like Californios. The finale consists of a dance. A Yankee couple waltzes, a Californio couple does

a corrida. The Yankees square dance, the Californios fandango. At first the competition is friendly but gradually the dances turn more and more aggressive. The cultures in conflict, the dancers close in a tableau of incomprehension, competition, combat. (Morton 103-104)

What is the purpose of this final image of the Spanish and Anglos caught in a family feud? Why is the Indian subjectivity completely erased? If his aim had been to only retell the story of the state from the Native perspective Morton would have accounted for Indigenous survivance, for the Kumeyaay are still here and as we know from Houston they were in the audience in 1978. But because in California imaginary the Native is consumed by the binary logic of the Europeans the indigenous blank spot is precisely what Morton wants to achieve.



Charles Lummis dancing with Susanita del Valle on a veranda at Camulos, photCL 504, Photograph Album from Charles F. Lummis to Susanita Del Valle, 1888, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

In this ending, the play reveals its true trajectory: not of the plot nor of the state's imaginary. Rather, as suggested before, it is an operation on the consciousness of the audience. This arc develops from an alluring romanticization/exoticization of the Native at the beginning to something rather uncanny in the finale, an anxious indigenous lacuna. In other words, this "missing something" at the end functions as the figure of the unthought and serves to affectively approximate what Alan Lawson calls in his analysis of settler colonial discourse the colonial lacuna and "anxiety of proximity" (Lawson 27). After Simquale and Sinmuhow are killed only

Tupipe remains. “Where are the Kemyia?” (Morton 102) she asks. The question is a signifier of genocide but, more pertinently for the immediate audience, the figure of the repressed in the state’s conscience. Tupipe’s words linger as a disturbing punctum of the play.

If the finale’s dance stages the binary (Spanish v. Anglo) limits of the dominant imaginary, its alethic horizon, the punctum of Indigenous absence extends this horizon beyond the binary and opens up the abyss of uncertainty or what Roland Barthes has called “a zero-degree of meaning” (Barthes in Sandoval 146). This moment is explained by Barthes as the “‘third meaning,’ which is that which always haunts any other two meanings in a binary opposition” (Barthes in Sandoval 144) and which puts into question everything we think we know. Chela Sandoval explains it as “an extra, uncategorizable unnamable meaning haunting all human need to name, classify, order, control” (144). The third meaning is thus an unsettling excess, an overflowing, a rapture in relation to the “real” and the known. Such moments have a potential of transforming or opening a “normal” or “well-adjusted” consciousness to what Barthes and Sandoval call “*differential consciousness* [which] represents a signifier without any set signifieds” (Sandoval 146). In other words, instances of third meaning unmoor us from our stable coordinates of knowledge, subvert “the whole practice of meaning”. A year before *Los dorados* was staged, Barthes proclaimed that “this subversion of meaning is a ‘new, rare practice, affirmed against a majority practice (that of signification)’” (Barthes in Sandoval 146).

It is in those moments when solid signifieds fail us, when binaries are not enough that we enter a no-place, a chiasmus, we lapse and enter the differential consciousness. Such moments can be accessed through various “puncta [which] release consciousness from its grounding in dominant language and narrative to experience the meanings that lie in the zero degree of power” says Sandoval (147). Only such practice on the consciousness, asserts Barthes, “will undo the very forms dominant society depends on in order to ‘ensure its peace of mind.’ Once this Western peace of mind is unsettled, he believes, consciousness will have the opportunity to ‘grasp the magnitude, the detours’” (Sandoval 144).

Los dorados was in many respects innovative. It addressed in a fresh, unorthodox way the question of *indigenismo* in Chicana theater. It placed Native history centrally in the narrative of the history of the state. In this it anticipated other theaters’ later works. For example, La Compañía de Teatro de Albuquerque’s *Nuevo Mexico Si!* was first performed in November 1981 and narrates four hundred years of New Mexico in a corrido style. The play opens with narrator’s address to the audience in which, after mentioning various Native tribes, Spaniards are introduced who, like in Morton’s play, see only the myth: “Could this be Golden Cibola – a New Mexico?” (in McCosker 56). *Los dorados* original production was consistent with innovative trends in American theater regarding cross-racial casting but distinguished itself from majority of such works by questioning the epistemic center of the mainstream or refusing to reify the status quo. More than a decade before Bhabha it articulated and critiqued in an artistic form the colonial mimicry. In its semiotic dislocations,

its staging of parallel temporal frames and through its many puncta like in the rape/baptism scene or in the Indigenous absent presence in the finale *Los dorados* is revealed as a play actively pursuing to unsettle the California audiences' stable imaginary, to unmoor their systems of signs. The goal was consistent with Barthesian model: to lapse the consciousness of the audiences, to afford them a ladder to a differential consciousness in order to reorganize their alethic certainties and shift the balance between the thought and the unthought, to "disreal" (Barthes in Sandoval 144) the real. Pushing to reconfigure the state's wasteland of memory this way Morton was at the forefront of challenging the system of thought, a project which Barthes calls "Prophetic Love" and Sandoval names "Methodology of the Oppressed." It is noteworthy that this project centered on bringing attention to Indigeneity as an element repressed but necessary to be recovered. As such, it constitutes an important but heretofore neglected in Chicano theater historiography element of what Huerta has called "necessary theater" (1989). That is why it deserves to be remembered.

(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
 And I will show you something different from either
 Your shadow at morning striding behind you
 Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
 I will show you fear in a handful of dust.
 (Eliot 5-6)

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“Theater on the Border” or Here Comes *Quixote Nuevo*¹

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Abstract: Octavio Solis is an American playwright and director who was born and raised in El Paso, Texas. His plays have been performed in show theaters and small companies throughout the United States of America. He wrote more than 25 plays, including *Mother Road*, *La Posada Mágica*, *Santos* and *Santos*, *Lydia*, *El Paso Blue* and others. His reputation as an American borderland author was augmented by his creative nonfiction memoir *Retablos: Stories from Life Lived Along the Border*. It is a collection of short stories based on Octavio’s experiences during his childhood. The concept of retablo refers to a unique genre that combines visual arts of Mexico and the devotional icons of the Catholic Church. *Quixote Nuevo* is one his most successful plays widely represented in many theatres all over the USA. It is an excellent example of borderland thinking applied to performative arts. Its synthetic idiom combines all elements of the Chicano artistic identity created at the intersection of the pre-Colombian (Indian), the European (Spanish), the American and the Mexican traditions. The interview below focuses on the analysis on the play *Quixote Nuevo* as one of the paradigmatic works of the borderland Chicano theatre.

Keywords: borderland, quixotic myth, Chicano identity, borderland theatre, synthesis of cultures

Oleksandr Pronkevich: In what way has the Spanish tradition influenced your borderland theatre?

Octavio Solis: The Spanish tradition has always been at the root of my theatrical practices. *Quixote Nuevo* is my third attempt at trying to adapt the story of don Quixote from the novel and I think I finally found the form that Quixote really needed for my purposes. I must also say that I used the Spanish tradition in my very first Latino play, that allowed me to dig my hands deeply up to my elbows, so to speak, into my culture. It was a play called *Man of the Flesh*. I was asked by a small theater company in Dallas, to write an adaptation of the story of don Juan Tenorio. Before starting the project, I had familiarized myself with all variants of don Juan’s legend in Spanish and world theatre. I read everything, every stage permutation of the don Juan story, even don Juan in *Man and Superman*. And then I thought, now what do I do with that story? What do I do with that myth? The only other requirement that the commissioning company asked me for this play, besides updating it and placing it in America, was that it had to be set during the Day of the Dead. And that was a holiday that my family hadn’t celebrated before. We didn’t know much about that observance, and so my immersion in that really opened my eyes to vital theatrical possibilities. In

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particular, there is a supernatural dimension upon which the story of don Juan operates and that suited the elements that I wished to bring into it. The idea of Death a real figure of seduction catching up to a man who is so intent on creating life in the most vulgar, arrogant way, or even in a romantic way, worked so well. Tenorio represents this life impulse whose own mortality is approaching him every step of the way. So that was my first attempt at melding our Día de los Muertos traditions with the Spanish literary mythology.

Man of the Flesh also opened my eyes to the theater of the Spanish Golden Age. This knowledge was helpful when the Dallas Theater Center asked me to adapt *La vida es sueño* by Calderón de la Barca. I wrote *Dreamlandia* and set it also against the Texas-Mexican border, in fact, in El Paso. A lot of my work is based in El Paso, because I feel like it's such a burning hot spot for the issue of immigration. It has bedeviled us, the people who have made their living on both sides of the border, and it continues to be the abiding issue of this country today. At any rate, I seem to keep delving into Spanish literature and Spanish theater for the stories that I write for my plays. I think it's no accident. It happens because there's Spanish blood in us Latinos. In my neck of the desert, we are known as Chicanos, but that same Spanish blood courses in all of us to some degree. There is both the blood of our Indian ancestors mingled with the blood of the Spanish. It's still within us, no matter how much we may want to resist it, or deny it.

O.P.: There is a tradition of reading Cervantes as a borderland writer. At least, his most known character crosses geographical borders and easily becomes a protagonist of other cultures. In your opinion, is don Quixote an American hero? And how is this character seen by Latinos?

O.S.: To a great extent, don Quixote is an American hero. But not in the traditional sense. He functions more like an anti-hero, because he's a dreamer, battling invisible chimeras and dragons. He appears as a ridiculous figure, like a fool pretending to be a super hero. And yet, in my play those dragons turn out to be quite real, and they are represented by the Border Patrol, by the policies that disenfranchise Latino Americans. So, my Nuevo Quixote sways from anti-hero to straight-up American hero for me.

It's important that my Quixote is connected to the Latin American community. I know that a lot of Latinos are drawn to Cervantes's don Quixote in this country because of his Spanish roots and because we share a language in terms of the Castilian Spanish. But it deepens when one begins to realize that everything Quixote is doing is because he wants to become a knight. He wants to imagine that he is a knight in an age where there is no room for knights. In some respects, that's how many Latinos feel in this country – they want to become American, more American, and be part of that fabric of what it means to be American but are so often denied that. This is what drew me to the story of Quixote. I myself wanted to become an American in the same way don Quixote wants to become a full knight with all the privileges that come with that. He stands for the disenfranchised, for the economically bereft, for those, who are considered illegal just by being in this

country, who lack any real identity, except as foreigners, as unwanted aliens. In that sense my Quixote really is an outcast American hero.

O.P.: Did the US-Mexican border make you change the destiny of your Quixote in comparison to the novel by Cervantes?

O.S.: My protagonist is a Cervantes scholar, who teaches in a small college in the southwest, on the Texas-Mexico border, in a small rocky desert town. He is starting to suffer from Alzheimer's symptoms as he is getting older. In particular, he conflates the Cervantes novel with his own past, with his own demons and the unacknowledged failings of his life. In this respect my protagonist is different from Cervantes's don Quixote. In the novel we don't really learn much about who Quijano really was. We only see him from the point that he gets up in the morning and goes right out, becomes a knight, and launches on his adventures. But we never see any of his backstory. There is no background to him. He has a housekeeper, a niece, and there are some people that know him and seek to return him to his home. In my play, however, he has a backstory. He's been a professor. He lived his youth working on a farm with his father and his mother. He fell in love as a boy.

There are other details that appear in my play that are connected to everyday American life at the US-Mexico border. My Quixote finds his own helmet of Mambrino. The helmet of Mambrino in the novel is the barber's bowl. In my story it's a plastic bedpan that he wears on his head. He bought it at a yard sale. He saw it and said: "That's the helmet of Mambrino." His Sancho is a guy named Manny Diaz, and he says: "No, I'm not Sancho. It's me, you remember me. I'm Manny, Manny Diaz." My Quixote interprets these words in his own peculiar way: "Yes, many, many dias, muchos dias, since I have seen you, it's good, Sancho, come with me, ride with me." Manny is a vendor selling frozen fruity popsicles (known as paletas) in a little cart which has a donkey printed on the side to attract the kids. Quixote says: "That's your Dapple. Tu Moteado." Your donkey. That's how I know you're Sancho." The two of them ride off toward their numerous adventures and get in lots of trouble.

The story works out in a picaresque way, in the same way a novel does, that is, episodically, but all the scenes have become reset in the US-Mexican borderland. I don't use the windmills because it was too easy. It seemed too cheap to attack those large wind turbines or those slight tin windmills that you see in the West Texas desert. I went to something even more potent. We have large surveillance drones that patrol the border. Very large white blimps, that have cameras and surveillance equipment to monitor activity on the border. My Quixote attacks one, and he brings it down, which brings the wrath of the border patrol down on him. There's an episode in the novel, where Quixote and Sancho meet some prisoners that are on their way to the galleys, and he interviews them all, then Quixote sets them free and he gets attacked for his good deed. One finds a similar episode in my story as well, except the prisoners he comes across are detainees. They have crossed the border and have been arrested by the Border Patrol. Quixote sets them free, and then he is attacked by the Border Patrol for his good deed. There are a lot of parallels in the novel that are also in my play. At the end, my protagonist finds his Dulcinea who

was someone from his childhood he had forgotten about, a young girl who had haunted his lonely heart. This girl, whose name we never learn, appears to him as a vision, and he calls her Dulcinea after the character in the novel, who, I believe, is only mentioned, but she is never actually encountered in the novel, which is what I find really fascinating. When Cervantes/Quixote describes Dulcinea, she is a simply a constructed paradigm. Nothing in Quixote's description of her makes any kind of sense. She's an amalgam of metaphors. Her lips are roses. Her skin is white marble. Her hair is a braided mane. He doesn't really describe a real person. He describes an ideal. But in my play, she is a real person. She was a real person. And that's who he sees in his dementia, and that's who he's fighting for; he is fighting to sort some measure of peace in his heart, to come to terms with an unspoken betrayal of that girl.

I took the story of Quixote and made it a Latinos' story because I wanted to tell an American story, I had to use American myths. The myths of knighthood and chivalry are very powerful in Spain and all over Europe, but they are almost meaningless in the US. But we do have Day of the Dead. We do have our fascinations with death as a real figure represented by those figures of the underworld, the Calacas, the Calaca Flaca of Day of the Dead. They are very active in my play. They are following Quixote everywhere. My Quixote, who is aware of them, who talks to Papa Calaca as if it's his own father, works out his fragmentary logic with Death.

The contact with the US-Mexico borderland transforms the figure of Cervantes himself. My earlier impulse was to actually put him in the play because I find Cervantes to be the most interesting character in the novel. He's constantly interrupting the narrative of don Quixote to tell the reader: "Look, I'm not sure I should even relay to you this part of the story, because it's too absurd. I don't even believe it myself." He's constantly suborning his own story, and I found that Cervantes was playing with his own novel in a meta way, utterly self-referential. I decided to do that with the figure of Papa Muerte, which is the character of Death, that follows Quixote and guides him and points him to his various adventures because in many ways that's what Quixote, both in the novel and in my play, is trying to seek out. He is trying to escape oblivion. To elude death. And only by performing feats of valor, doing the things you've always wanted to do, coming to terms with who you are, here and now, only in that way you can really escape death. But it always catches up with you as it catches up to Quixote at the end of my play.

O.P.: You title your play *Quixote Nuevo*, not *Don Quixote Nuevo*. Why?

O.S.: I just got tired of hearing American producers and audiences keep talking about "don Quixote" as if don is short for Donald and I just wanted to stop hearing it, because I know that my actors would always correctly pronounce it as don Quixote, "don" being a title rather than a name. Moreover, at the time I was writing *Quixote Nuevo*, we had a president, whose name was Donald, and I wanted my play to have nothing to do with him. (Unfortunately, he is going to come back again.) Then I thought: "No, it has to be Quixote Nuevo, because I am doing something completely different, than the original Cervantes's novel and what other people have

done." I decided to put my identity, my tag on it to declare that this is a different play, a new interpretation of an old story. There are things I do in that play that aren't in the book at all. The housekeeper and the niece never have names in the book. But I had read up on about Cervantes's life and realized that he lived with his sister Magdalena, who took care of him in his house. And he had an illegitimate daughter that Magdalena raised as her own, and her name was Antonia. So, I named them thus because I have always felt that Cervantes was actually inserting much of his own personal life into the story of don Quixote.

O.P.: How did you come up with the idea of Quixote of the US-Mexican border?

O.S.: The Border is a motif that is always present in me. It's constantly working on me. I feel in many ways that I am defined by the border. My parents are from Mexico. I am a first generation American. I grew up less than half a mile from the Rio Grande in El Paso. I had direct encounters with the Border Patrol and with undocumented aliens coming across. My father himself was an undocumented alien working in El Paso, and he was almost deported. My parents are both now full citizens, but I had very strong direct encounters with life on the border and what that meant, and I feel like all my stories are border stories that run through my bloodstream and I just can't get away from there. I tried to move as far away from the Texas-Mexican border as I could, but it didn't matter. Every time I go further away, it seems like I get closer to home. So I felt like don Quixote's story would be really good to tell in that context, because it's part of my identity. Initially, in the first attempt at adapting the novel, which was produced at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2009. They had wanted a straight version, set during don Quixote's time, in a European setting. They wanted a faithful adaptation of the novel and I delivered that. Only Book One and of course I chose specific episodes that would be interesting, and I think the play largely worked. But I wasn't happy. I felt like I could take pride in one major element and that was that Cervantes scholars, people who read the novel, would see that and say: "Yes, that's in the novel, and that too, and that too." It wasn't like *Man of La Mancha*, which had almost nothing to do with the book.

I wanted to do something different. I felt like I was missing something. Actually, what the play was missing was ME. I was AWOL as a writer, as an artist in the piece. When the California Shakespeare Theatre, a company in the San Francisco Bay Area, asked me to revise the play for their production, they told me in no uncertain terms that they were interested in producing my play, not Cervantes'. I was urged to take the book from his hands and make it mine, that is, make it a play for the Americas. So the first thing I did was re-establish the location to rural Texas, rugged country Texas, down by the elbow of the Rio Grande near Big Bend National Park. The towns are tiny, isolated burghs, far from noise of other large US and Mexican cities, where life is very rural, really tough and demanding, and where it would be very easy for someone to get lost within a two-mile radius. I've always felt that in the novel, don Quixote and Sancho never really wander very far. They get lost as they traverse the world meeting monsters and maidens. But I don't think they

wander beyond a five-mile range. Likewise, in my play, it wouldn't be difficult to get lost in the mountains of the Texan desert wilds. Once I set the play on the border, then everything exploded. I suddenly realized that I had access to all the things of my culture that could be useful storytelling tools, including the use of the Day of the Dead figures, the Calacas, the underworld skeletons, the figures of Death, as well as the Father who is represented as Death (Papa Calaca). I felt like it made the story more accessible to me. Once I went there, it wrote itself very quickly. I didn't have time to think about it. We had deadlines; I had to work very quickly. But that also enabled the writing to shed the skin of Cervantes more readily, and yet ironically I felt I was being truer to the spirit of Cervantes's novel. Even if it wasn't true to the letter, it was so true to the spirit, because the events that I depicted are actually in the novel in some respect. They're killing the sheep in a fantasy battle led by Ali Fanfaron. They head to the inn, which makes perfect sense, since we have these amazing cantinas in the middle of the desert that hardly seem to have changed in hundreds of years. They remind me so much of the posadas where I would go to dine and drink in La Mancha.

O.P.: Do the toponymical names mentioned in the play contribute to expressing the Chicano identity?

O.S.: All of these places mentioned in the play are fictional, except for El Cumpio del Diablo, which is a two-mount range in the city of Monterrey in Mexico. But it seems so flat for what I wanted to create in terms of the setting for the play. When I went to that part of the border down by Big Bend, the Rio Grande separates these two large canyons, with the United States on one side and Mexico on the other. And I imagine that my main characters in the play can talk to each other across this chasm, even in the dark. I used it for that reason. *Cenizas*. I thought it would be a very good name for a Mexican town that would echo our shared destiny. We are all ashes to ashes, so a town named after ash made sense to me. I started with just a pun with the name *La Mancha*. I started with a jockey pun. This is a characteristic feature of my works. I play with language, and I often pun with words. I am not above making silly rhymes and having fun with coarse and common language. At the same time, I also enjoy the lyrical heights of poetic language. I resolved to use *La Plancha* as the setting, because *La Plancha*, which is an iron, is very hot, just like that terrain. It is a harsh desert environment, a kind of forbidden land. People must either make a choice to live there or be stuck there against their will, often because that's where they were born or raised. I have been to La Mancha in Spain, and I found it to be both beautiful but also kind of forbidding. It is very rocky. It's still a very agrarian landscape, and that appealed to me as a Chicano from El Paso. Our Chicano culture in the United States is different from Puerto Rican and Cuban culture in the sense that their culture is more northeastern and urban. They talk about their food, they talk about city life, it's life as a pedestrian living in brownstones, but that's not what we're familiar with. We in the western United States are primarily engaged in suburban agriculture, having our base in an agronomic culture. Many of our ancestors and contemporaries still work the land. We have a lot

of migrant workers coming from Mexico to work in the US. For us the countryside resonates as home, and our writing and our pace and our rhythms reflect that, and we're attuned to the seasons, we know what grows where, we're attracted to the open land. That's the characteristic of my *Quixote Nuevo*; there's a town there, but it's holding on for dear life in this very tough unforgiving environment that recalls La Mancha and El Toboso, where Dulcinea purportedly came from. An interesting thing happened when I went to see the windmills in La Mancha. I saw American and British tourists there, who were asking us if don Quixote fought windmills here. Are these the windmills? Can you show us where he is buried? He is as real as a historical figure, this Quixote, and why not? He's real to me.

O.P.: You play with many Chicano historical names. For example, the trigger finger of Pancho Villa, Joaquin Murrieta, heroes of the Mexican Revolution. Could you speak about these elements encoded in the Chicano historical cultural memory, which reincarnate in *Quixote Nuevo*?

O.S.: The trigger finger of Pancho Villa is kept in a jar there on the bar. I actually saw it. I found it in a strange shop in El Paso and they still have it on a display and sell it for like \$350 and it's in this awful water and it's floating in there, big, ugly, nasty, severed finger. I'm sure someone buys it on occasion and then the store proprietor replaces it with another finger of Pancho Villa. In the play it is kept as a memento, as something of an attraction for the clientele. When Quixote shows up and demands to be knighted, which actually occurs in the novel, he is knighted with the finger of Pancho Villa. Henceforth, he is known as don Quixote, protector of all the people, Latinos and Chicanos, and not only them, but all those who cry for succor in this region. I evoke all of this; I evoke singers, like the late Mexican crooner Javier Solis and all these Mexican movie stars from the 40's and 50's as well as TV stars like Erik Estrada and famous bandits like Joaquín Murrieta and Pancho Villa. I evoke them and even Aztec Princess, because in some respect that's my version of what Cervantes is after in his book. His protagonist, Quijano, is always evoking heroes of the past: Gawain, and all the dragon slayers, and the heroes, who have fought in past wars and battles that are now etched in the annals of chivalry. He cites them all the time from memory. He knows that history probably better than he knows his own. I know we don't have knights in this country, but we have knightly behavior, courtiers, who are fabulous movie stars, with pencil-line mustaches and these beautiful voices, as they come riding on horseback, and heroes who fought for the people, whether they were bandits or revolutionaries. They're all there as a part of our world. They are part of our own cultural memory. My Quixote is more familiar with this than he is with his own past. He is trying to come to grips with his past, but as he deals with his dementia, his Alzheimer's, he conflates everything he read from those books, from studying Cervantes and his novel and it meshes with his own real life, with his past, and it all gets mixed up. The big jumble of cultural references that he juggles throughout his adventures is his lifeline to his memory.

O.P.: Another dimension of the borderland culture in your play is language. Is it Spanglish or something else?

O.S.: Some words and sentences in *Quixote Nuevo* are in Spanish, some in English. It is mostly in English, because most people of Mexican descent living in this country are English speakers now. But I really enjoy leaning into the Spanglish, which is where we code-switch so much that we start to take English words and change them to fit the grammar of Spanish. An example of it is *troca*. A *troca* is a truck. But the Spanish word for truck is *camioneta*. But nobody says *camioneta* in El Paso or anywhere along the border. They say *troca*, which is a truck with an A at the end. The same thing with junk. Garbage is *yonke*. We say *yonke*, which is just mispronounced “junk”. Another one is the popular Chicano phrase, which means “see you later”, is *Ay te wacho*, which means “There I see you; I see you there, I see you next time.” And “watch” is an English word, but becomes *wacho* and you say it with the right intonation and it becomes *te wacho*. “Be seeing you.” It has a certain wonderful musicality. Therefore, the code-switching that happens in my play is quite normal for the audience. It’s really familiar to viewers who live along the border or live in large Mexican communities in the United States. They recognize it. They know it. I turn it on its head a little bit, so that I can play with it.

Earlier, we referred to death as Papa Muerte. Papa Muerte is there with his bony angels. The Calacas say that they really know how to mix English and Spanish in order to say that they have come to tell you it’s time, “time to rise and remember who you were, what you left behind, who were the people you touched and who touched you before you go all ghostly with us.” They also say that “the world leaves you twisting like a *churro* in the wind, remember, in the end, you ain’t what you pretend or what you spend, but what you did and didn’t do, said and never said, loved and loved so badly.” Their idiom identifies them as unique characters that have permission to use that elevated lyricism with both sublime and profane words, and yet still central to the way we speak.

O.P.: Your play contains very much cultural information. What should we know to understand it?

O.S.: There are lots of songs. There are musical traditions, musical styles from boleros to ranchera music, Banda. Banda is a broad Texas-style music that involves a lot of horns played very, very loudly. Ranchera music is more folksy, almost like Mexican country music with a courtyard in the center of the accordion, which comes directly from the German and Polish immigrants that settled to Mexico. Tejano music is also very different. It has more of a pop beat. There’s also rap I use, a bit of hip-hop that is fused into the work as well. With all these musical styles being played as a kind of net around the story, a lot of fantastical things can happen. Music enables the story to move through space and time, which is another tool in my toolbox. With my composers David Molina and Ed Robledo, we were able to find the simple music of migrant workers sitting with their guitar around the fire after working in the fields. The music in the play is grounded in all these musical styles that are familiar to us along the border.

O.P.: We should speak about maybe the most famous element of Chicano culture – the Calacas.

O.S.: All the major characters, except for Quixote and Sancho, that have speaking lines are also playing Calacas. (Calacas is our colloquial way of saying Calaveras... or skeletons.) These actors were double and triple cast. We simply had to do that. It was our way of mounting this work without requiring a cast of 20. As a result, there are a lot of quick changes, sometimes executed within five seconds. The characters couldn't fully be in the costumes of Calacas. They had to change very quickly, and we did that using things like fans or funny hats. We took a different route in depicting Calacas. They seem more like fantastical characters than simply bare-boned skeletons. So, we had to find another metaphor for the portrayal of our Calacas. We chose strange and unique elements compatible with the desert environment and yet unique to the characters they are playing as well. Consequently, sometimes they show up wearing a large saguaro cactus. We can't do any face painting, because the actors have to be someone else in the next scene, so there's no time to wipe it off and come in to someone else. So mask work became essential. As did puppet work. They transform from Calacas to a variety of characters quite seamlessly, and when we need them, they return to Calacas mode. It was such a delight negotiating those changes, but sometimes it could be logistical nightmare because sometimes there is no time to change. I've seen of people putting a skeleton jaw tattoos on their hand, which placed over their mouths, will reveal the grim smile of a skeleton.

O.P.: What can you tell about the design of costumes?

O.S.: Chicano theater is created with the barest of resources which can hamper our efforts to bring in large elaborate sets and really fine costumes, really wonderful design elements. We create the Calaca with the help of a fan. The skull is drawn on it so that the actress can be a skeleton one minute and Dulcinea the next, but it was also part of her costume. There are a lot of mixed cheap elements used to create costumes. The method that we use in Chicano theater is called "*rasquacho*". It's a real word we created to indicate something that is made from whatever you can find. If you want a platform and you don't have it, you use crates. You build it with crates. Costumes can be made from curtains. We create costumes and illusions out of nothing, out of trash. And therein lies the special theatricality of our *metier*.

O.P.: Basing on the theatrical history of *Quixote Nuevo* and your other plays, can you provide me with your definition of "theater on the Border"?

O.S.: It is theatre that deletes borders and producers a unique synthesis of cultures existing on the border. And what is the border? I posit that the border is very surreal. I think of it as a very surreal place, a place of dreams, a place of nightmares. People in Mexico are dreaming to come to the USA. The USA is the land of the ultimate dream, but, as it happens, both sides of the border are dealing with nightmares. A nightmare of violence, the disappeared women of Juárez, who are dying day after day, and no one doing anything about it. Another nightmare: the cartels at war with each other here and there; then there is the nightmare of trying to become a citizen of this country. The Borderland is a very surreal world, I see it as a very liminal space, where the border is both the border between life and

death, between citizenship and belonging, community and disenfranchisement, a border between identities, between knowing who you are and having that identity stripped away from you. It's a border between remembrance and active forgetting. The self-induced amnesia of our state of being, because we are forgetting that we were here first, that we are the first citizens of this nation. Suddenly we are made to forget that through this mass cultural amnesia. At last, it's a border between reality and fantasy, facets that are crucially active in Cervantes's novel, in *Don Quixote*. But theatrically, it means that it has to be a much more robust landscape, a much stronger kind of performance. It's very physical and it isn't quite so formal. Theatre on the border plays with all these elements by mixing them, because that's our culture. We will take an American car and make a mural out of it and it will also work it so it jumps with hydraulics; we will build Day of the Dead altars in the trunk of our cars for the special holiday. It demonstrates how we take American culture and apply our aesthetic to it, altering it, so that something new and different emerges. This is what I meant about why this nuevo Quixote is different from the European Quixote. Day of the Dead is an indigenous holiday that deals with the seasons, that deals with the passage of life from the cycles of life, from birth to death to rebirth, and we are given the Virgin of Guadalupe, our own mother Mary, a new permutation of the corn goddess, who sees that our crops bear bountiful fruit each year. All these elements in my Quixote are made more robust through the infusion of blood of from both indigenous peoples and the colonizers. We recognize that we are partly Spanish, we are partly Cervantes, and the story of don Quixote is uniquely Spanish. Only now it's got another side, one that is informed by its own culture. Don Quixote is an eternal story about the people who try to transcend borders – geographical, political, cultural, linguistic – and when they succeed, we discover that we are no different than anyone else.

VARIA

Kastor Ornowski

“Something queer in the cellar”: Reading H. P. Lovecraft’s Pickman Through a Queer Gothic Lens

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Abstract: The article’s aim is to examine two of Howard Philips Lovecraft’s texts—the short story “Pickman’s Model” and the novella *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*—through the lens of queer Gothic. My focus will be the recurring character of Richard Upton Pickman, alongside the trope of ghouls associated with him in both narratives. Using the combined methodologies of Gothic and queer studies, I propose to view the character and the monsters as queer figures. Pickman in both texts is portrayed as a liminal, “eccentric and abnormal” character whose transgressive desires and artworks cause scandal and evoke reactions of profound abhorrence, anxiety, and horror. As will be argued, Gothic tropes of secrecy and abject monstrosity linked with ghouls can be read as an expression of anxieties regarding masculinity and sexuality, revealing a subnarrative of homophobia. The latter subject has been discussed by Lovecraft scholars; however, I contend that, while such a subnarrative is present in the selected short story, the novella explores the issue and queer characters with more nuance and sympathy.

Keywords: H. P. Lovecraft, queer, Gothic, space, liminality, body

Introduction

Describing the development of a horror tale in his 1927 essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” Howard Philips Lovecraft declared the Gothic novel to be dead, as well as “naive and artificial” in comparison to “[t]he best horror tales of today” (51). Yet the Gothic, broadly conceived as the literary mode concerned with fear, certainly includes much of Lovecraft’s literary output. Lovecraft is synonymous with fear of the unknown, his imaginative pantheon of monstrous deities, and an ornate style, filled with words like “ghoulish,” “eldritch,” or “queer.” Significantly for my inquiry, Brian Johnson, in his article “Paranoia, Panic, and the Queer Weird” (2018), states that the word “queer” had been undergoing a shift in meaning during Lovecraft’s time, so that, while the writer preferred its nonsexual meaning of “weird,” some ambiguity exists as to what is “queer” in his stories (255). Lovecraft’s work had been interrogated for nonheteronormative subtext by many researchers. Johnson explores

this topic from several angles, including Lovecraft's possible queerness, his (perhaps internalized) homophobia, and his writings, with their "sexually indifferent male protagonists, doomed bachelor friendships, and the notable sidelining of female characters" (256). Johnson analyzes the queer elements of "The Hound" and refers to similar analyses of "The Outsider" by Robert M. Price ("Homosexual Panic in 'The Outsider,'" 1982), of "The Thing on the Doorstep" by Joel Pace ("Queer Tales?," 2008), and of several stories, chiefly *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, by Bobby Derie (*Sex and the Cthulhu Mythos*, 2014). While "The Hound," "The Outsider," and "The Thing on the Doorstep" seem to attract most of queer readings, many potentially queer aspects of Lovecraft's fiction had been underexplored. In this article, I focus on the queer aspects of Richard Upton Pickman, the ambiguously human painter who plays a major role in Lovecraft's short story "Pickman's Model" and a smaller but significant one in his novella *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*.

While the academic discussion of the queer subtext of "Pickman's Model" and Pickman himself appears to be lacking, several adaptations and retellings seem to attest to the presence of such a subtext by engaging with it. Rod Serling's horror anthology series *Night Gallery* retells the story as a romance in episode eleven of the second season, although with a female character in the place of the original's male narrator, Thurber. Part seven of Alan Moore and Jacen Burrows' metafiction comic book series, *Providence*, contains an ambiguous scene where a stand-in for Pickman holds a male ghoul's hand. Caitlín R. Kiernan portrays Pickman as bisexual in her sequel story "Pickman's Other Model." The fanfiction website Archive of Our Own, as of the time of me writing this article, hosts 41 stories featuring Pickman in a romantic or sexual relationship with Randolph Carter, the protagonist of *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*. Such interpretations of the character reveal the queer potential of the text.

The intention of the following analysis is to foreground this potential and explore the character of Pickman and the trope of ghouls associated with him as they appear in "Pickman's Model" and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*. My angle will be the combined perspectives of Gothic genre studies and queer theory. My hypothesis is that "Pickman's Model" and the ghoul-related subplot of *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* use tropes which belong to the Gothic and queer alike, which, with or without the conscious intent on author's part, creates a queer narrative. My inquiry will thus revolve around the queer aspects of Pickman and the ghouls as revealed through the recurrent Gothic motifs of secrecy, underground spaces, liminality/ambiguity, and abject bodies.

Methodology: Queer Theory and Gothic Studies

As indicated before, the methodology employed to explore this issue entails selected concepts deriving from queer studies and Gothic genre studies. I use "queer" as a vague, catch-all term which includes all behaviors and identities which are outside of normatively defined heterosexual manhood and womanhood. I understand "Gothic,"

as I mentioned in the first paragraph of the article, as a literary mode concerned with fear. It includes Gothic and horror as genres of literature and other narrative media, as well as a specific framework for approaching texts that may not belong to these genres but nevertheless explore feelings of fear and terror¹. This definition of Gothic enables me to incorporate *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*. Despite being a fantasy adventure novella, it contains horror elements, notably those related to the ghoul subplot interrogated in the subsequent analysis. The term “Gothic” is, perhaps fittingly, as vague and broad as “queer.” These two concepts have a lot in common, since both are synonymous with the exploration of what lies outside of normative societal boundaries and how it engages with it (Haeefe-Thomas 2-4).

I base my understanding of queer Gothic in general on the following books: Ardel Haeefe-Thomas' *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic* (2012), Paulina Palmer's *The Queer Uncanny* (2012) and *Queering Contemporary Gothic Narrative* (2019), as well as Laura Westengard's *Gothic Queer Culture* (2019). These texts offer comprehensive and detailed discussions of the interplay of queer and Gothic. The criticism foregrounds themes of the Other, liminality, ambiguity, space, secrecy, and bodies, all of which will be explored in this article. However, to foreground the complexity of these topics, I chose to add to my bibliography varied critical and theoretical works with a more particular focus.

Among the supplementary references, I have included Robb Graham's *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century* (2003), which proves useful for determining the forms of Othering that can be read as queer. Despite Robb's focus on an era preceding the analyzed texts, the introduction to his book contains some theory that is either applicable cross-historically or explicitly concerns the early 20th century. The concepts of gender-liminality and species-liminality of Lovecraft's ghouls are based on theories about monstrosity, boundary-breaking, and queerness found in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's “Monster Culture” (1996) and Patricia MacCormack's “The Queer Ethics of Monstrosity” (2012). Both essays define monsters as liminal, binary-disrupting beings. Lovecraftian ghouls are described as hybrid and liminal, in accordance with Cohen's and MacCormack's definition of monstrosity, encouraging their queer reading. In my discussion of queer Gothic spaces, I combine Aaron Betsky's book *Queer Space* (1997) with Veronika Majlingová's Master's thesis *The Use of Space in Gothic Fiction* (2011). Betsky's book concerns the history of spaces created and used by and for queer people and their needs (which I refer to henceforth as “queer space”). Meanwhile Majlingová's thesis connects Gothic space to the concepts of the Other and the Freudian *unheimlich*. Reading them together allows me to understand the connection between queer space and Gothic space. I posit that haunted Gothic spaces can, in many cases, be

1 Hereby I refer to Palmer's description of the Gothic as a “highly mobile and fluid literary form” (*Queering* 11) concerned with the uncanny and repressed fears, as well as Westengard's equivocation of both Gothic and gothicism with “tales of... horror and terror” (6). Westengard makes a distinction between Gothic, the literary and historical period, and gothicism, the “literary device or aesthetic sensibility that... is not strictly tied to any historical or geographic location” (6), however, I apply the word Gothic to both.

read as queer when analysed from the point of view of characters Othered within the Gothic narrative.

For the theme of secrets both queer and Gothic, I use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). These two books examine many works of literature, including Gothic ones, through the queer lens. *Between Men* focuses on desire that underlies male-male seemingly non-erotic relationships, such as the analyzing the "hero worship" relationship between Pickman and Thurber, the narrator of "Pickman's Model." *Epistemology of the Closet* explores secrecy, spaces, and desire for knowledge, which are all themes present in the short story. Both books are concerned with "homosexual paranoia," which, as evidenced in my analysis, is informing "Pickman's Model."

Lastly, I explore the subject of the abject body and body-related anxieties, using theories deriving from Susan Sontag's "The Pornographic Imagination" (1967), Julia Kristeva's *The Powers of Horror* (1980), Paul Ableman's *The Banished Body* (1984) and Kelly Hurley's *The Gothic Body* (2004). Kristeva's essay defines abjection, the feeling of horror and revulsion connected to the body, which plays a major role in "Pickman's Model." Ableman's book is about nudity and its social reception. As will be demonstrated, nudity plays a significant role in *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*. Sontag and Ableman explore the difference between acceptable art and pornography, which can be used to conceptualize Pickman's art as pornographic. Finally, Hurley's book provides insights into the ways in which specific bodies evoke discomfort, connecting the repulsive body with Kristeva's theory of abjection and Cohen and MacCormack's definition of monstrosity.

"That Man—if He Was a Man!": Otherness, Liminality, and Ambiguity

The plot of "Pickman's Model" centers around Richard Upton Pickman, a controversial artist who paints realistic depictions of ghouls. The macabre nature of the paintings and the strange, inhuman features of the artist cause him to be ostracized by all except Thurber, the narrator of the story. Thurber becomes fascinated with Pickman's art and forms a close connection with him, which leads to an invitation to Pickman's hidden studio. There Thurber is faced with a photograph of a ghoul and receives a shocking realization that these creatures are real. Afterwards Pickman vanishes in mysterious circumstances. He returns in Lovecraft's later work, a novella *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, where he, now transformed into a ghoul, assists the protagonist, Randolph Carter.

Pickman, especially in the short story, is portrayed as the Other. To read him as queer, it must be understood what kinds of Othering have been historically applied to queer people and to explore whether Pickman's treatment in the story is similar. It is known that homosexual acts and crossdressing are considered sins or taboos in many religions, however secular forms of Othering are by no means nonexistent. As attested by Patricia Elliot's *Debates in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theory*, queer bodies and identities have been long been subject to medical discourse, which took

the forms of both neutral attempts at explanation and of outright pathologization (113-114). When Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explores *Billy Bud* in her *Epistemology of the Closet*, she notices the presence of both religion and medicine as methodologies used to construct and describe a homosexual character (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 95). Listing several different explanations for homosexuality which had been proposed between the late 18th and the early 20th centuries, Graham Robb's book *Strangers* confirms that both fields mentioned by Sedgwick have long attempted to investigate the phenomenon. The list includes physical and health conditions, as well as social and religious influences (5-6). Queerness is also a liminal state between the genders: transgender identities are obvious examples, but Robb's list mentions hermaphroditism as one explanation for homosexuality (5). Sedgwick also states that homosexuality had been considered a form of gender-liminality (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 1-2). The last important factor of queer Otherness is that it is a personal identity. Robb states that people in all historical eras "had no difficulty in identifying themselves as homosexual (or whatever word was used)" (12). If *Pickman*'s Otherness is treated as a sin, a medical abnormality, a liminal state, and a personal identity, a strong case for his queer reading can be made.

As "Pickman's Model" is a story of the supernatural, the tropes of hell and demons permeate the discourses and thoughts of the characters confronted with *Pickman* and his creations. Thurber claims that *Pickman*'s art is "blasphemous" and that "no mortal unsold to the Fiend" (512) could paint like this. He describes him as a "nauseous wizard" that "had waked the fires of hell in pigment" (509). It is mentioned that *Pickman*'s "four-times-great-grandmother" (507) had been executed for witchcraft. When talking about the historical figure Cotton Mather, who is presented as the judge in her case, *Pickman* states "I wish someone had laid a spell on him or sucked his blood in the night!" (507), invoking the Gothic imagery of witchcraft and vampirism. Palmer and Westengard attest to the queerness of vampires in *Queering Contemporary Gothic Narrative* (67-85) and *Gothic Queer Culture* (130-139) respectively, while Haefele-Thomas explores the non-heteronormativity of the witch (50-61). It is notable that ghouls have hooves, associating them with the stereotypical image of the Devil.

The medical viewpoint is also represented in the story, and it is no less moralizing than the religious one. Reid, one of the members of the art club, conceptualizes *Pickman*'s Otherness as a medical abnormality:

Reid, you know, had just taken up comparative pathology, and was full of pompous 'inside stuff' about the biological or evolutionary significance of this or that mental or physical symptom. He said *Pickman* repelled him more and more every day, and almost frightened him toward the last—that the fellow's features and expression were slowly developing in a way he didn't like; in a way that wasn't human. He had a lot of talk about diet, and said *Pickman* must be abnormal and eccentric to the last degree. (Lovecraft, "Model" 506-507)

Reid's theories about Pickman's development correlate with explanations of homosexuality mentioned by Robb, namely "excessive meat-eating" and "regression to a prehuman era" (Robb 5). Reid's medical anxiety concerns Pickman's degeneration, a concept that Haeferle-Thomas links to nineteenth-century anxieties about miscegenation and homosexuality (74-75). Degeneration, is, to quote Kelly Hurley's *The Gothic Body*, "evolution reversed and compressed" (Hurley 66), which crosses the line between human and animal. The story implies and the novella shows Pickman's transformation into a ghoul, a creature that Lovecraft conceptualizes as a human-animal hybrid. Ghouls are "seldom completely human" and "vaguely canine" (509).

Such a crossing between human and animal can be understood as symbolic of gender liminality or ambiguity, since the oppression of women by men has been conceptualized as parallel to the domination of nature by civilization by theorists such as Rene Hirsch, the author of *The Masculine Civilization* (2013), and Reay Tannahill, the author of *Sex in History* (1980). They propose that patriarchy is based on men's control over both women and nature, and that it was invented along with the domestication of animals, when men learned that female mammals (including humans) do not give birth unless they are impregnated (Hirsch 73-76, Tannahill 38-43). This dynamic of combined oppression of women and nature is represented by one of Pickman's paintings, in which a group of ghouls bays in a circle around a hanged witch "whose dead face held a close kinship to theirs" (Lovecraft, "Model" 510). Any entity that "threatens to smash distinctions" (Cohen 6) between the masculine world of humanity and the feminine world of nature threatens human-centric patriarchy and is treated by this system as a monster.

Although human-animal hybrids carry a queer symbolism, Lovecraftian ghouls can be understood as existing outside human gender norms within their fictional world itself. *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* mentions two important traits of ghouls: that they do not grow facial hair (Lovecraft, *Dream-Quest* 339) and that they have high-pitched voices (most of their vocalizations are described as "meeping"). That means that Pickman, in the novella and perhaps earlier, is a male character with a hairless face and a high-pitched voice, traits which a gender binary built for human bodies would classify as feminine. Pickman is even referred to as "it" the first time Carter sees him post-transformation (338), a pronoun choice which both highlights his inhumanity and questions his gender. It is fitting that ghouls are confusing to humans, because the animal symbolically associated with ghouls, sharing their canine appearance, scavenging diet, and "epileptic and reverberant laughter" (Lovecraft, "Model" 511), is the spotted hyena (Al-Rawi 56-57). These animals are known for their large clitorises, often mistaken for penises by humans. Ross Brooks, in his article "Bounds of Diversity," states that, because of this trait, the hyena is often used as a symbol of androgyny and general liminality. Citing Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica*, the critic notes that, for "someone unstable and not remaining in the same state," the Egyptian hieroglyph was a hyena, "[f]or the hyena is sometimes male and sometimes female" (Brooks 3). Therefore, reminiscent of the physique of the hyena, a ghoul is equally a species-liminal and gender-liminal

creature. *Pickman* compounds this uncertainty, as his natal species, for a lack of a better term, remains unstated. It is suggested that he could have been a human wizard, a ghoul changeling, or a hybrid descendant of one. Thurber wonders whether “he was born in strange shadow, or he’d found a way to unlock the forbidden gate” (Lovecraft, “Model” 513), but ultimately dismisses this fact as unimportant.

According to MacCormack, the presence of liminal monsters introduces a sense of panic born from a sudden lack of clear boundaries between identities like man/woman or human/animal (259). Lovecraft himself insisted that the best horror literature is based on “a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos” (Lovecraft, “Supernatural” 24). The panic and chaos related to species definition is most visibly present in Thurber’s horror at the implication that “[t]he dog things were developed from mortals!” (Lovecraft, “Model” 510), but the theme of a questionable masculinity also appears. *Pickman* challenges the masculinity of the club members who shun him by calling them “fussy old maids.” Meanwhile, during his account of his meeting with *Pickman*, Thurber feels compelled to defend his masculinity: “I’m no mollicoddle” (510), he says, “I’m what the man in the street would call fairly ‘hardboiled’” (509).

While *Pickman*’s precise ontological nature might be in question, his Otherness is both clear to the society he lives in and to himself. He expresses his non-normative identity through art, notably by painting himself as a changeling.

[M]y eye caught a picture.... It was that of an ancient Puritan interior—a heavily beamed room with lattice windows, a settle, and clumsy seventeenth-century furniture, with the family sitting about while the father read from the Scriptures. Every face but one showed nobility and reverence, but that one reflected the mockery of the pit. It was that of a young man in years, and no doubt belonged to a supposed son of that pious father, but in essence it was the kin of the unclean things. It was their changeling—and in a spirit of supreme irony *Pickman* had given the features a very perceptible resemblance to his own. (Lovecraft, “Model” 510)

In *Lovecraft. Disturbing the Universe* (1990), Donald R. Burleson explores the double meaning of the word “changeling” in the context of “*Pickman*’s Model”:

With regard to the word changeling, it is interesting to note that in a number of terms employing the suffix -ling, the suffix functions as a diminutive, as in duckling. Such a diminutive flavor to the suffix in changeling would suggest ‘little changed one,’ which one may readily read as ‘little-changed one.’ The suggestion again is one that blurs distinctions. (92-93)

Aside from this boundary-breaking symbolism, “the weird people” who “leave their spawn in cradles” (Lovecraft, “Model” 510) are usually identified in folklore as fairies, as attested by Katharine Briggs in *An Encyclopedia of Fairies* (71).

Significantly, in the 1920s, “fairy” was a term used to describe a feminine gay man, as attested by George Chauncey’s *Gay New York* (101-111). Aside from the figure of a fairy changeling, Pickman also reappropriates the label of a wizard or someone “sold to the Fiend” (Lovecraft, “Model” 510) by identifying with his ancestress who had been executed for witchcraft. He implicitly draws a comparison between the past authorities who condemned her and the present authorities who condemn him. Pickman not only identifies as the Other, but specifically as two different queer, feminine, nonconforming figures.

In the short story “Pickman’s Model,” Richard Upton Pickman is an Othered, monstrous, liminal character. The community of Boston artists treats his Otherness as a medical pathology and as a supernatural threat, which invites comparisons to the treatment of queer people by the heteronormative society, especially when compared with Robb’s list of historical explanations of homosexuality. Pickman and his fellow ghouls are associated with language and imagery that is also queer-coded: witchcraft, vampirism, fairies, hyenas. Even the monstrosity of the ghouls as human-animal hybrids is queer, for it has gender ambiguity implied within it, which, according to monster theory of Cohen and MacCormack, provokes the fear of dissolution of legible categories. This monstrous Otherness is part of Pickman’s conscious identity. Cohen sees the benefits of “reading cultures from the monsters they engender” (3), and such a connection of queer tropes with monstrosity clearly reflects the homophobia of Lovecraft’s culture. As demonstrated above, “ghoulishness” in “Pickman’s Model” bears many common traits with the cultural constructions and perceptions of queerness, validating a queer reading of its subtexts.

“If You’re Game, I’ll Take You There Tonight”: Secrets and Space

Pickman is aware of both his Otherness and the negative reaction it inspires, so he uses secret spaces as an escape from mainstream society, paralleling the actual ostracism and stigmatization experienced by people who had to deal with “the trauma of being queer in a system built to invalidate and destroy anyone who strays from the norm” (Westengard 3). Aaron Betsky’s book *Queer Space* proposes his definition of queer space, a place which satisfies the needs of the queer community, as something out of a fantastical story: “It is the scene of myth, of stories of which you do not know whether they are true or not, where the everyday and the miraculous mix. It takes place in a mixture of the man-made and the natural, the real and the imagined” (25). What I wish to add to this observation is that the major difference between a Gothic space haunted by monsters and a safe queer haven is a matter of perspective. In her thesis *The Use of Space in Gothic Fiction*, Veronika Majlingová invokes the Freudian concepts of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* to characterize the Gothic space of the Other as a hidden side of the accepted reality. Palmer notes that in a Gothic story “environment can indicate the stage [the hero] has reached in the Gothic process of uncanny ‘enthrallment,’ as he moves from feeling separate from the landscape to experiencing an ‘interpenetration of subjective and objective reality’”

(*Uncanny* 105-106). Reading monsters as queer entails reading the Gothic space from the point of view of beings fully integrated into it, as well as exploring the meaning of monstrous space for the seemingly gender conforming Gothic heroes. Since, according to Majlingová, the Other is *unheimlich*, it is an unknown part of the accepted self, not wholly alien. The ghoul-haunted underworld, in "Pickman's Model" and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, is both a practical space of freedom for the outsiders rejected by mainstream society and a metaphorical reflection of this society's uncertain relationships with the potential Otherness of itself.

Maurice Lévy's *Lovecraft: A study in the fantastic* portrays the setting of "Pickman's Model" as "respectable Boston, with its picturesque streets and its old homes" on top of "sinuous conduits... perpetually filled with a swarming and infamous life" (65). As a seemingly respectable man with a secret "infamous life," Pickman is the character who perfectly embodies the Lovecraftian vision of Boston. Like Stoker's *Dracula*, whose vampirism is highlighted by his comfort in the wilderness (Palmer 151-152), Pickman's ghoulishness is connected to his affinity for the tunnels below Boston's North End. His conversation with Thurber about these tunnels shows the perspective difference that makes a space either Gothic or queer. While the rest of the short story portrays the underworld below Boston as monstrous, Pickman instead describes the mainstream Boston society as repressive and the underworld as a place of freedom. He contrasts the "pale-pink brains" (Lovecraft, "Model" 508) who react with disgust to subjects they consider immoral with the past world of witches and other outcasts who "knew how to live, and how to enlarge the bounds of life" (508). He tells Thurber that the tunnel system below Boston served as a safe space for the oppressed Others during witch-hunts: "Let them prosecute and persecute above ground—things went on every day that they couldn't reach, and voices laughed at night that they couldn't place!" (508). While the space is freeing, it exists because of a history of oppression, which supports Westengard's argument that "if something is both queer and gothic, look under the surface to disinter the insidious trauma buried there" (2).

Pickman speaks of these spaces mostly in the context of the past, but his own studio can likewise be described as a queer space. It resembles "a miniaturized... museum" (Betsky 65) of his art. Even the paintings themselves are of queer spaces. They portray "seldom completely human" creatures in settings such as "old churchyards, deep woods, cliffs by the sea, brick tunnels, ancient paneled rooms, or simple vaults of masonry" (Lovecraft, "Model" 509), which parallels Betsky's description of queer space: "Ruins and trees create a framework that shows us our own society in a mirror that reveals both its temporality and its order... all wrapped around nymphs, satyrs, and other hybrid creatures" (Betsky 25). It is a place where a social outcast like Pickman can "reside in his dreams and within his own private fantasy realm while still functioning within society" (87). However, as Betsky points out, a queer space provides not only a relief from the pressures of the mainstream, but also a connection with the hidden society of fellow Others. One of Betsky's examples of a queer space—"a place of gaudy pleasures contained

within an anonymous façade" (156)—is a label that can be assigned to Pickman's studio. Pickman and Thurber arrive there on foot, after a long journey through unnamed streets. The first two elements of the building Thurber notices are "an antediluvian ten-paneled door that looked damnably worm-eaten" and, beyond it, "a barren hallway" (Lovecraft, "Model" 509). Concerning the pleasures, it is there that Pickman meets his models, those who are Other like him, and photographically admires their bodies.

Such a reading of Pickman's studio transforms Pickman's invitation of Thurber into a gesture of flirtation. This is strengthened by both mythological and historical precedent. Dwight F. Reynolds states, in the "Folklore" chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arab Culture* (206), that ghouls are often imagined as taking the forms of beautiful women to seduce men into their lairs. Additionally, discussion of art used to be a form of subtle flirtation between men (Robb 143-146). Therefore, a male ghoul inviting a human man to come to his secret space to "enjoy the pictures" (Lovecraft, "Model" 508) has a definite homoerotic undertone.

Thurber accepts the invitation to enter this queer Gothic space because he is fascinated with both Pickman's art and with the artist as a person. It is not merely a one-sided fascination, but a relationship that involves some level of emotional intimacy. "My hero-worship... made him get very confidential with me" (507), says Thurber about Pickman. The relationship between the two is interesting when analyzed through the lens of Sedgwick's work. In *Between Men*, she explores the ubiquity of male-male relationships in patriarchy. According to her, homophobia, while targeting a visible minority of homosexual men, serves to regulate all male-male relationships, which are fraught with vulnerability when "no man" can "ascertain that he is not (that his bonds are not) homosexual" (Sedgwick, *Between* 88-89). As Thurber narrates his story, he tries to determine whether his bond with Pickman, given his status of the Other, was proper. He understands that some level of connection with the Other makes one Other too, in a way that is true for both fictional ghouls and real gay men. Thurber struggles between the desire to assert his normative self and the persistence of his positive feelings towards Pickman. "The man was great," he states, "I say it even now, knowing as much as I do" (512), implying that these feelings are at odds with his socially expected identity.

Thurber's conflicted view of Pickman and himself parallels what Sedgwick calls "homosexual paranoia." In her book *Epistemology of the Closet*, she describes it as putting men in an impossible situation where, at the same time, they must avoid being homosexual while also avoiding the knowledge of homosexuality, as "it takes one to know one." The desire to unmask gay men to police their sexuality is fraught by this "fatal symmetry of paranoid knowledge" (Sedgwick, *Between* 100). Thurber follows Pickman into his Gothic space for the same reason Pickman invites him into it: to learn whether the other man is one of the "weird people" (Lovecraft, "Model" 510). These "two mirror-image men, drawn together in a bond that renders desire indistinguishable from predation" (Sedgwick, *Between* 100) walk through a queer Gothic space decorated with images which look back at the viewer, representing

their mutual gaze. Thurber is disturbed at the fact that the observed object returns the gaze, that the painted ghouls “leered and slavered out of the canvas with the very breath of life” (Lovecraft, “Model” 510), or, in other words, by the suggestion that “to know and to be known” is “the same process” (Sedgwick, *Between* 100). This “fatal symmetry” has a counterpart in Gothic studies: doubling. Palmer describes the concept of a double, a doppelgänger that reflects a hidden or rejected part of the self as fundamental to Gothic fiction (*Queering*, 85). Robert H. Waugh’s “Landscapes, Selves, and Others in Lovecraft” explores doubling in “Pickman’s Model” and concludes that, if we can assume that Pickman is Thurber’s double and Pickman is a ghoul, “we must recognize [Thurber] as a ghoul also” (232).

It is notable that Palmer, quoting William Patrick Day, describes the final stage of integration with the Gothic space as the “interpenetration of subjective and objective reality” (*Uncanny* 106). This process is seen through Pickman’s queer seduction of Thurber, shown as a journey through a selection of spaces that increasingly blur the lines between the subjective and the objective. At first, Thurber encounters paintings of ghouls and witches, which, though realistic, portray a world of the past. Then Pickman shows him his modern studies, which strip away that comforting temporal distance, bringing “the horror right into our own daily life” (Lovecraft, “Model” 510). Thurber can still believe that this horror is fictional until he sees a photograph of a ghoul, which is a starkly objective depiction of the monstrous Other. His reaction to the mimetic verity of the representation is significant:

Pinned with a thumb-tack to a vacant part of the canvas was a piece of paper badly curled up—probably, I thought, a photograph from which Pickman meant to paint a background as hideous as the nightmare it was to enhance.... Why I drop him?.... No, it wasn’t the paintings I saw in that place; though I’ll swear they were enough to get him ostracized in nine-tenths of the homes and clubs Boston, and I guess you won’t wonder now why I have to steer clear of subways and cellars. It was something I found in my coat the next morning. You know, curled-up paper tacked to the frightful canvas in the cellar; the thing I thought a photograph of some scene he meant to use as a background for that monster. That last scare had come while I was reaching to uncurl it, and it seems I had vacantly crumpled it into my pocket.... You know how damned lifelike Pickman’s paintings were—how we all wondered where he got those faces.... Well—that paper wasn’t a photograph of any background, after all. What it showed was simply monstrous being he was painting on that awful canvas. It was the model he using—and its background was merely the wall of the cellar studio in minute detail. But by God, Eliot, it was a photograph from life. (Lovecraft, “Model” 512-514)

Its existence had been foreshadowed throughout the story by the repeated observations that Pickman’s art is unusually realistic despite its fantastical subject matter. As noted by André Bazin in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”—here quoted after

by Aaron Smuts, who offers more detailed insights into the relationship between affects of horror and photography in his article "Pickman's Model": Horror and the Objective Purport of Photographs,"

The production by automatic means has radically affected our psychology of the image. The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction. (13-14)

Smuts quotes also Gregory Currie's apt observation from the essay "Visible Traces" that "photographs seem to have an affective capacity that handmade pictures lack.... By virtue of being traces of things, they offer us special... emotional access to their subjects" (Currie 145). Clearly drawing on the putative "objective purport" of photography (Smuts 495) conceptualizes the photograph as a tool that crosses the line between the worlds in a way that an inherently subjective medium of a painting cannot.

Thurber carries the photograph back to the respectable part of Boston but stops his integration with the Gothic space of the Other at the very last moment. He burns the image and rejects its subject as unspeakable and unthinkable. "Don't ask me to explain or even conjecture about what I burned" (Lovecraft, "Model" 514), he says to Eliot, his narratively silent conversation partner. Thurber's decision can be understood as the rejection of the Other to preserve his identity in a Gothic city "that threatens the individual with fragmentation of identity and moral disintegration" (Palmer, *Queering* 151). By burning the photograph Thurber declares that the ghoulish, queer Other is alien and abhorrent to him. It is notable that Thurber's attempt to distance himself from the Other, apart from the aforementioned epistemological element, is also spatial in nature, as he develops an aversion to going underground. He rejects both the knowledge of the abject Other and the space it occupies, linking them together.

The protagonist of *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, Randolph Carter, is at a more advanced stage of the integration process described by Palmer. During his quest through Dreamlands, Carter finds himself in its underworld. Naturally, a space that is both underground and inside a dream is doubly symbolic of the subconscious or the *unheimlich*. For Carter, this ghoul-haunted space is still frightening, but as an explorer of the Dreamlands, he is more accustomed to "interpenetration of subjective and objective reality." Dreamlands are both accessible by the dreaming and by travel through physical places, like forests and graveyards. Creatures which inhabit Dreamlands appear in subjective visions, and yet, as shown in "Pickman's Model," they are objectively real enough to be photographed. Carter, additionally, has "a very singular link" with ghouls because "his vanished friend Richard Pickman had once introduced him to a ghoul" (Lovecraft, *Dream-Quest* 336). He is more

integrated with the Gothic environment, which is most vividly shown when he must disguise himself as a ghoul, embodying the Other. He does that with no significant discomfort, signaling that he is more at ease with the Other part of himself which Thurber would rather deny.² Carter even joins the ghoul community to an extent. He helps them defeat their enemies, and in return they assist him until the very end of the novella, when mysterious divine forces snatch them away to an unknown fate. Soon after, the god Nyarlathotep explains to Carter that the dream-city which he had been seeking throughout his quest was his childhood memory of Boston. Until higher powers intervene to guide Carter to his “proper” place, he is content to associate himself with monstrous Others.

Waugh describes a space of “the shadow” as a recurring theme in Lovecraft’s work. According to Waugh, these dark spaces represent “the other side of ideal” (223), “the world as it is, behind appearances and possibilities” (224). Certainly, the ghoul-haunted underworld is one of such landscapes. While the short story portrays this world as dark and dangerous, it also provides ample evidence for a more sympathetic reading, foregrounding a community hiding from oppression, which ties in interestingly with Westengard’s conception of a Gothic as a proper literary mode to express queer trauma. The short story and novella provide a different description of the space depending on who is interacting with it, ranging from an “annex of hell” (Lovecraft, “Model” 510) to the curious but reluctant Thurber, to a space of liberation for Pickman. From both the perspective of Gothic studies and queer studies, these attitudes reflect more about the characters than the space, referring to their stage of integration with the environment and/or the intensity of their “homosexual panic.” “Pickman’s Model” and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, read together, are an example of how the negatively charged Gothic space and the positive space of queer safety and social connection can be understood as the same location observed from the different perspectives.

“Others Eyed His Leanness Speculatively”: The Abject Body and Carnal Desire

A central aspect to the Othering of queer people is the taboo attached to the nature of and the partners in their sexual interactions. That would seem to undercut the reading of ghouls as queer, since, at first glance, “Pickman’s Model” and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* are relatively unconcerned with sex. However, “Pickman’s Model,” like many other Gothic stories, deals with the question of which bodies are unacceptable, or, in other words, abject. Kelly Hurley’s book *The Gothic Body* treats the terms “Gothic body” and “abject body” as synonymous (4-5, 44-45). Taking my cue from Hurley and other queer critics, I rely on Julia Kristeva’s essay *The Powers of Horror* for my conceptualization of abjection. Kristeva theorizes it as a bodily revulsion felt when “the threatening world of animals or animalism... sex

2 Interestingly, Pickman’s home in the Dreamlands is a queer museum-like space, just like his studio in Boston. Carter meets him in a liminal place, “closer to the waking world,” “strown with singular relics of earth—old gravestones, broken urns, and grotesque fragments of monuments” (338).

and murder” (13) attempts to violate the distinction between the subject and the object. The natural response to this violation, according to Kristeva, is nausea, a rejection that attempts to reinstate the borders of one’s physical identity (3). Hurley describes Gothic as “a thoroughly nauseating genre” (44) and perceives abjection as an ambivalent experience crucial to the Gothic, as it allows the readers to enjoy shocking or repellent stimuli without losing the boundaries of their bodies and identities permanently (44). Therefore, abjection becomes, paradoxically, a tool for pleasure of the audience. A disgusting but pleasurable physical experience naturally invites comparisons to sex, especially kinds of sex considered taboo by a given society (Toates 211). Consequently, Gothic physical anxieties explored by Lovecraft in “Pickman’s Model” and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* and personified by ghouls can be interpreted as sexual in nature.

Firstly, there are parallels between Pickman’s art and pornography, which go beyond the fact that ghouls are usually naked. According to Paul Ableman, who examines the diverse emotions provoked by nudity in his book *The Banished Body* (1984), there is a difference between an artistic portrayal of a naked body and pornography. Non-pornographic nude art features the body in “an idealized setting” (Ableman 50), does not inspire action or evoke a physical reaction (52), and focuses on the body as the seat of the spirit, “an angel in its caterpillar stage” (56). In contrast, pornography depicts the human body with less idealism, as flesh without spirit, “brutish and unredeemed, the heir to gross tides and impure aspirations” (56). It can evoke physical reactions, both lust and abjection. Another useful analysis of pornography is Susan Sontag’s essay “The Pornographic Imagination” (1967), which discusses the distinction between written pornography and literature. Despite this difference in analyzed medium and Sontag’s thesis that pornography is indeed literature, she echoes Ableman’s views when she explains why pornography and literature are conceptualized by society as exclusive phenomena. Sontag says that “the subject of literature is the relation of human beings to each other, their complex feelings and emotions,” meanwhile pornography “reports only the motiveless tireless transactions of depersonalized organs” (208). To both critics, pornography’s defining trait is focus on the body to the exclusion of the mind, an objectification of the human subject. This is also the defining trait of Pickman’s art, which is why other characters respond to it as if it was pornography. They treat it with disgust and horror both because of its uncomfortable realism, and because it portrays “the degradation of the mortal tenement” (Lovecraft, “Model” 511). Pickman’s art ignores the soul and portrays the body as either animalistic or edible. Both ghouls and corpses are Gothic bodies, as they represent “the ruination of the human subject” (Hurley 2003). They are also abject bodies; the ghouls blur with their existence the lines between humanity and “the threatening world of... animals” (Kristeva 13), while the corpses are “death infecting life” (4).

Hurley’s concept of an “abhuman” body, “a not-quite human subject... continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other” (3-4) is another term applicable to ghouls. According to Kristeva (3) and Hurley (44-45), decaying and

changing bodies provoke nausea, which Lovecraft shows with Thurber's reactions. Thurber calls both Pickman and his art "nauseous" (Lovecraft, "Model" 510, 512), and produces a primal sound of abjection when thinking about the bodies of the ghouls: "The texture of the majority was a kind of unpleasant rubberiness. Ugh! I can see them now!" (509), physically rejecting the Other from his self. Pickman's art is so pornographic, because the world of the ghouls is the world of abject and taboo carnality. Robert H. Waugh's "Landscapes, Selves, and Others in Lovecraft" features this interesting interpretation of the underworld as it appears *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*: "in this region the sarkos, the body of flesh, rather than the soma, the body of wholeness, is in command. Night-gaunt, ghastr, gug, and ghoul, all these g's that must be pronounced far back in the throat, represent a dyspepsia, those various sounds we hear at embarrassing moments our busy mortal bodies making" (Waugh 225). As ghouls represent the shameful, animalistic parts of human physicality, their nudity provokes unease. Ableman claims that humans appear more naked than animals because of their lack of hair (1). Despite their animalistic features, ghouls have even less body hair than humans: they do not grow facial hair and their skin is described as rubbery. That would make them look even more naked than humans, transforming their bodies into an exaggeration of human insecurities. Clothing not only covers body parts considered shameful, but also, according to Kate Cregan, it serves as "means of communication" and self-expression (33). Pickman in the underworld is naked, which represents his rejection of his human identity. To further underline the condition of his indeterminacy and Otherness, the novella's narrative voice refers to him sometimes as "the ghoul that was Pickman" (Lovecraft, *Dream-Quest* 339), signaling that both his human clothing and human name were artificial constructions obscuring his naked Otherness. When Carter adopts a ghoul disguise, he strips naked and covers himself with mud, going one step beyond the objectifying gaze of the abject as he decides to touch it with his naked flesh. He carries his clothing "in a bundle as if it were a choice morsel from a tomb" (339). That way, his body becomes symbolically that of a ghoul, while his human identity assumes the role of the object of a ghoul's carnivorous desire.

This desire is also open for a sexual interpretation. Toates' *How Sexual Desire Works* (55-56) compares sexual desire and hunger, as both are primal bodily urges which vary in intensity and direction from person to person, but of which only some expressions are considered acceptable by society. Bunny Crumpacker's book *The Sex Life of Food* (2007) is a more in-depth analysis of the topic, including cannibalism. Crumpacker mentions Marquis de Sade's conviction that human flesh is an aphrodisiac and Dracula's sexually charged bloodlust as examples of "the always ready connection between food and sex, between love and the love bite" (212). Westengard interprets cannibalism and vampirism as specifically queer acts, since they entail mutual penetration: the cannibal penetrates the victim with their teeth, and the victim enters the cannibal's body with their flesh and blood. The digestion of the victim also ultimately makes the desired and the desiring one body, abolishing the difference between the two (130-139).

Within this paradigm, Reid's vague "talk about diet" is transformed into gossip about Pickman's sexuality and adds additional layer to interpreting Pickman's art as potentially pornographic. The final painting which Pickman shows to Thurber in "Pickman's Model" is perhaps the easiest to read erotically. It portrays a ghoul "in a sort of crouching position," with "a thing that had been a man" in its "drooling lips," as if the corpse was "a stick of candy" (Lovecraft, "Model" 512). When Thurber looks at the painting, he fears that the monster might "drop its present prey and seek a juicer morsel" (512), that is, he imagines the ghoul eating him. This scene is pornographically evocative, and while it overtly concerns death, not sex, Sontag says that pornography "ultimately, isn't about sex but death" (224). It deals with forces of sexuality which she calls demonic and extreme, capable of pushing people into violence against self or others and inspiring "voluptuous yearning for the extinction of one's consciousness, for death itself" (22). Another morbid and potentially erotic scene occurs between Carter and the ghouls in *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*. As Carter arrives in the underworld, ghouls raise their gazes from the corpses they were up to this point eating and "eye... his leanness speculatively" (338). One attempts to pinch him, which is, in my opinion, a gesture more legible as erotic rather than culinary. As both these scenarios occur between men and gender-ambiguous beings, their queer aspect becomes especially evident.

Notably, erotic ghoul-human interaction and reproductive ghoul-human interaction are mostly separate matters. Lovecraft's more racially charged monsters, like the Deep Ones from *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, derive a part of their horror from interbreeding with humans. Ghouls, instead, swap their young with human children. The young ghoul grows up to look human but remains "kin of the unclean things" (Lovecraft, "Model" 510), while the young human, by feeding on corpses, slowly transforms into a ghoul. This is portrayed in "Pickman's Model" by a pair of paintings, one showing the fate of a ghoul changeling, and the other, called "The Lesson," the fate of the abducted child. The first painting, in contrast with familial degradation in *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, depicts a break between the generations that is unrelated to any sexual or reproductive choice. The Other child appears in a normative family with a "pious father" (Lovecraft, "Model" 510) by essentially random chance, mirroring the way queer children are born into otherwise heteronormative families. The other painting of reproductive interaction taps into a more problematic history. According to "The Lesson," to reproduce, the Other corrupts otherwise normative children by feeding them human flesh, which, as I have established, can be read a sexual act. Even the painting's title can invoke homophobic fears about queer teachers grooming their students³. Lovecraft's portrayal of ghoul reproduction is another thing that opens them to a queer reading.

Ghouls portrayed in "Pickman's Model" and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* represent anxieties regarding the body, including sex. Pickman's art can be considered pornographic in light of Ableman's and Sontag's theories of pornography, because of its objectifying gaze, the visceral abjection it inspires, and

3 See Halperin for the history and persistence of this moral panic

its subject. This subject, the hybrid, rubbery bodies of the ghouls, which could be called “abject” to quote Kristeva or “abhuman” to borrow a term from Hurley, shock human onlookers with their nudity. Their taboo hunger for human flesh can be read, with the help of Toates’ and Crumpacker’s theories on intersection of food and sex and Westengard’s reading of cannibalism, as a symbol of socially unacceptable, potentially queer sexual appetite. Connecting this sexual undertone with the aspects I discussed in previous sections, I believe it is indeed queer sexuality that hides under the monstrous figure of the Lovecraftian ghoul.

Conclusion

Gothic monsters are, more or less overtly, the expressions of what a society deems and treats as the Other. H. P. Lovecraft’s work had been given queer readings and investigated for homophobia by scholars like Johnson, Price, Pace, and Derie. However, “Pickman’s Model” and the character of Richard Upton Pickman had gone underexplored in this discussion. My reading of the character as portrayed in the story and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* has offered an attempt to redress that gap in research.

To communicate that Pickman is queer and dangerous, Lovecraft uses Gothic tropes of ambiguity, liminality, hidden space, the dark secret, the abject body, and the taboo physical appetite. Such selection of Gothic elements, combined with the interesting choice of language and symbols associated with Pickman and his ghoul models—“eccentric,” “sold to the Fiend,” the witch, the fairy—creates a surprisingly coherent queer reading of the story. My revisionary engagement with both “Pickman’s Model” and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* through the queer Gothic lens reveals that the particular kinds of Othering applied to Pickman and ghouls are similar to those experienced in reality by queer people. Pickman’s Otherness troubles medicine, religion, and gender. To escape the backlash he experiences as a result, he uses secret and subterranean Gothic spaces, cellars in which “something queer” (Lovecraft, “Model” 508) had survived the witch-hunts, to meet his fellow Others. I propose that Gothic space, as conceptualized by Majlingová, can be read as a queer space, like that described by Betsky, when viewed from the perspective of characters Othered by the narrative. Apart from its intradiegetic use as a space of freedom and safety for these characters, on a symbolic level, the Lovecraftian underworld represents the *unheimlich*, tantalizingly implying that inhabitants of “respectable Boston” are not far from the “infamous life” (Lévy’s 65) of the ghouls. Such invasion of the boundaries of the self, according to Kristeva’s theories, may provoke abjection, especially considering that the monstrosity of the ghoul is tied to the body, both the human bodies it eats and its own monstrous, abhuman physique. As I have shown, the body-related Gothic anxieties symbolized by the ghouls can be understood as insights into the world of repressed sexual desires, expelled from the normative self and projected onto the monstrous Other. Pickman’s art, in its objective-objectifying gaze and strong physical response it inspires, resembles pornography as analyzed

by Ableman and Sontag. Meanwhile Toates' and Crumpacker's linkages of food and sex open the possibility of reading the ghoul's hunger for flesh as sexual. Combining all these facets, "Pickman's Model" paints a vivid, homophobic picture of a seedy underworld full of Satanic, bestial Others who eat men, corrupt children, unsettle society, and produce degenerate art.

However, when Lovecraft returns to Pickman and the ghouls in the novella *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, he notably chooses to explore them in a more positive light. They are still sources of terror and repulsion, but they also assist the main character, Carter, in his titular quest. The ghouls continue to represent the abject and the carnal, in Waugh's words "the other side of ideal" (223), but they are no longer evil or existentially horrific. The fact that Lovecraft chose to publish the paranoid story "Pickman's Model" while keeping the more sympathetic *Dream-Quest* unpublished during his lifetime, may, in my opinion, prove notable to biographers investigating Lovecraft's sexuality⁴. The duality of these two texts appears to corroborate Johnson's conviction concerning "tropes of cosmic and bodily horror," which for the critic "often seem equally legible as travestied homoerotic fantasy" (256). Pickman's narrative, told in both texts, turns out to be an example of Gothic's ambivalent attitude to monstrosity, which "transgress[es] monstrosity in the sense that [it] help[s] interrogate the very idea of what is monstrous" (Haefele-Thomas 5).

The story and the novella, read as a companion pieces, interrogate the boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable bodies and desires in a way that lends itself to a queer reading. Everything associated with Lovecraftian ghouls, from their liminal nature, through their use of secret spaces on the flipside of mainstream society, to their abject carnality, questions where the normative ends and the Other begins. The push and pull of fascination and loathing provoked by the surprisingly close Other plays itself out between Thurber and Pickman in the short story, between Carter and Pickman in the novella, and, on a metatextual level, between Lovecraft and Pickman. In those two texts, the author's feelings on his character seem to mirror those he held about real gay men and which he expressed in his letter to James F. Morton in 1924: "I didn't know whether to kiss it or kill it!"

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4 Some examples of such investigations: Joshi describes Lovecraft as asexual in his biography of the writer; Derie mentions arguments for and against the theories that Lovecraft was gay or transgender and decides that those "against" are more convincing; Shea theorizes that Lovecraft might have had latent homosexual desires; Sargent said that he believed Lovecraft was gay, based on subtext in his stories "The Outsider" and "The Dunwich Horror," as well as Lovecraft's close relationship with R. H. Barlow.

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Representation of Whiteness and Blackness in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*

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Abstract: The article focuses on the representation of whiteness and blackness in the imagery of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976). Many of *The Woman Warrior* images present whiteness side by side with blackness. Rather than perceive the juxtaposition of whiteness and blackness as a mere coincidence, it can be seen as an extension of Kingston's commentary on racial relations in the United States, a constituent element of a meticulously constructed design, an attempt to "transform aspects of [one's] social grounding into aspects of language" (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 4). The juxtaposition of whiteness with blackness reveals what can be termed as a dyadic quality of whiteness, that is, the socio-historical dependence of whiteness for its construction on non-white racial categories. Whites often position themselves in the center, defining themselves in relation to the people, whom they place in the margins. Beyond rendering the dyadic quality of whiteness, the black-white imagery of *The Woman Warrior* may also be perceived as an illustration of the black-white binary persisting in the United States racial relations at the time when Maxine Hong Kingston wrote and published her work. While opting for a particularist, socio-historical explanation of black-white imagery in *The Woman Warrior*, I still want to acknowledge an explication that would be grounded in the archetypal theory of color perception. I also cite the traditional color theory identifying both black and white as achromatic colors. The most striking image of blackness juxtaposed with whiteness that comes to the foreground in the narrative and receives special attention in the article is the image of the narrator's childhood paintings during the three years of her most profound silence.

Keywords: whiteness, blackness, Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, imagery

THERE'S NO SUCH THING as art for art's sake in non-white North America... Asian American writers tread deliberately, for every image, every phrase, is likely to have lasting reverberations throughout the community. (Aguilar-San Juan 17)

This article focuses on the representation of whiteness and blackness in the imagery of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976). Many of *The Woman Warrior* images present whiteness side by side with blackness. Rather than perceive the juxtaposition of whiteness and blackness as a mere coincidence, it can be seen as an extension of Kingston's commentary on racial relations in the United States, a constituent element of a meticulously constructed design, an attempt to "transform aspects of [one's] social grounding into aspects of language" (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 4). The juxtaposition of whiteness with blackness reveals what can be termed as a dyadic quality of whiteness, that is, the socio-historical dependence of whiteness for its construction on non-white racial categories. Reflecting on this

dependence, Ruth Frankenberg claims that “White/European self-constitution is... fundamentally tied to the process of discursive production of others” (63). Whites position themselves in the center, defining themselves in relation to the people, whom they place in the margins.

Beyond rendering the dyadic quality of whiteness, the black-white imagery of *The Woman Warrior* may also be perceived as an illustration of the black-white binary persisting in the United States racial relations at the time when Maxine Hong Kingston wrote and published her work. With the focus on black Americans and white Americans, Asian Americans felt excluded from the political debate of the country. In this bipolar, black and white American world, the tensions between white Americans and black Americans came to the foreground, while other marginalized racial and ethnic groups frequently found themselves left out of the picture. Reducing racial relations in the United States to the black and white binary, white people took Asian Americans out of the equation, banishing them outside the perimeter of the United States. Kingston questions the black-white dyad more explicitly in her third work, a novel entitled *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, published in 1989. A sense of being overlooked is the most palpable in a statement by the protagonist of the novel, Wittman Ah Sing:

I have a nightmare that... someday Blacks and whites will shake hands over my head. I'm the little yellow man beneath the bridge of their hands and overlooked. Have you been at a demonstration where they sing:

Black and white together
Black and white together
Someday-a-a-ay. (*Tripmaster Monkey* 308)

Wittman Ah Sing utters these words in the 1960s, the time when the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* “marched to change the world” (56). The lack of any overt reflection in *The Woman Warrior* on the black-white dynamics of American racial relations may stem from the overall character of the book, whose purpose is to find a voice and articulate unique Chinese American female experience rather than reclaim America for Chinese Americans. The decisive reclaiming of America takes place in *China Men* published in 1980 and the above-mentioned *Tripmaster Monkey*.

While opting for a particularist, socio-historical explanation of black-white imagery in *The Woman Warrior*, I still want to acknowledge an explication that would be grounded in the archetypal theory of color perception. Cultural critic Tzvetan Todorov looks for the opposition in nature that contributed to the creation of the dichotomy of black versus white across cultures (qtd. in Adams 20). White is associated with light and day, while black with darkness and night. Expounding Todorov's theories, Michael Vannoy Adams assures that Todorov withholds from drawing definitive parallels between the polarity of black and white in the world of nature and the world of culture (21).

Analyzing the juxtaposition of black and white in Kingston's imagery of *The Woman Warrior*, it is also worth noting that the traditional color theory identifies both black and white as achromatic colors. What makes both of them achromatic is their relation to light. While white reflects all wavelengths of light, black absorbs all wavelengths of light (Adams 33). It needs to be emphasized that the traditional color theory identifies black and white as non-colors or as achromatic colors because what is of primary importance is the above-mentioned light, the participation of light waves. Undermining the traditional color theory, Patricia Sloane shifts the focus from light to sight. Sloane's shift of emphasis to sight and perception in the definition of colors is of particular significance because of the central role that vision plays in it. According to Sloane, both black and white are colors because human beings perceive them as such. Sloane also asserts that the opposition of white-black is entirely psychical or symbolic (qtd. in Adams 34).

One of the most striking images of blackness in tandem with whiteness in *The Woman Warrior*¹ can be traced in the narrator's childhood paintings drawn during the three years of her most profound silence (the "thickest"² silence) (192). For three years the narrator first draws houses, flowers and suns only to cover them with black paint. The whiteness of paper sheets on which she draws is not explicitly

- 1 Kingston herself identified *The Woman Warrior* as a novel, but the generic hybridity of the narrative has been the subject of a vigorous critical debate, among others among such scholars as Joan Lidoff, Khani Begum, Patricia Lin Blinde, Sarah Gilead and Kathleen Brogan. Lidoff argues that "by re-creating and revising generic forms, Kingston constructs a fiction of the self that questions the construction of the self" (118). The "self" constructed by the mature narrator shows a higher degree of inclusiveness and willingness to embrace others and their stories. Weaving her first person narrative, the narrator does not limit herself to telling her own story, but brings to light the stories of other marginalized women: Brave Orchid, the No Name Woman, Moon Orchid, Ts'ai Yen, Pe-a-nah, the crazy village woman. While the narrator's voice reigns supreme over the whole narrative, it also funnels other voices, creating the effect of polyvocality. Brave Orchid's voice features as ancillary to that of the narrator. In line with Lidoff's statements on a collective and relational character of *The Woman Warrior* as a first-person narrative, Begum notes that the text "resists categorization as individual autobiography because it concurrently interweaves myth, fiction, and reality to create its own unique tapestry of form" (143). Lin Blinde speaks about the collage of such genres as a novel, an autobiography, a series of essays and poems, claiming that "while the work capitalizes on the conventions and expectations of various genres, it also evades the limitations of any one genre" (52). It is also worth mentioning that the opening chapter of the narrative "No Name Woman" was first published independently as a short story in the January 1975 issue of *Viva*. The fourth chapter "At the Western Palace" narrated in the third person could also function independently as short story. Lidoff ponders on the generic permeability of *The Woman Warrior*, wondering whether it is fiction, nonfiction, autobiography or novel (118). Concurring with Lidoff, Brogan reflects on the relation of history and fiction. Brogan cites Michel de Certeau, who observes that history reaches for rhetorical and narrative strategies central to fiction (de Certeau cited in Brogan 17). Brogan also invokes Lynn Hunt whose observations on the definition of history shed further light on the interface between fiction and non-fiction in *The Woman Warrior*. Rather than highlight the differences between history and fiction, Hunt shifts the focus to commonalities. Hunt sees history not so much as a "repository of facts" but as the "telling of stories" (Hunt cited in Brogan 17). The narrator's history as well as the histories of other Chinese and Chinese American women which branch into the narrator's history are not merely a repository of facts either. First of all they are life tales of particular individuals/characters whose lives gain an added significance in the act of the telling.
- 2 Paul D. reaches for a similar epithet in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to speak of Sethe's love for Beloved: "Your love is too thick" (164).

stated, but it is clearly to be deduced from the narrator's assertion that she performs an equivalent operation while drawing on the blackboard, the only difference being that then she covers her paintings with chalk (192). Applying a layer of black paint or white chalk, the narrator has an impression that she constructs a stage curtain, which is momentarily to rise to reveal her private visions. Looking as a child at her black paintings, the narrator sees a world of possibilities: "I spread them out (so black and full of possibilities) and pretended the curtains were swinging open, flying up, one after another, sunlight underneath, mighty operas" (192). Like the stage curtain, the black paint covers the realm of potential. Blackness, like the narrator's silence, entails a multitude of interpretations, carrying the promise of fulfillment.³ Both are a preparatory stage for a triumph of speech and the narrative language that bursts in a myriad of images.

The black and white paintings passage merits further attention in the context of Kingston's own views on the process of composition. In an interview conducted by Kay Bonetti, Kingston reveals "After college I thought that I was a painter because I always see pictures, and I see visions before the words come, and it's always a secondary step to find the words" (Kay Bonetti's "Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston" 33). For Kingston, seeing is a crucial step in the process of articulation. Seeing is a prerequisite of writing. Yet words are indispensable as well, helping to bind the visions together and fill the gaps in the visions. As Kingston explains in another interview:

words are a medium to get to the seemingly subconscious... *visions don't just come full-blown and with details* such as chairs and clothes, and where everything is placed—the relationships between bodies in a room. All that becomes more and more accessible as I approach them with words. *Words clarify the vision and memory.... As I paint part of a vision, the next part of it becomes clear.* It's as if I am building the underpinnings of a bridge, and then I can cross it, and see more and more clearly. (Rabinowitz 68, emphasis added)

While Kingston identifies seeing as a prerequisite of word production, she still perceives words as rivets that are essential for the completion of her visions. Words enhance her ability to see and to remember: to "see more and more clearly" (Rabinowitz 68).⁴ In an interview with Neila C. Seshachari, she speaks of her writing in terms of being at the theater and looking behind the curtain to see "all kinds of gifts and visions" (213). Kingston's outlook on the process of writing matches closely that of Toni Morrison, who also accentuates the importance of the sight of the author: "the author's presence—her or his intentions, blindness and sight—is part

3 The passage conjures up distant echoes of John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter" (Keats 531).

4 It is also worth noting that while I do not identify the narrator with Kingston and Kingston herself is emphatic about the fact that she should not be identified with the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, she still indicates that the childhood paintings incident took place in her own life (Kay Bonetti's "Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston" 33).

of the imaginative activity" (*Playing in the Dark* xii). Sight is also hyper important for both authors when they speak of the reader's reception. Kingston "want[s] her readers to see the pictures" (Bonetti 68), whereas Morrison claims that the reader "reads, becomes engaged in and *watches* what is being read all at the same time" (*Playing in the Dark* x, emphasis in original). The term "watches" indicates that Morrison frames reception in theatrical terms, while Kingston perceives production in a parallel way: "When I write, I am at the theater" (Seshachari 213).

The black curtain covering the narrator's imaginary visions in *The Woman Warrior* can also stand for the Duboisian veil separating the narrator of *The Souls of Black Folk* and other people of color from the fulfillment of their visions, especially in the context of exclusion and discrimination related by the narrator in the passages immediately following the childhood paintings episode. In *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois notes that African Americans are "shut from [the white world] by the vast veil" (4). Life behind the veil entails physical and psychological separation from the world of privilege, the "pale world" (Du Bois 4). If the black curtain of the narrator's painting visions bears a resemblance to the Duboisian veil, it still has a much more positive signification than Du Bois's original veil. Reaching for the black curtain metaphor, the narrator emphasizes its potential rather than its limiting power. The black curtain recurs as an image when the narrator announces that "the curtain [inside her brain] flaps closed like merciful black wings" (108) whenever she hears Brave Orchid's graphic tale which she resents listening to. In this instance the black curtain functions as a protective device shielding the narrator. Conversely, the black veil also features in *The Woman Warrior* in an explicitly negative context of Brave Orchid's medical calls. The "black veil" is said to hang over the face of daughters in law whose relatives are about to die (97).

Through the childhood paintings episode Kingston reverses the representation of black and white as bland colors. While for most of the narrative both the white color and the black color receive a negative signification, the childhood paintings episode explicitly shows up the potential of blackness and implicitly also the potential of whiteness. The narrator's paintings are "so black and full of possibilities" (192). The discussion of blackness continues in the passages immediately following the childhood paintings episode. This accumulation of blackness is hardly accidental. The narrator places her black childhood paintings in the context of the semiotics of racial categories. Looking back to her school days, she compares herself to an African American girl whose mother combs her hair Shanghai style so that they look with the narrator like Shanghai twins, the only difference between them being the skin color: "except that she was covered with black like my paintings" (193). On the one hand, the narrator is very conscious of the semiotics of race, but on the other she minimizes it, drawing an overt comparison between the blackness of the African American girl's skin and the blackness of her paintings. In both cases blackness is a cover for the world of internal possibilities. The passage underscores the performativity of racial categories and indeterminacy of identity definitions.⁵ Finding explicit parallels

5 The performativity of racial categories comes to the foreground in Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*.

between herself and the African American girl, the narrator also unsettles the black-white dyad, proposing an alternative racial configuration. A very direct proposal of a cross-racial alliance between Chinese Americans and African Americans comes in the following excerpt, when the narrator remembers how black students walked her home and to school to protect her against rowdy Japanese American children.⁶ Black children ("Black Ghosts") impress the immature narrator with their ebullient personalities of "daring talker[s]," who "laugh[] the hardest" and treat the narrator as their equal, as if she was "a daring talker too" (193). Explicitly valorizing blackness, the narrator re-centers it, shifting blackness from the margins of American society to the social center of her childhood world. This re-centering can be traced further in the figurative rendering of the letter "I," startling the narrator with its simple silhouette and riveting her attention to its "black center" (193).

The blankness of the sheets of paper on which the immature narrator unfurls her visions may symbolize the amorphousness of self-definitions embraced by some white people at the time when Kingston wrote the narrative. Ross Chambers speaks about "blank whiteness" parading as an "unexamined 'norm'" and "blank blackness," that is, an "unknowable 'other'" (193). Ruth Frankenberg notes the "formlessness of being white" and whiteness presenting itself as "an unmarked or neutral category, in relation to which others are named or marked other" (66). Covering blank, white sheets of paper with childhood drawings, the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* figuratively undermines this formlessness and blankness. Before being covered with black paint, the narrator's drawings offer an alternative definition of whiteness—whiteness that defines itself in a positive way instead of reaching for an oppositional, negative self-definition. Rather than define itself against the background of blackness,

The Chinese American protagonist of the novel, Wittman Ah Sing, performs his Chinese American ethnicity. In his play he also stages the performance of Chinese American ethnicity and stereotypes about Chinese Americans.

The protagonist of Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, Emi, makes an interesting reflection on the fiction of multiculturalism and performativity of racial identities. Emi claims that representatives of diverse racial and ethnic groups are invisible to each other and that white people who celebrate cultural diversity usually express very superficial interest in the people of a different racial or ethnic origin, seeing them through the prism of sushi bars, never reaching beneath the surface of cultural difference, but merely skimming it: "Cultural diversity is bullshit.... It's a white guy wearing a Nirvana T-shirt and dreds. That's cultural diversity.... We're all invisible. It's just tea, ginger, raw fish, and a credit card" (Yamashita 128). Emi also pokes fun at the white restaurant patron proclaiming sincere embrace and appreciation of all aspects of multiculturalism to be traced in Los Angeles. Chopsticks in her hair are to be one of the manifestations of this multicultural bent. Emi asks the white lady if she would also consider wearing forks in her hair.

- 6 It needs to be emphasized that immediately after portraying Japanese American children as "noisy and tough" (193), the narrator mentions their release from concentration camps (193). Yet no further reflection follows why they are "noisy and tough" or if there may be any possibility of reverse power dynamics at play. Notwithstanding animosity on the part of Chinese Americans and Korean Americans towards Japanese Americans, one can encounter examples of interethnic friendship in Asian American fiction, for instance in the above mentioned *Tripmaster Monkey* between the Chinese American protagonist, Wittman Ah Sing, and a Japanese American character, Lance Kamiyama as well as in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995) between the Korean American protagonist, Henry Park, and the Japanese American character, Pete Itchibita.

stating who they are not, white people could define themselves in a beautiful, positive way and state who they are. Their self-definition could be as beautiful and positive as the visions unbridled by the narrator on blank, white sheets of paper. Yet instead of embracing these beautiful, positive self-definitions, many of them opt for negative, oppositional self-definitions, defining themselves against the background of blackness. The aforementioned observations by whiteness studies scholars Ruth Frankenberg and Ross Chambers are the best illustration of that situation.

Further examples of dyadic whiteness can be traced in the sections of *The Woman Warrior* outside the narrator's narrative present, the sections dedicated to the Chinese past of her ancestors or passages in which she imagines herself in the Chinese reality as an avatar of the renowned Chinese Woman Warrior, Fa Mu Lan. Black and white feature prominently in the photographs of the No Name Woman's long gone husband, so long gone as to make the narrator speculate that her aunt must have forgotten what he looks like. Trying to visualize his face, "she only saw the black and white face in the group photograph the men had taken before leaving" for the United States (7). In the Chinese tradition black and white are primarily the colors of death. Staying away from China for years, the No Name Woman's husband is barely a living presence in her life. He is rather a living absence although he is not physically dead. During her solitary labor the No Name Woman is portrayed in terms of brightness against the blackness of the surrounding universe: "She was one of the stars, a bright dot in blackness" (16). The narrator's mother, Brave Orchid, is accompanied on her night medical calls by the white dog, whose whiteness stands in sharp contrast to the darkness of the night, scaring away potential attackers. Useful as the white color is to Brave Orchid in this particular instance, she still guards against the potential unpropitiousness of the white color perceived in Chinese culture as "the mourning color" and an emanation of "bad luck" (96). The narrator as Fa Mu Lan goes to battle on a white horse side by side with a rider on a black horse (43). Black and white are also the only colors explicitly named in the Chinese past sections of the narrative in reference to the "remote island of Japan" (109). Black and white are identified as the attributes of some animals inhabiting the island: "black apes" and "white stags" (109). Other, more florid and diverse colors feature only implicitly as the qualities of "magic orchards," "strange trees," "plants of jasper" (109). An explicit naming of only black and white colors in the imagery characterizing Japan may stem from bellicose relations between the Chinese and Japanese as well as Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans, as characterized in *The Woman Warrior*.

The examples of an overtly negative signification of blackness alone can also be detected in the sections of the narrative unfolding in China or centering on the narrator as an embodiment of Fa Mu Lan. Blackness envelopes the No Name Woman during her lonely delivery. The No Name Woman is engulfed by blackness of the night, sky and space: "The black *well* of sky and stars went out and out forever... Black space opened" (*The Woman Warrior* 16, emphasis added). The "black well of sky and stars" foreshadows the No Name Woman's suicide death by drowning in a

family well. According to the narrator, the No Name Woman's illegitimate pregnancy opens the "black hole," the hole which, according to the villagers, makes the "break" "in the 'roundness'" of the community (*The Woman Warrior* 14). Paul John Eakin argues that the No Name Woman's death "plug[s]" the hole opened by the No Name Woman's act of self-individuation and insubordination (258). Blackness comes to the foreground during Brave Orchid's traumatic encounter with the Sitting Ghost. The darkness of the landscape is equally distinctive before the narrator as Fa Mu Lan enters the "yellow, warm world" of her apprenticeship with the guru couple.

In a similar vein, whiteness when unaccompanied by blackness in the narrative, conjures up predominantly negative associations in the imagery of *The Woman Warrior*, signifying terror, death, insipidity, coldness, alienation and the lack of life and vibrancy. Through her construction of white imagery Kingston inverts associations of whiteness with normativity, the associations "express[ing] the vanity of the Caucasian race" (qtd. in Adams 36). The imagery of whiteness inscribes itself in the consistent defamiliarization of whiteness in the narrative and the marking of its often camouflaged qualities. The postmodern, collagic, eccentric structure of *The Woman Warrior* contributes to the dispersion of whiteness into a multitude of images. These are: bones, light, all engulfing whiteness, paper, white masks and white bands, coldness and iciness, icicle in the desert, black and white paintings, pearls grown in oysters. The imagery of the narrative allows Kingston to indirectly critique whiteness and speak about the semiotics of racial categories. While one may not necessarily subscribe to Mieke Bal's statement that "the figural" "is the privileged site of contestation" (1291), it has to be acknowledged that Kingston extends contestation to the figurative language of the narrative. Initiating in 1992 contemporary whiteness studies and in particular the study of whiteness in American literature with her seminal work *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison claims that writers "transform aspects of their social grounding into aspects of language" (4) and that "Knowledge however mundane and egalitarian plays about in linguistic images and forms cultural practice" (49). The second statement corresponds closely to the opening epigraph by Filipina American sociologist Karin Aguilar-San Juan, who writes in 1994: "Asian American writers tread deliberately, for every image, every phrase is likely to have lasting reverberations throughout the community" (17). Echoing Clifford Geertz's *Local Knowledge*, Morrison focuses to a greater extent on the social sphere providing a stimulus for the creation of particular narrative imagery. Aguilar-San Juan shifts the focus to the social ramifications stemming from narrative imagery of a work—the consequences for a particular community. Both note a very close overlap of the social and the aesthetic, an overlap, which is also very conspicuous in *The Woman Warrior*.

The juxtaposition of black and white imagery in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* can be interpreted as a symbolic commentary on racial relations in the United States. Beyond rendering the prevalence of the black-white binary in the racial debate of the country at the time when Kingston wrote the narrative, the juxtaposition of black and white in the imagery also renders the dependence

of whiteness on blackness for its self-definition. The central image juxtaposing blackness and whiteness in *The Woman Warrior* is the image of the narrator's childhood paintings. Apart from highlighting the hidden potential of both blackness and whiteness, the narrator's childhood paintings deserve attention if one considers that Kingston herself compared the process of narrative production to the act of painting, claiming to see visions "before the words come" (Bonetti 33). Blackness featuring in *The Woman Warrior* receives mostly a positive signification, which may also be perceived as an acknowledgement of the debt of Asian American studies for their emergence to the rise of black studies in the 1960s and the 1970s.⁷

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You Are What You Eat: Narrating Ethnic Identity Through Food in Polish Chicagoan Writing¹

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Abstract: This article offers an analysis of the representation and function of food in several texts by contemporary American writers of Polish descent associated with the city of Chicago. All of the texts analyzed below present Polish foodways as an important element of Polish diasporic identity. Foodscapes in what I call Polish Chicagoan literature are invariably depicted as a gendered space, although, as this article will show, detailed descriptions of food production and consumption tend to lead to different outcomes in the texts authored by male and female writers.

Keywords: Polish American literature, American Polonia, foodways, Stuart Dybek, Elizabeth Kern, Marcia Cebulska, Chicago

Introduction

The inception of food studies as a scholarly discipline in the 1980s brought to the fore the role that foodways play in the construction and preservation of identity, be it race, ethnic, gender, or class identity. The term “foodways” is defined as “[r]eferring to more than just physical food, also encompass[ing] activities associated with the procurement, preparation, service, and consumption of food and drink” (Niewiadomska-Flis 23). As a coinage of food and landscape, foodscape, another important concept in food studies, is in turn “a useful framework for discourses about food and sites of various sizes and scales, ranging from the personal space of a body, to the social spaces of a kitchen or community, to the public spaces of a city, region, or nation” (Adema 6). As Adema further argues, “foodscape incorporates the dynamics of global exchange, including the translocal and transnational character of modern food practices” (6). There seems to be a general consensus among scholars that “[f]ood simultaneously reflects and co-creates culture and identity” (Niewiadomska-Flis 22).

Within the Polish American context, the importance of foodways for the retaining of Polish identity in immigrant and second-generation families has been argued, among others, by John Radzilowski and Ann Hetzel Gunkel. In their take, “food is more than a matter of physical sustenance. It is also a system of communication, a type of language through which we express identities and

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relationships, including gender, ethnicity, nationality, festivity, and sacrality” (136). The two scholars go on to add that “Polish foodways often are the most persistent legacy of Polish culture, even when third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation Polish Americans have lost the Polish language and a direct connection to Poland itself” (140). As Gunkel argues in another essay, “[c]uisine and foodways play a special role in the work of ethnic memory, a role which has been overlooked from an intellectual and political point of view” (39).

Those briefly-sketched reflections on food in Polish diaspora and other cultural and ethnic contexts constitute an apt starting point for my ensuing discussion of the function that foodways play in literary texts by American writers of Polish descent associated with Chicago.² In what follows I will discuss two stories by arguably the best known and most acknowledged Polish American writer, Stuart Dybek, narratives tellingly titled “Blood Soup” and “Sauerkraut Soup,” both included in his first collection of short stories published in 1980 as *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods*. The second part of the essay will offer an analysis of two narratives authored by women writers: Elizabeth Kern’s 2011 coming-of-age novel *Wanting to Be Jackie Kennedy* and a recent memoir by Marcia Cebulski titled *Lovers, Dreamers, & Thieves: My People, Chicago, & the Polish Bakery Where I Grew Up*. In all of these texts Polish cuisine plays a substantial role, offering a link for the third-generation Polish American protagonists to the culture of their forebears. As I will argue, these texts also point to the gendered character of the Polish diaspora in the US, as the foodscapes they sketch are invariably presented as a female space, though with considerable differences between the accounts by male and female authors.

Polish Food in Stuart Dybek’s Short Fiction

To begin with Stuart Dybek, when read as a whole, his first collection of stories strikes the reader as a nostalgic musing on times and spaces long lost, such as the eponymous childhood and neighborhoods, rendered in a manner reminiscent of magical realism. Characteristically for Dybek, these texts tend to employ a male narrator—a boy or a young man—and evoke the area of Pilsen/Little Village on Chicago’s Lower West Side, where Dybek grew up as a third-generation Polish American.³ In the collection, Dybek names two out of eleven stories after soups, signaling the significance of ethnic food for his construction of diasporic identity and memory. Gunkel posits that “food clearly plays a special role in immigrant history and memory,” adding that it is therefore “not surprising that food imagery

2 I am consciously focusing on what I call Polish Chicagoan literature here, as Chicago can arguably be treated as the capital of the American Polonia, cf. Dominic A. Pacyga, *American Warsaw*, pp. 1-18. Therefore, it is my contention that the literature of Polish Chicago can likewise function as illustrative of trends within Polish American literature in general, regional and other differences between individual Polish American authors notwithstanding.

3 As Carlo Rotella puts it, “Dybek has rendered Pilsen/Little Village with a vividness and depth that turns it into a literary place on a par with Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, Elena Ferrante’s Rione Luzzatti, or J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth” (405).

serves as a powerful vehicle for exploring the ethnic self in literary contexts such as ... Stuart Dybek's short stories" (39). By virtue of associations it evokes—of comfort, home, and familiarity—ethnic food seems to function in Dybek's oeuvre like other tokens of Polishness, such as the Catholic church or snippets of the Polish language, that construe second- or third-generation Polish American identity as inevitably marked by nostalgia.

In "Blood Soup," the main character, a 13-year-old boy named Stefush, the Anglicized form of which is Steve, is asked by his dying grandmother to procure duck blood so that she can cook blood soup—called in the text also by its Polish name, *czarnina*—and continue to live. As Stefush's reminiscences about past family feasts clearly show, for his grandma blood soup equals a method of healing, what one of Stefush's uncles mockingly calls "the family's oral transfusion" (Dybek, *Childhood* 27). Busha⁴ endows blood soup with almost magical properties, a testimony perhaps to her peasant roots.⁵ Urged by her, Stefush embarks on a day-long dream-like peregrination through the neighborhood, which takes him from a butcher's shop, through the Douglass Park area marked by an increasing presence of Hispanics and Blacks, to Mr. Gowupme (the spelling of whose name evokes the pronunciation of the word *golqb* [pidgin] in Polish), an almost legendary figure said to be raising all kinds of fowl. Disobeying his parents' command to stay at home and watch the bed-ridden grandmother, Stefush and his 9-year-old brother Dove are willing to brave the hardships of their unsafe neighborhood in search of a mythic cure and, perhaps, adventure. The boys' quest offers the third-person narrator an opportunity to comment on the demographic changes that the area is undergoing, ceasing to be a primarily Slavic enclave due to the arrival of other ethnic groups, most notably Hispanics and Blacks, which the established Slavic population is not particularly amenable to, and with reciprocity. Taking the two boys through dilapidated buildings and encounters with inimical strangers, the narrative comes full circle when the two boys run back home under the characteristic Chicago El train tracks with a jar of what is supposed to be duck blood. Deciding to taste the liquid, Stefush realizes that he has been fooled by Mr. Gowumpe (as he was earlier deprived of his money by a group of African American teenagers in the park), and the only food item he turned out to have been able to obtain was beetroot juice.

While this brief summary of the story does not aspire to do justice to the complexity, poetic feel or the magical realist qualities of Dybek's prose, it does show, I hope, the prominence of food as the structuring mechanism and the driving force behind the story. Attitude to ethnic food seems to carry intimations of one's own ethnic identification. Busha, presumably a first-generation immigrant of a peasant stock from the partitioned Poland, speaking Polish—the snippets of which are intertwined with the English text—clings to her old-world traditions, both culinary and otherwise. Her bedroom is decorated with "[t]he holy pictures of

4 The grandmother is referred to in the text as Busha, a term of endearment frequently used by Americans of Polish descent that harks back to the Polish words *babcia* or *babusia*.

5 The major wave of Polish migration at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was by and large of a peasant character; cf. Pula.

Jesus and Mary gaz[ing] down over Busha's bed with sorrowful eyes, hair flowing, their flaming hearts crowned with thorns, pierced by swords, and dripping blood" (Dybek, *Childhood* 26). Catholic icons and rituals, ethnic food, and her use of the Polish language all reflect Busha's primary identification as an ethnic Pole. Without providing much information on Busha's children, the narrative presents her American born and raised grandchildren as still willing to comply with their grandmother's wishes, despite their fear of disobeying their parents and falling victim to various crooks and villains inhabiting the neighborhood.

In general, the first/third generation connection is a common motif in Dybek's fiction, with the grandmother serving as a figure of primary importance, a link for the third-generation Polish Americans to their ethnic roots. In light of this, the ending of the story seems particularly poignant:

He [Steve/Stefush] flipped the jar up over the garage roofs. It turned end over end against the fading sky and seemed to hang liked a kicked football, then plunged down. Dove lunged forward to catch it, only to flinch as it touched his hands, jerking his elbows back into his stomach desperately as the jar hit the pavement with the muffled explosion of glass, splattering the cuffs of their jeans, the white laces of their gym shoes. (52)

Finding out that he has been cheated by people suggested to him as potential procurers of duck blood, Stefush seems to realize the futility of his efforts. Just as blood soup would not miraculously heal his dying grandmother, clinging to old-world traditions likewise seems pointless in the reality of an American working-class urban district. While in one of Anthony Bukoski's stories, invariably set in Superior, Wisconsin, the daughter Stanisława cooks beetroot soup daily for her aged mother coming from the "old country" as a sign of caring for her (177), Dybek's story seems to imply that in an urban setting of Chicago "old country" ways are losing relevance.⁶

The second story that I propose to discuss in this essay, "Sauerkraut Soup," is narrated by Franklin Marzek, who is reminiscing about a period in his young adulthood when he was working in an ice-cream factory to raise money for school. The story begins point-blank: "I couldn't eat. Puking felt like crying" (Dybek, *Childhood* 122). While the reasons for the protagonist/narrator's condition are not elaborated on in the story, his digestion problems are contrasted with the healthy appetite of the Slavic cleanup crew that he is working with: "The lunch table was spread as for a buffet. Swollen gray sausages steaming garlic, raw onions, dark bread, horse-radish, fish roe" (129). Not much is revealed about Frank's ethnic

6 Dybek's attention to ethnic detail in the story makes Thomas S. Gladsky conclude that it is the only story in the collection in which the author "examine[s] the interior of the peasant culture" (*Princes* 258). Elsewhere, Gladsky argues that "in this story Dybek moves beyond ceremonies and the surface features of ethnicity when he tries to capture something of the old world temperament that differentiates Eastern Europeans from Americans and first generation ethnics from their descendants" ("From Ethnicity to Multiculturalism" 110).

background, except for his last name, the fact that he grew up in a neighborhood “where every last name could be spit out like an insult” (124), and a few Polish words interspersed throughout the narrative.⁷ Although it may come as somewhat surprising that Frank cannot “exactly identify where in Eastern Europe” (128) his fellow employees came from, his difference from others is accentuated by several other factors as well, including his sickly slenderness and his being a college student in love with literature, whereas most of the other employees are simple working-class folk. Still, Frank’s fantasies about a possible cure for his ailment are expressed in culinary terms as if he were—or were wishing to be—a member of the healthy-appetite group: “*Zupa*—chicken broth, beef barley, cream of celery—sounded like an antidote” (130). Eventually, he wanders into a restaurant on the corner of 47th Street and Western Avenue, Chicago, and the area where he works: “Forty-seventh had a number of places like it, mostly family-owned, bars that served hot lunches, little restaurants different ethnics ran, almost invisible amid McDonald’s arches and Burger King driveways” (136). The narrative thus establishes a stark contrast between ubiquitous American fast food restaurants—such as McDonald’s or Burger King—and unassuming ethnic eateries. It is in the latter that Frank is handed a bowl of sauerkraut soup that actually heals him:

She [the waitress] brought it fast, brimming to the lip of the heavy bowl, slopping a little onto the plate beneath it. It was thick and reddish, not the blond color of sauerkraut I’d expected. The kind of soup one cuts into with the edge of the spoon. Steaming. The spoon fogging as if with breath. The peppery smell of soup rising like vapor to open the bronchial tubes. I could smell the scalded pepper and also another spice and then realized what colored the soup—paprika. (137)

Having never had sauerkraut soup before, the narrator is nevertheless convinced that it is the only cure that can counter his inability to hold food: “I’d been thinking of zupa, but of something more medicinal, like chicken rice” (137). He eats two bowls and from a vantage point of further in his life he concludes that these two portions translated into two years of happiness for him, again endowing Slavic food with magical properties.

To go back to the contrast drawn in the story between Frank and the other Eastern European men who he shares the space of the ice-cream factory with, Frank’s inability to eat and participate in the communal lunch is a clear illustration of his departure from and non-belonging in the diasporic community. As Grażyna Kozaczka argues with reference to Dybek’s fiction in her essay “Writing Poland and America: Polish American Fiction in the Twenty-First Century,” “[i]n contrast to the nostalgic embrace of the diasporic past, the present of the Polish American homeland for Dybek is less encouraging as it exhibits clear signs of physical and

7 In Gladsky’s interpretation, in many texts of the collection the “unobtrusive Polishness” of the protagonists “is largely assumed or, if anything, reduced to a cultural residue” (*Princes* 257).

emotional ruin as well as the inability to create and sustain new life" (76). Still, this diasporic wasteland of sorts can be combated, the narrative seems to suggest, but solely by a return home. It is after all only when he accepts clearly ethnic food that Frank is healed, both physically and metaphorically.

To conclude the first part of this essay, ethnic identity is often articulated in culinary terms in Dybek's fiction, with allegiance to culinary traditions posited as a sign of willingness to retain one's ethnic identity as an Eastern European. As Kozaczka puts it, "Polish American characters, mostly representatives of the working class, rarely seek the renewal of their ethnicity through links to the old country, but rather create their ethnic identity based on nostalgia and collective immigrant memories which by the third generation have become practically mythologized" ("Cultural, Class and Ethnic Conflicts" 1063). This diagnosis seems to certainly ring true with respect to the two stories analyzed above; what is more, the memories of ethnicity the two stories evoke clearly have a distinct culinary aroma and taste. In one interview, Dybek himself reflected on the affective dimension of food:

As in any number of households and many immigrant cultures, food is a measure, a conveyor of culture, and it's also a nonverbal way that affection is communicated, which is really important in immigrant households where the grandparents are speaking a language different from the grandkids. In my family where my father was a native Polish speaker and my grandmother spoke little English, we could always communicate via food. The words for food were often in Polish. ("I'm Most Comfortable" 79)

Further, the gendered character of the ethnic foodscape clearly comes to the fore in Dybek's fiction. In the first story, blood soup is to be cooked at the grandma's request, while in the second text the young narrator receives medicinal sauerkraut soup from a waitress described as "too buxom to be grandmotherly" (Dybek, *Childhood* 137). It seems therefore that Dybek's fiction does not question the gendered character of the Polish diaspora, with women being primarily associated with the sphere of food production and distribution. This link between gender and foodscape is also clearly visible in the two texts by Polish American women writers to be discussed below, albeit to somewhat different results.

Polish Women Writers on Food

According to Anne Hetzel Gunkel, as a result of the renewed interest in foodways, more attention is being paid to the role of women in ethnic contexts; as the scholar puts it, "[t]he recovery of material culture, particularly religious iconography and food, provides us access to the creative work of women in our community" (38). In light of this, let me examine the depiction and function of Polish cuisine in two texts authored by women writers associated with Chicago, namely Elizabeth Kern's *Wanting to Be Jackie Kennedy* and Marcia Cebulski's *Lovers, Dreamers &*

Thieves. The former is a coming-of-age novel, narrated in the first person by a 50-year-old woman, Ellie Manikowski, who comes back to Chicago after many years for a reunion with her childhood friend. On the way from the O'Hare airport to her hotel in Downtown, on a whim she asks a cab driver to exit the highway and stop nearby her family home on Ashland Avenue, close to the Ashland/Milwaukee/Division intersection, termed the Polish Triangle. The several frame chapters are clearly demarcated by the date May 20, 1994 placed right underneath the chapter numbers, and are strategically placed in the book as Chapters 1, 13, 26, and 36 to slow down the action of the main tale. The majority of the narrative, in turn, takes place in the early 1960s and focuses on the protagonist's experience of growing up in a Polish American household in the oldest Polish American neighborhood in Chicago. I would argue that by narrating ethnicity via food, Kern does not only show Polish cuisine as a link to one's Polish roots, but also signals food's community- and family-building function, a perspective that is not as emphasized in Dybek's short stories analyzed above.⁸ The significance of food is accentuated by the fact that Kern devotes numerous paragraphs of her novel to detailed descriptions of Polish dishes, their preparation and consumption.

Polish restaurants that serve *kielbasa* and *pierogi* abound in the Polish American Downtown, the neighborhood in which Ellie grows up, while Poles who attend the polka⁹ potluck parties bring trays of Polish food with them. To give an example of Kern's attention to culinary detail, let me quote an excerpt of her novel. As Ellie and her friend Joy sit on a bus—which they typically ride to be able to talk out of the earshot of their relatives—the bus turns out to be filled with Polish men and women on their way to a polka party. One of the girls' acquaintances is described as follows: "Lydia was gripping both edges of a tray of *mazurek*, a dense almond cake layered with preserves and topped with marzipan, candied orange peel, and drizzled with angelica. Already cut into squares, the confections were neatly lined up on a paper doily and protected under cellophane" (Kern 246). Lydia offers the girls a piece of cake as a sign of her hospitality. To give another example, Polish food is also supposed to comfort Poles going through difficult times. When Joy decides to become a nun and leaves her despairing single mom behind, she asks Ellie to "take Ma out for pierogi at The White Eagle... all you can eat. Buy her wine. My treat" (267). Joy assumes that her mother, a Displaced Person who moved to Chicago after World War Two, having lost her husband during the war, will be comforted by the familiar taste of Polish culinary classic, which will help her deal with another loss, that of her daughter to the Catholic church.

Of course, food is not the only marker of Polish ethnic identity in the novel; the characters' religious affiliation as Roman Catholics is likewise very pronounced. Religion seems to dominate the lives of Poles as much as the steeple of their parish church, St Casimir's, towers over the neighborhood. The significance of clinging

8 For a detailed discussion of the novel in the context of transgressive sexuality see Chapter 6 titled "Transgressive Sexuality in Polish American Fiction of the Last Twenty-Five Years" in Kozaczka's *Writing the Polish American Woman* (pp.111-131).

9 For an analysis of the cultural significance of polka for Polish diasporics, see Gunkel; Trochimczyk.

to tradition—both culinary and otherwise—is explained to Ellie by her mother, who shares with her the story of the girl’s maternal grandparents, first-generation immigrants:

She [Ellie’s grandma] and your grandpa came to this country not speaking English, and like most immigrants they worked at simple jobs. Grandma made salads in a cafeteria. Grandpa worked as a machinist. I remember many a time they’d come home in tears because people laughed at them for their broken English, for their old-fashioned clothes, for misunderstanding directions. So they took comfort in sticking with their own. ‘Stick with your own,’ they’d tell me again and again. (Kern 257)

It goes without saying that “sticking with your own” pertains also to foodways.

When it comes to food’s family-building role, many of Ellie’s memories of her family life are accompanied by the aroma of food being cooked in her house. It seems that for the 50-year-old narrator it is easier to remember the smell rather than the taste of the foods of her adolescent years, as the olfactory aspect is definitely the most pronounced in her descriptions. Early in the text, the teenage Ellie draws the reader’s attention to the smell of her home, which is rendered in paradoxical terms as the family occupies two floors above a funeral home, the business that, in Ellie’s mom’s words, “puts the food on the table”:

Funeral homes have a distinct smell. Musty flowers. Stale cigarette and cigar smoke. The acrid chemicals used in embalming. That’s how it was downstairs at our place. But upstairs it was a different story. Upstairs, our hallway smelled like a Polish restaurant: spicy *kielbasa*, pungent sauerkraut, beef and pork roasts smothered in garlic, homemade *babka* and *mazurek* glazed with rum and almond. (Kern 27)

When Ellie comes home that day, she is drawn to her aunt Nina’s apartment on the first floor by the aroma of bread baking: “Nina was in the pantry, so I followed the yeasty aroma into the kitchen. I leaned over the golden crusts of two braided loaves of bread cooling on her stovetop and thought about how I could talk to Nina about anything—my lovelife or lack thereof, my insecurities, my dreams of the future” (27). When her relationship with her aunt is most intimate and comforting, freshly-baked bread seems a perfect reflection of that. However, when later on Ellie finds out that her beloved aunt was having an affair with a local priest, who died of a massive heart attack in her bed and left her pregnant, her naïve vision of the world and her uncomplicated trust in her relative are shattered. When Aunt Nina volunteers to prepare a dessert for Ellie’s 18th birthday party as a way to make amends, the girl’s choice could not be further removed from the simplicity of a loaf of bread: she asks Nina to bake her a Napoleon cake, a very complicated dessert, a testimony perhaps to the complexity of adult relationships.

The description of Ellie's birthday party in the novel provides an opportunity to reflect on a relationship between food and social class status. Ellie's family is clearly well-off, as her father and his two younger brothers are running a successful funeral house business started by their father. When Ellie's mom offers to throw a dinner party for Ellie and her friends to celebrate her daughter's 18th birthday—a threshold into adulthood—the menu is very sophisticated and not at all distinctly Polish:

Mom served us appetizers on a silver tray. Cheez Whiz on sesame thins with julienne cuts of pimento, and Smoky Links on toothpicks with cellophane frizzies on their tops.... Dinner was prime rib on large china plates along with a leafy green salad, a fluffy spinach souffle, and parkerhouse rolls. My friends were duly impressed. They unfolded their linen napkins on their laps, nervously eyed the assortment of silverware and crystal before them and held their spines rigid. (Kern 173)

What is interesting, culinary sophistication generates discomfort among the young guests, in contradistinction to the previously quoted depictions of food that evoked a sense of intimacy, friendship, and community. Interestingly, this seems to be the only depiction of fancy food in the novel; for the most part, Polish Downtown does not seem to be a place for culinary extravaganza. Even if the food consumed by the characters is not Polish, it is still simple, to give the examples of the Chicago-style hot dogs served in the street or Ellie's Italian American aunt's lasagna brought to the dinner prepared for Father Ben, Aunt Nina's secret lover. The lasagna seems the only culinary concession to outsiders, which nevertheless shows that were the family to accept one not of their own, they would still need to be white and Roman Catholic.

Apart from these two major roles of food discussed above—as marker of ethnicity and element of community-building—food is also presented as a means of subsistence. Ellie's much younger sister Marta ends up as a proprietor of a chain of Polish fast-food restaurants in New York, simply called Marta's. Food also offers a glimpse into ethnic succession, a common pattern of change in urban areas. When the middle-aged Ellie asks her cab driver to stop at her old neighborhood, his initial response is: "That neighborhood is a dump" (Kern 2). As Eleanor walks the neighborhood, it becomes clear that it is now a Mexican American area, a change epitomized by her getting tacos-to-go.

Food also plays a significant role in Marcia Cebulka's *Lovers, Dreamers, & Thieves*, a memoir in which Cebulka tells her family's immigrant history through brief chapters focused on a single family member and through family pictures. Similarly to Dybek's and Kern's take, food in Cebulka's account is related to the preservation of ethnic identity. This is especially clear in the chapter titled "Polish Easter," in which the author enumerates dishes she remembers from Easter celebrations in her family home against the context of a trip she made as a young woman to visit her mother's relatives in the vicinity of Kraków so as to celebrate an

authentic Polish Easter. This notwithstanding, food in Cebulka's memoir serves primarily as a means of social ascent, a function hinted at also in Kern's novel. The family's bakery is so successful that they are wealthy enough to shop at Marshall Fields and move to the suburb of Niles when Marcia is about to start 8th grade. Like Kern's protagonist, Cebulka makes a come-back visit to her family home and bakery at 2501 N. Lotus Ave in Chicago as a mature woman. She does so upon the request of her husband, as she herself is extremely reluctant to go, given the painful memories that she shares with the reader: her father's proclivity for gambling, which cost him his reputation and freedom, the physical abuse of her mother by her father that she and her older brother could only helplessly watch, the eventual divorce of her parents, and the father's subsequent downfall and homelessness. The power of Cebulka's account lies in my view in the painful honesty with which she discusses the things that would typically be considered taboos, including her mother's crush on or a possible affair with a local priest, again a motive that her memoir shares with Kern's novel. Cebulka does not offer a sugar-coated view of the Polish American community or her own family, but rather seems to subscribe to the view that truth needs to be told, even if it is a very harsh truth. Even if Kern does not shy away from difficult topics either, her novel still reads as quite an optimistic account of all ending up well in the long run. If Cebulka celebrates anything, it is the power of perseverance.

Conclusion

As argued in this essay, Stuart Dybek, Elizabeth Kern, and Marcia Cebulka all deploy food as code for ethnicity and family history. Polish Chicagoan literature tends to depict foodscapes as an exclusively female domain, regardless of the author's gender. What is interesting, however, is that women authors, such as Kern and Cebulka, in general seem to pay more attention to the preparation and consumption of Polish dishes as a way to signal their characters' allegiance to their identity as Polish ethnics. While in all of these writers Polish food is understood in terms of ethnic legacy, what the women writers propose is that food can also serve as a means for Polish women to achieve financial stability and freedom outside of the gendered constraints of the Polish American community.

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“All That Is Good Is Nasty!”: Parliament-Funkadelic and the Grooving Bodies of Afrofuturistic Citizens

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Abstract: This paper discusses the idea of citizenship as represented through Parliament-Funkadelic’s trademark Afrofuturistic take on funk music. Afrofuturism connects and reimagines the past, present, and future of the Black diaspora, often from an African American perspective. As a product of Black culture, born out of a response to the turbulent circumstances of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, funk proves a powerful lens for discussing citizenship. The purpose of this paper is to present funk as an affective mnemonic device that carries social and historical knowledge, crucial to the formation of national identities. To illustrate this, Parliament-Funkadelic’s Afrofuturistic journey towards the liberation of the Black body and its communal agency is discussed. I highlight the band’s emphasis on sourcing freedom in the innate drives of the body, and thus bringing about a sort of collective intimacy which fosters the creation of new identities, united in movement.

Keywords: Afrofuturism, funk, music, African American music, citizenship, community

The social, political, and cultural importance of African American music has been widely acknowledged at least since the early twentieth century. From W. E. B. Du Bois’s exploration of “Sorrow Songs” to Houston Baker’s examination of blues, and the extensive studies on the hip-hop generation, the impact of Black musical tradition has been acknowledged as a central force within both the African American community and American mainstream culture. There is, however, one notable Black musical genre that has frequently been ignored by scholars. Because of its inherent insistence on a sound that is dynamic and headstrong, as well as the lyrical content, for years funk has been dismissed as music that is not to be taken seriously. As Rickey Vincent points out in reference to the funk scene, “most people do not realize that a significant musical movement occurred during the 1970s, generated primarily by outcast musicians from the black underclass in America” (91). Timothy S. Hughes also points to the often-overlooked political significance of this genre and argues that “perhaps the most significant feature of funk is that in its day it was musically political.” He explains that “simply playing in a funk style was a provocative political action—whatever the accompanying visual image or lyric content,” mainly due to the genre’s message transcending race, class, personal style, and political divisions (113). Expanding upon Vincent’s and Hughes’s claims, I will demonstrate that funk goes beyond being merely an illustration of African American cultural expression; rather, it should be recognized as a vehicle for political commentary, resistance, and the construction of identities. My analysis will center on the Afrofuturist aesthetics of George Clinton’s Parliament-Funkadelic, drawing on Josh Kun’s concept of audiotopia and Lauren Berlant’s notion of affective citizenship to substantiate my arguments.

In Audiotopia, Kun contends that “popular music in ‘America’ is an archive of sound, performance, and culture that has cultural revisioning and decentering as its organizing principles” (16). Afrofuturism serves as a great example of grand-scale cultural revisioning, and it pairs well with the concept of audiotopia, which emphasizes the search for difference and strangeness within music. The confrontation of the “normal” and the “strange” proves a potent ground for identity formation, including national identities. Through their take on Afrofuturism, Parliament-Funkadelic posse champions an engaged, personal, and affective citizenship. I argue that for P-Funk, its essence comes down to the body, especially in the way that it both moves by itself and operates in relation to other bodies. On the one hand, the main concern is how individuals perceive and experience their own bodies; on the other hand, the key is to navigate differences among bodies, actively challenge the limits of “otherness,” and thus generate “togetherness in motion,” which Howard C. Harris, quoted by Vincent, sees as the essence of funk (64). I have selected two albums to showcase Clinton’s use of music as a mnemonic device and a vessel for social change. Mothership Connection (1975), which reifies funk as the ruler of all beings, inspires the discussion of the impact that rhythm and repetition in P-Funk have on listeners’ emotions and bodily reactions. In turn, the discussion of 1977’s *Motor Booty Affair* focuses on how P-Funk engages with Atlantis as a metaphorical space for marginalized communities to reclaim narratives of power and resilience. The underwater celebration of difference as positive and desirable allows for outlining the P-Funk project’s attitude towards “freaks” as those intimately connected to funk, subverting traditional notions of belonging.

Since publication of Mark Dery’s 1994 essay “Black to the Future,” in which Afrofuturism was first defined, numerous ideas of what Afrofuturism is have been concocted. Reynaldo Anderson and John Jenkins note that contemporary Afrofuturism was “maturing in the area of metaphysical components such as cosmogony, cosmology, speculative philosophy, and philosophy of science” (29). Alondra Nelson shifts the weight from images of technology itself to how technology aids broadly defined Black creation rather than serves as its object (9). Adriano Elia sees Afrofuturism as “a transdisciplinary cultural movement based upon the unusual connection between the marginality of allegedly ‘primitive’ people of the African diaspora and ‘modern’ technology and science fiction” (83). Afrofuturism has strong ties to the idea of Black utopianism. The reality of African Americans, akin to a dystopia from the outset, conditioned utopian imaginaries to seek different gateways into the freedom that manifested in Black self-determination and a colorblind world.

A refreshing look at the possibility of a Black utopia came in the 1960s through the work of American jazzman Sun Ra, whose space analogies were “the ideal way to escape the parameters of music and humanity, and they freed him creatively to ponder the life questions he seemed so dedicated to answering and addressing through music” (Womack 87). Zamalin believes that Sun Ra’s version of Afrofuturism “said something about the depths of black despair and the possibility of constructing a new citizen” (9). Sun Ra’s artistic projects are relevant for this

study as he serves as the direct precursor to the Afrofuturist aesthetics embraced by Parliament-Funkadelic. Additionally, his work effectively embodies Kun's notion of audiotopia. The sound and the message of Sun Ra epitomize the concept of a "small, momentarily lived utopia" that may consist of various musical elements such as rhythm, chords, lyrics, etc., and it can offer a map to "position listeners within the larger social world" (3). Sun Ra's audiotopia serves as a navigational tool, positioning listeners within the broader social landscape.

An audiotopian dialogue with music forces the audience to confront strangeness both within themselves and within music—to illustrate the power of such a confrontation, Kun quotes James Baldwin's meditations on identity in *Notes of a Native Son*: "An identity is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to fall, or when the wretched begin to rise, or when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter, to be a stranger: the stranger's presence making you the stranger, less the stranger than to yourself" (12). In turn, Kun encourages the embracing of strangeness as formative not only in the individual, internal sense but also in the broader context of citizenship. As the notion of community and citizenship is central to my reading of funk's significance, I will complement Kun's concept of audiotopia by incorporating recent theories of citizenship from affect studies.

Lauren Berlant defines citizenship as "a relation among strangers who learn to feel it as a common identity based on shared historical, legal, or familial connection to a geopolitical space" and adds that "many institutional and social practices are aimed at inducing a visceral identification of personal identity with nationality" ("Citizenship" 38). Berlant's insistence on both strangeness and feeling as the basis for citizenship should be noted here—a complex relationship with the inhabited space must be established to speak of citizenry, and it can only be forged through a confrontation with strangeness that prioritizes embracing said strangeness as our own. In reading popular music as a vehicle for learning about citizenship, it can be inferred that although lyrics, chords, or rhythm serve as the building blocks for a "map positioning us within the larger social world" that an audiotopia proposes, the real process of positioning begins with and is fueled by emotion. As Kun writes, "the emotion and the sensibility that music offers are what leads to a change in who we are, who we want to be, and how we want the world to be." He refers to performance scholars Richard Dyer and Jill Dolan, according to whom utopianism in music does not stem straightforwardly from the sounds, but it is "contained in the feelings it embodies," and "presents what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized" (17).

Another element that appears crucial towards establishing the connections that constitute what Berlant describes as citizenship is the affective reaction to newly acquiesced historical knowledge. Alison Landsberg writes about "prosthetic memories," whose nature stems from individual encounters with public (and publicly felt) memories by the way of mass media (15). Although Landsberg's analysis of affective engagements with remediated visions of the past is sourced in film and

television, I believe it can be applied to music. While the visual aspect of film and TV connects audiences much more rapidly to the actual content, songs (especially those accompanied by music videos) can also foster a complex relationship between the listener and its content. As one of the examples of affect's workings in learning history, Landsberg suggests an "oscillation" between "absorption and distraction," where absorption allows the audience to identify the represented historical circumstances as important, and distraction maintains the distance necessary to evoke reflection—both upon the mediated past and the self among the encountered and, more importantly, experienced remediation (41). The importance of experience to affect studies cannot be overstated—affect, i.e., "the experience of being touched or moved before that sensation is recognized or codified into a particular emotion or feeling," sparks the formation of new ideas, sensibilities, and connections to others, which later turn into action (Landsberg 45). Through an engagement with sound, this may be even more immediate and relevant than the impact of audiovisual works. Landsberg recognizes the difference between the experience of living through a historical event and witnessing it through remediation; still, she emphasizes the role of affect here as she asserts that "even in the presence of a mediated representation, the body can be moved, touched, affected. The experience of the mediated representation is itself lived; it is a real experience" (48). This aligns with Kun's idea of interacting with music within the audiotopian space; once a connection with a certain musical work is forged, the listener will be left with *something new*—whether affect or new knowledge, it will be of substance and potential.

The community-building aspect, which supports the core idea of citizenship and music's utopian tendencies, is best exemplified by collective experiences of performance, during which cultural spaces can instill an array of feelings in audiences, notwithstanding the desire to "reach for something better, for new ideas about how to be and how to be with each other" (Dolan 455). Although Jill Dolan writes about utopia and the deep reactions to stories told on stage in the context of theatre, her arguments are applicable to live musical performances. When discussing the communal role of Black music, Cornel West sees the importance of sharing certain spaces while performing in them providing "a view of a different sense of who you are: you're human as opposed to subhuman" (79). The spaces discussed by West can be viewed not only as actual places but also as audiotopias since in the moment of interaction with live music each listener enters a different world of sound. It is both an individual and collective experience as the entire audience engages in a dialogue with the same musical matter, yet interpretations of what they hear may vary significantly. Kun was cited earlier on being inspired by emotion and sensibility provided by music to change the world; and yet, the singular world that he refers to could be seen as a combination of billions of metaphorical worlds, which may have just as many inhabitants. Jennifer Gabrys encourages the "recasting of the *citizen of the world* as *citizens of worlds*" as she studies "how political affiliations and encounters are multiple and do not necessarily or exclusively parse as nation-state territories or singular forms of belonging" (3). She adds that "practices that

investigate the co-constitutive aspects of citizens and worlds offer a way to recast the hardened origin story of citizenship" (3).

Gabrys's point is reiterated by Berlant, who strongly believes in the proliferation of "different ways of being in relation," with citizenship as the prime example; she also says that citizenship is among "objects of ambition and desire," which, once treated as "stand-ins that organize our attachment to life," conjure up a "different understanding and a kind of generosity toward those objects" ("Citizenship"). Berlant further explains that her interest in citizenship sprouted from noticing that people see citizenship as "a state where they could imagine being collective and being willing to be collective in ways that were also inconvenient for them" ("Citizenship"). The grand-scale struggle for citizenship plays out mainly through social movements—mobilization to participate in them is ruled by emotion, and it is the degree to which emotion can motivate participants that decides the longevity of the social action. In the discourse surrounding contemporary expressions of Afrofuturism, social activism of the past decade is named as a possible form of Black utopianism; Black Lives Matter, a movement started by the means of modern-day technology, emerges as the most common example. When asked about the protests against systemic racism and police brutality as "a new Black utopia in the making," Zamalin answers that "it depends" and emphasizes that the crucial element in the eventual success of BLM activists is to "continue to recognize that utopian yearnings are fragile and can easily be subverted from without or within—and to push for that horizon they believe will lead to global freedom." While this article will be focused on Afrofuturism in culture and on the ways it can cause ripples in other areas of life, the (however brief) consideration of social movements in the proximity of the Afrofuturistic banner shows that the definition of the term has expanded far beyond its initial shape. Seeking the connections between Afrofuturism, history, and affect in the output of Parliament-Funkadelic will allow for an examination of the band's motivations to create images and sounds grounded in Afrofuturist and utopian thinking.

While James Brown and his musicians were responsible for crafting the first popular version of the funk sound, George Clinton's evolving vision allowed funk to blossom into a multidimensional artistic phenomenon. After Brown provided the musical and rhythmic blueprint as well as the frenetic pace of performing funk, Clinton added the storytelling and theatricals, fueled by the power of musical and aesthetic shapeshifting. The *one nation under a groove*, which Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic invites us to participate in, is an emanation of "new potentiality," combining elements of cultural uniqueness with a dynamic nature, while also embracing physicality and extending an open invitation to transcendence (Royster 99). Although Parliament and Funkadelic are commonly associated with each other and their members often switched between the two groups, they released their music independently. The distinction was not solely based on sonic differences; Werner argues that there is also an ideological divergence between Funkadelic and Parliament, stemming from their perspectives on time and location. The author explains that while Funkadelic

focused on “a conversation with the Black Power movement which had moved on to the realm of ancestors,” Parliament’s message involved “a fundamental change,” which meant doing away with the “either/or approach shared by mainstream politicians and their ‘revolutionary’ doubles” (Werner 228). For Funkadelic, an example of said conversation can be the 1972 album *America Eats Its Young*, which uses the anxieties and dissatisfaction of lower middle- and working-class African Americans in the early 1970s to paint a picture of a country at war with itself and a society that tends to dispose of its youth, especially in the context of Nixon’s war on drugs, the US involvement in Vietnam, and the continuing discrimination of minorities despite formal advancements such as the Fair Housing Act of 1968 or the Equal Opportunity Act of 1972. Although a significant portion of the lyrical imagery on *America Eats Its Young* presents a gloomy and grim reality of the United States, Clinton and his bandmates refuse to abandon their country—their calls to action make up for the most prevalent theme on the record. The social essence of affect manifests itself here—Funkadelic’s goal seems to exceed emoting; through music, they intend to connect with the listeners by the way of emotion, and thus motivate them to act, which is not limited to taking external measures but can also entail self-reflection.

At a time when the Civil Rights Movement’s protest activities subsided and the fostering of togetherness within the African American community had to be transferred to new leaders, funk musicians were among those who took up the mantle and challenged the socio-political status quo by the way of retelling and mythologizing everyday life experiences of the Black community (Morant 72). Vincent believes that apart from the aesthetic shift that the P-Funk craze brought about, the collective’s most important achievement was their assertion of “a postmodern black aesthetic at a time when sociologists, politicians, and writers were mired in integrationist dialectics” (441).

If *America Eats Its Young* was an immediate response to the fraught environment African Americans had to grapple with in the early 1970s, *Mothership Connection* became a celebratory vision for a more distant future. Vincent calls 1975 “the Year of the Mothership Connection,” which ushered in the era of P-Funk as “a truly spiritual form of black music in the tradition of jazz, soul, reggae, or gospel” and a musical journey to transcendence that escaped Earth and bound those traveling towards the cosmos (459). In *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, his seminal work within the field of music criticism, Kodwo Eshun counts P-Funk as part of the “Postsoul Era” in music, which the author characterizes as “extremely indifferent towards the human,” suggesting technology’s supremacy over an incessant struggle for realness understood as synonymous with humanness (3). To Eshun, the postsoul—and thus, posthuman—is not to be seen as disembodied, but rather *hyperembodied* (emphasis in original), since technology broadens music’s scope by “undermining, recombining and reconfiguring” the artform (5). Kun’s audiotopia bears much similarity to the “psychoacoustic fictional spaces” that Eshun explores in his work; P-Funk itself creates such a space on the Mothership as they “compel you to succumb to the inhuman, to be abducted and love it” (140). While musicians take over the

compelling, it is the music itself that is responsible for most actions and reactions, be it mental or physical. *Mothership Connection* serves as a testament to P-Funk's belief in music as "a living thing, an evolving conversation," and a deeply transformative vehicle that transcends earthly limitations (Clinton and Greenman 161).

The adventure on the Mothership begins with a broadcast hosted by the "abductors." A speaker, who introduces himself as the Lollipop Man, tells the audience not to attempt to adjust the radio as "there is nothing wrong" ("P-Funk [Wants to Get Funked Up]"). Eshun interprets the radio here as a "channel between offworld and onworld," and adds that "for Parliament, radio connects the human to the alien" (139). Moreover, the use of the radio resembles a sort of colonization of the aural space; the listener is naturally free to choose whether they want to listen to the broadcast or not, but once they decide to stay with WEFUNK, the experience is promised to exceed a typical listening session and immerse the audience in a new reality controlled by funk. "P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)" offers an introduction to and explanation of funk's power—funk can heal ("If you got faults, defects or shortcomings / You know, like arthritis, rheumatism or migraines / Whatever part of your body it is, I want you to lay it on your radio"), funk can warp the sense of time ("Once upon a time called Now"), funk can "move and re-move," the latter of which can be understood as a rewiring of one's inner workings—again, both mental and physical. Having boarded the Mothership on "P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)," the party commences, and the alien hosts proclaim that "they have returned to claim the pyramids" ("Mothership Connection [Star Child]"). The Afrofuturists' fascination with Egyptian culture, especially the pyramids, proposes a new perspective on the history of the African diaspora, which is rarely discussed in terms of advancement instead of strife (Womack 117). Pyramids symbolize one of the main tenets of Afrofuturism—they are a physical representation of the connection between the past and the (futuristic) present and the cultural legacy that is to be excavated and celebrated through new art.

Aboard Parliament's Mothership, time knows few boundaries as it interacts with funk here understood as a noun, a verb, and an adjective. Without time, it is impossible to engross oneself in the practice that is funk. "Unfunky UFO," the third song on *Mothership Connection*, is written from the point of view of someone who lacks in feeling, groove, and mystical funkiness; the person speaking switches between singular and plural, and in the chorus, the "punks" describe themselves as "unfunky, obsolete and out of time." Here, a twofold meaning of "time" reveals itself, as it is also a reference to musical time, which is crucial to understanding and *feeling* the groove. Being "out of time" complicates the listening experience—Fred Moten asserts that even outside of the music itself, "stories are driven by the time they inhabit, violently reproducing, iconizing, improvising themselves" (72). Once again, therefore, stories—whether they are told through music, literature, or visual art—can be treated as beings with agency and power to affect, and time allows them to reshape and reform. In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett argues that while relating affect to materiality, "organic and inorganic bodies, natural and cultural objects

(these distinctions are not particularly salient here) all are affective” (Bennett xii). Perhaps even more importantly, Bennett claims that actants never really act alone because “efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces” (21). Following this logic, stories and pieces of music as products of culture can also be considered vibrant matter—their particular elements, i.e., words or chords, always exist separately from humans, and only once an affective interaction occurs do they obtain said materiality. This is why, for example, one can consider rhythm as something that exists outside of the human mind—it cannot be touched, but it can still be perceived and have sufficient effects to be recognized as vital matter.

Eshun writes about the “psychoacoustics of rhythm,” which he explains as a grounding mechanism for the listener—first, one anticipates the cycle, then enters the groove, and finally goes on to “live inside the tense present of the loop” (24). Besides an individual member of an audience, this “tense present” has no other inhabitants—the role of the artist as a master of the psychoacoustic space is secondary; the space rules itself and takes up a dialogue with the listener, whose role—using Landsberg’s absorption-distraction model of engaging in remediation—is to identify the meaning of this brief “life inside the loop,” and decide how significant that meaning will be in the future. This is how Clinton treats funk—there is a consistent insistence on viewing music as something distinct from its makers. Repetition is crucial to the funk rhythm—both in terms of the instrumental and vocal layers. In “Supergroovasticprosifunktion (The Bumps Bump),” the lyrics resemble a mystic chant; the singers harmonize while repeating phrases such as “Give the people what they want when they want, and they want it all the time” against the backdrop of bells, rattles, and—most prominently—Bernie Worrell’s synth line. Its sound slides along the beat in a snake-like fashion, and other times, it dabbles along the groove’s motion; moreover, it is significantly louder than the vocals and other instruments, which partially displaces the listener in the soundscape.

To Eshun, the rhythm (“the breakbeat”) is not only the psychological mechanism described above but also a mnemonic device that “trains the obstinate body until it recognizes its endpoint” (24). The corporeal reaction to elements of music falls in the category of affect, which—as opposed to emotion—is considered to escape semantics and verbal representation; before one can consciously process certain experiences as emotions, they tend to occur in the body (Sharma and Tygstrup 20). Instances of auditory affect can manifest in diverse manners. During the act of engaging with a musical composition, individuals may involuntarily exhibit physiological responses, e.g., tearfulness or goosebumps, which may evolve into corresponding emotional experiences. Additionally, subconscious reactions to music can also find expression through motor activities, such as dancing. Unanticipated bodily responses to music encompass activities like foot or finger tapping, head nodding, or rhythmic tongue clicking. All listed actions indicate an affective and engaged mode of listening, which is the gateway to reaching audiotopia, i.e., entering a dialogue with the encountered forms of sound.

"Give Up the Funk (Tear the Roof off the Sucker)" is a straightforward celebration of the *realness* of rhythm—the repetitive lyrics present an almost ritual call that summons the funk, propelled by the rhythm circulating the imagined space. The phrases "we're gonna turn this mother out" and "you've got a real type of thing goin' down, gettin' down" refer to physical movement provoked by music. In her autoethnographic research on the connection between dancing, affect, and national bodies, Elisabeth Militz asserts that affect "activates bodily histories through (dis)connecting different bodies, objects, and places and renders them (ir)relevant in a specific situation" (183). Although Militz's work focuses on her relationship to dancing that symbolizes a certain national identity, which she finds difficult to associate herself with, she observes that music becomes enriched by "the sight of choreographed moving body parts, such as tripping feet, circling fingers and shyly swinging hips." She likens the coming together of moving bodies with the sound of music to fitting puzzle pieces and "a mutually intensifying unity;" then, as she finds herself attempting to join the group of dancers and is met with joy and encouragement on their part, Militz goes on to observe that "sharing or not sharing [a] symbolic order makes bodies connect and disconnect with practices, routines and representations of nation" (186). Transferring Militz's thoughts to the concept of the *Mothership Connection*, it can be inferred that "Give up the Funk" marks the moment when the original aliens come together with other groups encountered along the journey (other alien species and those captured at the beginning of the story). The collective person speaking in "Give Up the Funk" may represent the same group that described themselves as "out of time" in "Unfunky UFO." When the "unfunky" visitors demand the funk be given up to them, they wish to be allowed into the space powered by the movement, the sound, and the community. The constantly reiterated idea of collective participation suggests that unity in funk is training in togetherness; the affective connection created by the lived (albeit imagined) musical experience is likely to instill in listeners a desire for transcending the psychoacoustic space and acting in their external spaces.

Another dimension of interconnectedness between bodies is the sexual sphere, which Parliament-Funkadelic often approached with provocation and subversion in mind. Love, sex, and desire are a permanent thematic fixture in the P-Funk repertoire. The musicians approach the named three aspects and the "human rhythms" that drive them from a perspective that can be considered queer. Francesca T. Royster, for example, argues that in interviews, public appearances, and onstage, George Clinton and other band members "risk the notion of proper black masculinity, not just by cross-dressing but by playing with dynamics of humiliation, abjection, and exposure" (97). She recognizes that for Parliament-Funkadelic, male sexuality is often "the source of gentle and not so gentle mockery and critique" and lists instances such as P-Funk members "wearing diapers or soiled bed sheets for robes; wearing see-through women's black lace panties; or creating the outsized and sexually anxious persona Sir Nose, with his pale, floppy, rubberized, and (somewhat thinly) phallic schnoz" (97, 105). Royster argues for a queering of P-Funk's musical space, which may hold

importance for “improvising and performing nonnormative sexual desires for black men,” and it can serve as an example of a “seemingly normative male space,” molded into an area fit for “more fluid sexual and gender self-fashioning, identification, and desire” (99). P-Funk’s openness to experimenting with the performance of sex/gender aligns with Berlant and Michael Warner’s arguments about the privatization of intimacy and queer world-making as an answer to this process. In a 1998 paper titled “Sex in Public,” the authors explain that the privatization of intimacy has led to the segregation of personal and public spheres, with sex being relegated to the private realm. This, in turn, has led to the division between normalized and criminalized intimacies. For Berlant and Warner, queer culture challenges this normative intimacy by constructing alternative worlds, which assemble “a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, project horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies” (558-59).

A distinctive take on desire on *Mothership Connection* is the song “Handcuffs,” which takes sexual encounters to an extraterrestrial extreme. The song begins with a short-tempered yet playful question: “Do I have to put my handcuffs on you, mama?”; later in the chorus, the person speaking portrays the “mama” as a “sweet, sexy woman, and good to a man,” which implies both parties’ identification as human. Importantly, in the first verse, the person speaking wonders if he must “keep [the female] barefoot and pregnant to keep her in his world,” suggesting that the object of his desire comes from a different planet than his own. This suggestion is reified when the female’s “lovin” is described as “creature-like,” and the person speaking asks whether she would “submit to the first person who calls her name.” The female is treated as a fascinating sex object whose “creature-like loving” is to blame for the person-speaking’s relentless advances. The narrator preventively challenges potential claims regarding his chauvinism—he proclaims he “doesn’t care” and prepares anyone who criticizes him to “go to hell,” while he seeks ways to temper his lover (“Handcuffs”). By making this taming seem so necessary, the narrator—and Clinton himself—could be asserting confidence in his masculinity, the general image of which was changing in the 1970s. Support for the narrator’s preemptive denouncement of the chauvinism comes from Vincent—he argues that in general, P-Funk “manages to revere the struggles of women and pursue them with open and ribald sexual aggression at the same time” (487). In his view, P-Funk ideals include and rejoice in the passionate nature of the sexual urge as well as the nonsensical truths of sexual allure, all while validating the humanity of women.

However futuristic and affirmative the aesthetics of P-Funk are, the portrayal of the female in “Handcuffs” plays into the following stereotypical motive: in the end, the man is to overpower the woman—the devil, the temptress, Lilith—even if he does so with reverence and respect, as Vincent insists is the case in the P-Funk imagination. Of course, this is not to say that the P-Funk Lilith exhibits weakness—looking at the lyrics of “Handcuffs,” it appears self-evident that the female in the story is strong, and perhaps even threatening to the male person speaking. Royster, who writes extensively about Parliament-Funkadelic’s subversive representations at

the intersection of masculinity and femininity, acknowledges that at times, the band represents male and female relationships in "crudely sexualized terms lyrically and in terms of the icons of its covers" (104). However, she also argues that "Parliament/Funkadelic's ultimate vision of black humanity seems to be one in which men and women are equal and connected in struggle," reiterating the point made by Vincent.

The most common thematic overtone of Afrofuturism is the exploration of space. It is not, however, the only dimension of the speculative fiction that Afrofuturist artists turn to; an interest in ancient African culture and spirituality is particular to bands such as Earth, Wind & Fire, for example. Water and its different incarnations can be counted as another prominent Afrofuturistic theme—Parliament-Funkadelic explored it on their 1978 album *Motor Booty Affair*, which is canonical to their 1970s space odyssey, consisting of several concept albums. Among the various aquatic motifs proposed on *Motor Booty Affair*, but—more generally—in numerous works of Afrofuturism, a fascination with Atlantis stands out. The tragic sinking of Atlantis highlights the unpredictability of nature—Plato reminds us that no civilization, regardless of its accomplishments, is immune to destruction and serves as a reminder of the fragility of human achievements. Within Afrofuturism, Atlantis takes on a renewed significance. It becomes a metaphorical space where marginalized communities rediscover their agency and reclaim narratives of power and resilience.

The element of water itself bears much significance—as a fundamental element of existence and an embodiment of transformation, water carries deep cultural and spiritual significance in African diasporic communities. It represents the primordial source of life and serves as a conduit for spiritual and physical connections. Water's ability to change states and flow freely adds another layer of symbolism and points towards resilience, adaptability, and the dynamic nature of African cultures. Hence the somewhat revisionist fascination with Atlantis as a submerged mythical civilization, lost beneath the waves, as having ties to Africa. Such a rewriting of Atlantis speaks to a desire to reclaim forgotten knowledge and reconstruct historical narratives, while simultaneously broadening the scope of what can count as Afrofuturism. In his discussion of space and time in Afrofuturist sound, Steinskog calls upon Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, which recontextualizes the history of the slave trade and reintroduces the ocean as "a place in-between," where "movement and transport become more important than presence in a particular place" (98). Since modernity sees humans as initially oblivious and alien to the New World, slave ships, which transported Africans across continents to a drastically different reality, can be viewed as "a historical predecessor to the spaceships of the future" (Steinskog 98). Afrofuturist or Afrosurrealist stories furnish the ocean as a space of growth and ability, as opposed to a site of pain and desperation that is inherent to the loss of one's home and identity, as well as the relationship between the two. For P-Funk, the fabled undersea opens as many possibilities as outer space.

Between 1975 and 1978, after the success of *Mothership Connection*, P-Funk released two other albums—*The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* and *Funkentelechy vs. the*

Placebo Syndrome. Funkadelic enjoyed major success with their *One Nation Under a Groove*, and the title track—inspired by a particularly impactful live performance in Washington, D.C.—achieved an anthemic status. Shortly after the release of *One Nation*, *Motor Booty Affair* hit the shelves. It continues the science-fiction concept established on *Mothership Connection* and builds on it with themes and elements such as cloning, which Clinton admitted to having been fascinated by as a “cutting-edge science that answered age-old questions about mortality” (148). The party-loving aliens relocate their endless gatherings to the titular motorboat, where one goes to “shake their rump” (“Mr. Wiggles”). Star Child makes his return as the narrator of the story, still using the radio to communicate with his audience. The roster of characters considerably expands, with the prominent addition of Mr. Wiggles, the new underwater party host. Clinton explains that his band “populated the ocean of *Motor Booty Affair* with mermaids and fish and everything you’d expect to see, but also with tribes from Africa who left the plains and went into the ocean” (203). While *Mothership Connection* was more of a fantasy that Clinton interpreted as the extension of “putting a Black man in the White House” from 1975’s *Chocolate City*, *Motor Booty Affair* can be treated as a reclaiming of the ocean that exceeds its counter-historical function as the birth site of modernity and becomes a space which celebrates Blackness in its numerous aspects but does so with necessary caution (140). Royster reaffirms the connection between funk, the body, and pleasure by saying that “you cannot have funk without the sweat, without the labor of the body at work (and play),” and she paraphrases George Clinton’s philosophy behind the funky body as “one that challenges the order of the ways that the body is patrolled and controlled in space” (103). To illustrate this philosophy, Royster references *Motor Booty Affair*’s “Aquaboogie (A Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadoloop),” which she interprets as “an underwater escape from this history of control where ‘With the rhythm it takes to dance to what we have to live through / you can dance underwater and not get wet’” (103). She adds that “Aquaboogie” reframes underwater as “a place to speak back to history, to defy the rules of nature.” Building on this argument, the underwater is a space for celebration of Blackness and speaking back to history, but also a space for negotiating difference, which Berlant sees as the foundation for citizenship. The boundaries of difference are not only negotiated—in the process, they also reposition said difference as appealing and productive.

“(You’re a Fish and I’m a) Water Sign,” which was originally released as a B-side to “Aquaboogie,” is another spirited number in the Parliament-Funkadelic catalog that revels in how enticing differences can be. The song—the sole downtempo track on the album—begins with a one-sided conversation, accompanied by sprawling and surprisingly poignant background vocals, both of which are dubbed over a guitar line which is much closer to Funkadelic’s funk-rock edge than Parliament’s dance-oriented sound. Several different voices overlap, surrounding the aural space and giving a sonic illusion of sinking as the listener follows the main characters in their “liquid love affair” that requires them to “go down” (“Water Sign”). Much like in “Handcuffs,” the narrator calls upon a female whose status as human is somewhat

ambiguous—he begins by describing her as “the baddest mermaid he done seen around here in years” but later calls the subject of his affection a “girl” (“Water Sign”). Viewed in the context of the lyrics, the eponymous differentiation between a fish and a water sign (i.e., one of the three star signs associated with water, namely: Cancer, Scorpio, or Pisces) suggests that the story revolves around an aquatic female Other and a human male. Another interpretation could nod towards the idiomatic meaning of the word “fish”—phrases such as *an odd fish* or *a fish out of water* perpetuate the connotation of the animal with a person that is strange, out of place, and somewhat awkward. Notwithstanding (or, perhaps, due to) the repeatedly asserted differences between the characters in the song, the narrator pursues the mermaid/fish and encourages her to “waddle in the waves,” to join forces “on the seaside of love,” and to enjoy “a good time” (“Water Sign”).

Towards the end of the song, the person speaking focuses on his desire to mate with the mermaid/fish, and he eventually calls their pairing “two freaky fish.” The word “freaky” has much significance in the discourse about funk, especially once funk is considered not only as a musical genre, but as a philosophy about “what it means to be otherly human, inhuman, or nonhuman” (Stallings 28). Various iterations of “the freak” abound in funk, and—in line with this philosophy’s subversive nature—they have positive connotations, typically to desire and bodily pleasure.¹ For example, Funkadelic’s titular “Freak of the Week” from the 1979 album *Uncle Jam Wants You* is a woman whose intense movements resemble “the meaning of syncopation” and will not abide by the simple rules of the disco beat. Vincent notes that the P-Funk imaginary holds space for “freaks” only, and within this space, both women and men are honored for embracing their entire authentic selves, “including their nasty, freaky funkiness” (488). Stallings remarks that a significant amount of critique has emerged regarding the appropriative utilization of the terms “freak” or “freaks” within Black American culture, as critics contend that such usage endorses an excessive sexualization of Black bodies (81). Stallings, however, juxtaposes this critique with the example of nineteenth-century Black narratives, creating “a literary tradition of funk” that would “deploy the affects of sexual pleasure and corporeal displays to situate the freak at the crossroads of resistance, spiritual transcendence, freedom, and art and entertainment” (82). For Royster, both the figure of “the freak” and the performance of “freakiness” go on to “push the edges of the present to create a language not yet recognized: new sounds, new dances, new configurations of self—the makings of a black utopia” (8). In the eccentricity/freakiness of artists such as George Clinton and his P-Funk posse, Royster recognizes “a space for dreaming, a declaration of fun, funk, play, and pleasure” (33). The positive sexual dimension of

1 Although the term “freak” appeared in funk songs prior to 1978, with “Water Sign” itself as an example of that, the track that would begin a wave of “freak”-oriented songs was the smash Chic hit “Le Freak” (Vincent 407). Vincent recaps how the “freak” was initially related to a disco dance, but eventually began to be associated with “loose women.” The author continues: “A fad that lasted years beyond its hip usage, the ‘freak’ became a part of America’s modern folklore, and despite the sexy double entendre, freak eventually was used childishly to demean women in eighties black music on such sexist jibes as ‘I Need a Freak’ and ‘The Freaks Come Out at Night’ (408).

the funky freak becomes a conduit for empowerment, authenticity, and resistance. By challenging existing paradigms and embracing the power of their bodies and desires, individuals within the realm of funk assert the right to exist on their own terms.

Whereas on “Aquaboogie” the main idea was to “go down,” *Motor Booty Affair*’s closer, “Deep,” calls for “raising Atlantis from the bottom of the sea” by “dancing ‘til [it’s brought] to the top.” According to Clinton, the nine-minute-long funk epic “poked into pretty much every remaining corner” that was left once the band covered “pure entertainment” bases; in Clinton’s own words, they focused on “political organization [and] NIMBYism” (204). The latter phenomenon emerged as a form of resistance to the integration of African Americans into predominantly white neighborhoods, especially when proposals were made to build affordable housing or public housing projects. While NIMBYism (derived from the acronym for the phrase “Not in My Backyard”) affects various communities and projects, the racial dynamics underlying opposition to certain developments have had a disproportionate impact on African Americans and perpetuated spatial inequality and segregation. Another important matter for original NIMBYs was environmentalism—McGurty recalls that in the late 1960s, when the “environmentalist” label “became a full identity and part of the public discourse,” numerous discussions were held regarding the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation and reform on people of color and those living in poverty (303). Parliament reflect the NIMBY approach on “Deep” by acting out short dialogues throughout the lyrics; towards the middle of the song, there is a part where someone sounds as if they were talking to the police, and they say: “Listen, there’s ni**ers in our neighborhood, and I had to hire a spy. I didn’t know what to do since then.” Earlier, phrases such as “problem complexion” (about the Black complexion) and “that honky’s got his nerve alright, man / I take my piece along for my protection” appear—the latter quote is especially important because it is followed by the assertion that “a man’s got a right to be on top.”

“Deep,” which by itself seems to signify “backward” or “lost” in the context of the lyrics, showcases a few angles from which to see the socio-political situation of the Black community in the late 1970s. The environmental aspect—however briefly mentioned in “Deep”—of African Americans’ relationship with the unions reveals itself as one of the most interesting of its time. NIMBYism, which would contribute to the growing gentrification of American cities and the public housing crisis, left many African Americans cut off from the possibility of bettering their daily circumstances, leading to conflict. Many individuals were often situated near dangerous waste sites, landfills, and industrial facilities releasing pollutants into the air and water. When research findings were revealed highlighting the unequal exposure to pollution encountered by members of racial minorities in the United States, the Environmental Justice movement was formed as a response, coupled with the mobilization efforts undertaken by marginalized low-income communities and communities of color to counteract this issue (Sze 124). The official beginning of the movement was marked at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s in the predominantly Black community of Warren County, North Carolina, where protests were held against the siting of a

landfill for toxic PCB waste. In 1991, the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit declared the principles of Environmental Justice, the first of which affirms "the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species" and avows people of color's "spiritual interconnectedness" to said sacredness (*Principles...* 82). Moreover, EJ promises to fight for plenty of other causes, including environmental education, a special legal relationship of Native Peoples to the U.S. government, a safe and healthy work environment, and ethical, balanced, and responsible uses of land and renewable resources (*Principles...* 82). It can be argued that in short, EJ pledged to reframe the relationship between nature, the government, and the people, which Funkadelic lamented on *America Eats Its Young* two decades earlier and continued to give attention to on later releases, including *Motor Booty Affair*.

Almost half a century after the release of all discussed albums, in a 2022 *Harper's Bazaar* feature, Ko Bragg reflects on the climate crises of the day—here focusing on Hurricane Ida, a Category 4 storm that made landfall in southeastern Louisiana in August 2021—and recalls how she listened to 1970s funk and soul music while driving through debris left by unprecedented winds. As she "wanted nothing more than to return to a time when [she] was either too young to fully comprehend the dangers our planet faces," she decided to engage in a dialogue with "classic" songs from "back when our seasons made sense," thus entering a personal audiotopia. Bragg notes that despite being contemporaneous with the environmental justice movement, Black musicians like Stevie Wonder or Parliament-Funkadelic have received limited acknowledgment for their incorporation of climate change concerns and the imperative of preserving the environment and communal spaces within their songs. Yet, she attributes to them her knowledge of the environmental challenges during her youth and acknowledges how their songs still strike a chord with her in adulthood.

Bragg's story is an example of the previously discussed oscillation between absorption and distraction conceptualized by Landsberg—although as a child Bragg may not have been fully aware of the sociopolitical circumstances she had functioned in, she absorbed certain knowledge about them from the songs in question. As an adult, due to the process of remediation, she can recognize the significance of the songs in the past and the present, both on a personal and a global level. In general retrospect, the messages conveyed in songs like "Deep"—often dismissed as pure entertainment because of their funky way of serving—continue to resonate and serve as mnemonic devices, carrying the memories of the enduring struggle for environmental justice and racial equity, as well as the search for the definition of citizenship.

Mothership Connection and *Motor Booty Affair* take the listeners far into the future and, in only apparent disconnect from earthly matters, establish a celebratory mood that reduces the influence of social difference. Within the community inhabiting the Mothership or the Motor Booty, the unconventional authority is no longer the omnipresent and overwhelming nature, which can hardly be controlled.

The command shifts to funk—both as a musical phenomenon, based on a rhythm that disciplines all proceedings, and as a social force, which fosters a collective identity and encourages finding one's groove that can work in a broader setting. The affect mediated through collective participation in funk is a stimulus of a sense of belonging, which informs the mutual connection between citizens in Berlant's "intimate public sphere." Here, however, the nature of the collective participation is deliberate—although the P-Funksters have grand ambitions to make everyone *feel* the funk, they make it known that to be felt, funk and its rhythm must be understood; while funk may be the all-encompassing ruler of the P-Funk space, a passive acceptance of its rule will not suffice.

Although P-Funk does so in a less serious fashion than Octavia Butler, for example, they all engage with the boundary between the Human and the Other. A similar observation can be made about the aliens central to the P-Funk tales—as they scour the galaxies (and, later on, the sea world) for the "uncut funk," which is their epitome of *realness*, they embrace those who exist outside of funk's direct influence and either completely lack feeling/knowledge as to how to interact with the music or have a vague idea of what the essence of funk is and are willing to learn more about it. Vincent reminds us that at the center of the P-Funk worldview stands "an acceptance of the instinctive, sexual nature of the individual," which—in a more general sense—means an acceptance of the drives of the human body (sometimes difficult to control) as essential to understanding the "uncut funk" (488). To feel, to move at the instance of affect, to "get down low and dirty" is to be *real*. Vincent reiterates this point by recalling Clinton's chant used during concerts: "All that is good is nasty," taken from the 1970 Funkadelic song "What Is Soul," which also states that "nothing is good until you play with it." Much like in Kun's previously mentioned definition of the main task of popular music, funk in its playful, exuberant, and risqué dimension proposed by P-Funk takes on the serious role of validating the sentient experience of African Americans—especially those who, according to Stallings, "have repeatedly tried to ignore the erotic and sexual implications within funk music because open and frank sexuality did not align with the soul and post-soul civil rights policing of black bodies" (345). Royster argues that the core of Parliament-Funkadelic's music and live performances is a deep-seated "rejection of fear, loathing, and shame of the Black body" as well as a championing of "sexual and imaginative freedom" (102). Such an approach fosters an environment conducive to the creation of new identities, united in movement and benefiting from a sort of collective intimacy that this movement brings about.

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(Anti-)Liberational Feminism in the Neo-Westerns *Harriet* (2019) versus *Terror on the Prairie* (2022)

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Abstract: This essay aims to put the neo-Westerns *Harriet* and *Terror on the Prairie* into dialogue as pop-cultural texts that convey intersectional and conservative Feminism, respectively. As John G. Cawelti remarked, the turn to armed self-defense of Grace Kelly's character in *High Noon* (1952) legitimated violence on the frontier when practiced by virtuous female settlers. In fact, the Westward expansion of the U.S. necessitated both, the participation of Euro-American women and the resistance of Indigenous and enslaved Black women. The biopic *Harriet* literally commemorates the agency and legacy of the formerly enslaved Harriet Tubman who led masses of fugitive African Americans to Canada via the Underground Railroad. Like the Black Westerns of the Harlem Renaissance, the film deploys recognizable frontier aesthetics to conjure a Biblical struggle between heroism and savagery with the twist that a Black woman embodies superior moral authority with intersectional implications. In contrast, the independent film *Terror on the Prairie* with its controversial lead Gina Carano explicitly aligns itself with "anti-woke" conservatism in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd in 2020. While its title reminds of the nationalistic rhetoric of the War on Terror, the former MMA fighter Carano's central performance as a settler mother violently slaying her husband's avengers to protect her family constitutes a reactionary celebration of the foundational "myth of regeneration through violence" that Richard Slotkin described. Since both films evoke the cultural climate of their production, the flexibility of the Western as a genre can be underlined.

Keywords: Western cinema, Feminisms, American frontier, culture wars

Women in Frontier History, Literature, and Film

This essay argues that the pop cultural genre of the Western negotiates contemporary developments regarding Feminism and that the two exemplary films *Harriet* (2019; dir. Kasi Lemmons) and *Terror on the Prairie* (2022; dir. Michael Polish) are no exceptions. According to Malgorzata Martynuska, who discussed the four representative Westerns *Stagecoach* (1939), *High Noon* (1952), *Little Big Man* (1970), and *Dances with Wolves* (1990), the filmic genre commonly referred to as the "Western" and previously as "horse opera" or "cowboy picture" has been "glorifying the fast-fading values of the mythical West" since the early 20th century (60). On the one hand, it is characterized by repetition. In this sense, Martynuska names the basic themes as "conflicts between white pioneers and Native Americans as well as between cattle ranchers and fence-building farmers" and lists typical settings as "lonely isolated forts, ranch houses, the isolated homestead, breathtaking settings and open landscapes, the saloon, the jail, the livery stable, the small-town main street, or small frontier towns that are forming at the edges of civilization," "Native American sites or villages," and recurring symbols such as "the hanging tree, horses,

spurs, saddles, lassos and Colt .45's, canteens, stagecoaches and distinctive western clothing (denims, chaps, boots, etc.)" (59). Martynuska summarizes, "the central plot of the western film is maintaining law and order on the frontier" along a binary dichotomy of "good vs. bad, virtue vs. evil, settlers vs. Native Americans" in which the heroes are male "ranchers, army officers, cowboys, territorial marshals, or skilled gunfighters" whose personality she likens to "the Japanese samurai warrior, or the Arthurian knight of medieval times" (59). In American culture, this Western hero's triumph over nature and Indigenous tribes has come to symbolize "an ideal expression of the equality of opportunity" for everyman (60). On the other hand, Martynuska notes that the genre has been affected by cultural shifts over time. For example, Indigenous characters have transformed from "savage beasts attacking for no apparent reason" to "likeable characters exterminated by white colonists" due to the rise of political correctness (59). Therefore, Martynuska defines the Western film as "one of the oldest, most enduring and flexible *genres*" (59; italics in original), since its formula has timeless appeal but is still always able to translate the interests of diverse producers who approach it.

Against this backdrop, this essay sees a relation between popular culture and hegemony. This understanding follows from the pop culture theorist John Storey's paradigmatic fifth definition of popular culture (9). He connected it with the hegemony theory that Antonio Gramsci had developed (Storey 9). Storey explained, "Those using this approach see popular culture as a site of struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups and the forces of 'incorporation' operating in the interests of dominant groups" (11). As an example, Storey specifically pointed to how Feminist publishing companies resist subordination from the margins while still struggling with incorporation by publishing female authors who must conform to the genre conventions of popular genres such as science fiction or detective fiction (10-11). The Western genre could appear as a particularly difficult choice to incorporate Feminist politics, since its earliest iterations have been marked by patriarchy. As will be shown, however, *Harriet* and *Terror on the Prairie* both comply with and subvert the Western formula by centering female heroines. Further, both films were produced roughly around the same time during the simultaneous rises to mainstream popularity of intersectional and conservative Feminism. Since *Harriet* can be seen to perform intersectional Feminism and *Terror on the Prairie* conservative Feminism, this essay puts them into dialogue as reflections of and interventions into the cultural competition between these two variants of contemporary American Feminism.

Thus, literary critic Jane Tompkins claims that men wrote the first Western novels in rejection of Christian women's 19th century domestic novels and that, "If the Western deliberately rejects evangelical Protestantism and pointedly repudiates the cult of domesticity, it is because it seeks to marginalize and suppress the figure who stood for these ideals," namely, the white housewife (39). Actually, British Victorian culture heavily influenced American cultural production at the time with its emphasis on modesty, purity, and introversion—values that men might have

appreciated in women but rejected for themselves along with what they perceived as “women’s language” of expressing emotions (Tompkins 64). Against this backdrop, Tompkins views the self-imposed silence of the typical male Western hero as his resistance against the sentimental women’s culture of his time of birth in the Victorian era (55).

Similarly, genre theorist John G. Cawelti characterized the male Western hero as a rugged individual who manifests his aggression on the rigidly gendered frontier while only women live traditional domestic lives and care for their families (85-86). In this sense, Helen M. Lewis argued regarding paradigmatic Westerns starring John Wayne as their hero that female leads featured as part of “a restricted bride pool” despite the actual lack of women on the historical frontier (15). Whereas, however, “Women journalists, dentists, writers, artists, and scientists populated the West” in real life (Lewis 9), the women of classic Westerns are exclusively defined by their social function in relation to men as “available virgins,... aging spinsters, as well as widows, widows with children, divorcees, and prostitutes” (Lewis 7). These archetypal figures appear as damsels to be conquered but with minimal romantic courtship; instead, the hero either liberates them from their families or enemies of their families (Lewis 11). In fact, Lewis notes, “the wedding trip often equaled the move to the homestead” in the history of the American West (11). To underline the cultural relevance of the Western genre as an epitome of American foundational values, the women of John Wayne Westerns can be metaphorically reborn through his love (Lewis 13). Whatever their lives looked like before meeting him, he acts respectfully towards them, for example, by not usurping their wealth or by fathering their children from previous marriages (Lewis 13). Lewis summarizes that parallel to Wayne’s aging, his onscreen relationships with younger women grew increasing platonic and thus evolved as a model of personal virtue for the public (14).

This typical Western woman of constant or recuperated virtue, then, might refuse the Western man’s violent ethos but eventually condone it and rarely come to participate in it (Cawelti 87). In this sense, Cawelti identifies a rare transgression of the Western’s gender binary in the film *High Noon* from 1952 when the female lead who is a pacifist Quaker played by Grace Kelly picks up a gun to protect her husband from outlaws (87). Such rare scenes set the stage for a modern mythical plot to emerge which is “the conversion of the female to the new ethos of violence and rugged individualism” that persists in 20th century American capitalism (Cawelti 88). However, “in order to affirm the new values of mobility, competition, and individualism, the female must remain feminine while at the same time being forced to recognize that when the chips are down, there is no moral resort but the strength and courage of the isolated individual” (Cawelti 88). According to Cawelti, the female lead of a Western must never act interchangeably with the male hero, let alone dress in his clothing lest the heteronormative, patriarchal status quo of late industrial capitalism be disrupted (86). Therefore, the classic Western cinema (re-)told the history of the American frontier from the hegemonic view of white men.

Feminisms at War: Intersectionality versus Conservatism

In fact, it must be stressed that the Westward expansion of the United States of America necessitated the participation of white women as much as the resistance of Indigenous women and the forced labor of enslaved Black women. While it is the task of Feminist historiography to unveil the hidden histories of women on the frontier, the two films that were selected for this essay point to the heightened importance of frontier history for American women today who seek greater representation in politics and popular culture, including in Western cinema. Against this backdrop, this essay argues that contemporary culture wars about American history are reflected and intervened into by contemporary Western films with heroic women at their center.

The first critical perspective in what could be termed the current American Feminist culture wars pertains to intersectional Feminism whose foremothers range from the abolitionists Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth with her speech "Ain't I a Woman?" (510-511), to the Black lesbian Feminist Audre Lorde (134), the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (227), and the prison abolitionist Feminist Angela Y. Davis ("The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood"). But this movement proliferated more widely in name since Kimberlé Crenshaw first defined "intersectional experiences" that had been overlooked by both Black liberationists and Feminists (166). Among other examples, she famously referred to Black female workers who were denied the right to sue General Motors for hiring discrimination because its diversification measures only considered white women or Black men (Crenshaw 141-142). Crenshaw therefore argued against individual inclusion without collective structural change to benefit marginalized groups to the point that it can be said, "When they enter, we all enter" (167).

While Crenshaw discussed multiple social justice movements that marginalized Black women by focusing on one "single-issue" at a time (152), she concluded her seminal essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989) with the reminder that,

It is enough, for now, that such an effort would encourage us to look beneath the prevailing conceptions of discrimination and to challenge the complacency that accompanies belief in the effectiveness of this framework. By so doing, we may develop language which is critical of the dominant view and which provides some basis for unifying activity. (167)

While Crenshaw's goal of challenging intersectional discrimination by developing a critical language may not seem particularly divisive, since "When they enter, we all enter" (167) because by then society would have had to be restructured towards fundamental inclusivity, her approach has also been met with criticism. Notably, the conservative former Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz even accused the concept

of having become “a code word for anti-American, anti-Western, anti-Israel and anti-Semitic bigotry” because it allegedly allows too many and too different experiences of oppression in the West to be linked to the same capitalist superstructure. Instead, he distinguishes “important liberal causes” from “repressive extremists, who falsely claim the mantle of progressivism” (Dershowitz). Dershowitz claims that the latter group has formed around “hatred for their fellow students who are ‘privileged’ because they are white, heterosexual, male and especially Jewish.” Here, his usage of citation marks around the adjective “privileged” already demonstrates his rejection of any comparative discussions of structural privilege of identities.

Although Dershowitz’ specific criticism of intersectionality is connected to his own male, white, heterosexual, Jewish positionality, his skepticism of intersectionality as the theoretical foundation of the Black Lives Matter movement (2012-) is common in conservative circles. This reading of intersectionality further justifies perceptions of the journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones’ Pulitzer Prize-winning *1619 Project* (2020) as un-American, since it also centers a Black Feminist perspective to criticize traditional American historiography. Thus, on the four hundredth anniversary of the arrival of African slaves in the British colony of Virginia, *The 1619 Project* in *The New York Times Magazine* provocatively proposed rewriting American history through the eyes of the oppressed slaves. Jake Silverstein’s editor’s note explained the choice of the date of 1619 as follows,

It is not a year that most Americans know as a notable date in our country’s history. Those who do are at most a tiny fraction of those who can tell you that 1776 is the year of our nation’s birth. What if, however, we were to tell you that this fact, which is taught in our schools and unanimously celebrated every Fourth of July, is wrong, and that the country’s true birth date, the moment that its defining contradictions first came into the world, was in late August of 1619? Though the exact date has been lost to history (it has come to be observed on Aug. 20), that was when a ship arrived at Point Comfort in the British colony of Virginia, bearing a cargo of 20 to 30 enslaved Africans. Their arrival inaugurated a barbaric system of chattel slavery that would last for the next 250 years. This is sometimes referred to as the country’s original sin, but it is more than that: It is the country’s very origin. (4)

Silverstein’s suggestion can be understood as an intersectional reading of America’s foundational history from the bottom, since it leads to the conclusion that American freedom did not exist before it was extended to the Black slaves as well when slavery was abolished by President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation (1862). Yet, beyond the scope of Dershowitz’ gendered positionality, American conservatives of both sexes have rejected *The 1619 Project* in favor of the hegemonic narrative of the Republic’s birth on the frontier where European settlers fought the British Crown and Indigenous tribes. In the following, the conflict between intersectional and conservative Feminism that permeates current culture wars will be shown

to influence contemporary neo-Western cinema as well. As implied by the term “conservative,” political conservatism seeks to maintain the given status quo and following American women’s suffrage and liberation movements throughout the 20th century, can accommodate female politicians in the 21st century. Thus, Marsha Blackburn, a Republican senator from Tennessee provides an illustration of the American conservative women’s movement in her book, *The Mind of a Conservative Woman: Seeking the Best for Family and Country* (2020), “This isn’t radical feminism. This isn’t a bra-burning, man-hating, child-resenting, bitter-edged approach to life and politics. No. Good women love life, love their men, and are lovingly devoted to their children. They also love their bras! What they want is the freedom to be the magnificent creatures they are made to be” (xxiv).

Of course, Blackburn’s opposition to “radical feminism” rehashes derogatory stereotypes that have typically been used by men to gloss over the political demand of gender equality by reducing Feminists to non-conforming personal choices like, for example, to not marry a man or have children. Her usage of the evaluative adjective “Good” (xxiv) that she applies to heterosexual mothers could imply that those women who are neither heterosexual nor mothers and whom she lumps together under the label “radical feminism,” are by contrast “bad women.” However, despite her personal estimation, Blackburn can be seen to refrain from an essentialist definition of “Good women” with her wording, “the magnificent creatures they are made to be,” since she does not explicate whether God or society “made” them in a certain way (xxiv). Following her distinction between “radical feminism” and the conservative women’s agenda (xxiv), Blackburn continues by outlining the political focus of Republican female politicians as their rejection of state welfare which they perceive as enforcing dependency of a government that obstructs them in their pursuits “to rise as high as their gifts will carry them” in an idealized individualistic meritocracy (xxiii). Commenting on conservative women’s absence from the Women’s March in 2017, Blackburn further clarifies, “Putting ‘pussy hats’ on their heads would only diminish them, as it does the women on the left” (11). As an alternative to their globally visible, vocal, public protest, Blackburn commends her own act of silently remaining seated as a student when the liberal Feminist Gloria Steinem spoke at a women’s student government convention which she attended (12).

Some exemplary foremothers of Blackburn’s contemporary conservative women’s movement include the Republican Jeannette Rankin from Montana, who served as the first woman in Congress in 1916 (Meiritz and Schäuble 16) when the women’s suffrage movement was dominated by white, middle-class women with Victorian values, Phyllis Schlafly, an activist against the Equal Rights Amendment (Meiritz and Schäuble 16-17), and Eleanor Howe, a Catholic mother who protested against sex education in Californian schools in the 1960s (Meiritz and Schäuble 67). However, it was the former Governor of Alaska and Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin, who explicitly called for a conservative Feminism in America (Meiritz and Schäuble 20). In their book *Guns n’ Rosé* (2022), the Washington, D.C.-based German correspondents Annett Meiritz and Juliane Schäuble discussed

American conservative women from female Republican politicians to ordinary women, whom they interviewed during their campaigns for school board offices (50; 58). While nearly 90% of Americans enroll their children in public schools and many parents felt excluded from determining their children's education during the Covid-era lockdowns (Meiritz and Schäuble 51), school libraries have since removed hundreds of books deemed controversial for their depictions of racism, sexuality, and gender, including Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *The 1619 Project* (2019) (Meiritz and Schäuble 57). As Meiritz and Schäuble note, American conservative women value freedom of opinion but effectively exclude, for example, Black perspectives that indict police brutality (58) and would thus challenge patriotism. Indeed, in response to the viral *1619 Project* under then-President Donald Trump, the alternative *1776 Commission* aimed to draft a curriculum that would (re-)enforce patriotism (The President's Advisory 1776 Commission 16). In its reference to *The 1619 Project*, the *1776 Commission* repeats above-mentioned talking points of conservative Feminists as well, "Such works do not respect their students' independence as young thinkers trying to grapple with social complexity while forming their empirical judgments about it. They disdain today's students, just as they doubt the humanity, goodness, or benevolence in America's greatest historical figures" (The President's Advisory 1776 Commission 36). Although the *1776 Commission* does not explicitly address the simultaneous replacement of President Andrew Jackson's likeness on the \$20 banknote with that of Harriet Tubman, its emphasis on conformity regarding patriotic accounts of foundational American history negates such critical inclusions.

Harriet: Reclaiming Black HerStory

After this comparative introduction to intersectional and conservative Feminism as well as their roles in contemporary American culture wars, I will analyze how two exemplary neo-Westerns negotiate this tension. The first film is the Academy Award-nominated *Harriet* with a screenplay that was written in the 1990s which stands as the first major Hollywood biopic dedicated to the life of Harriet Tubman (Ifeanyi), who escaped slavery herself, fought for the Union in the Civil War, and guided at least 70 slaves to Northern states or Canada and into freedom through a route called the Underground Railroad (Britannica). Cynthia Erivo portrays Harriet, who mostly remains silent but claims the power of receiving messages from God. At the beginning of the film, she still carries her slave name of Araminta or Minty and is about to be sold because even her owner's wife and son suspect her of having willed their father to suddenly die. She embodies the ruggedly individualistic Western hero's claim to a divine mission when she communicates her desire to flee to her family through the gospel song, "I'm bound for the promised land" and the plantation priest tells her the parting message, "Fear is your enemy. Trust in God." No social ties restrain her, as she calls to her master from a bridge, "I'm gonna be free or die." As if by a miracle, she overcomes multiple obstacles until a collaborator

in Delaware offers to drive her over the border to freedom, but she responds, before looking into the sunset, that she will walk with the Lord. Besides herself, God is the only other power that she relies upon, as she also testifies to the secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society that even when her skull cracked following a beating, "Hole in my head just made God's voice more clear." Meanwhile, her hostess in Philadelphia, a Black woman who had been born free, reproaches to the renamed Harriet that she stinks "like a barnyard animal"—a classist judgment that Harriet dismisses with the words, "Guess you've never had the stink of fear."

Yet, after her flight, Harriet misses her husband. Despite the danger, she defends her choice to travel back to the plantation and help him flee with an intersectional Feminist statement, "If I'm free, they should be too" because without her family she is like "a stranger in a strange land." However, when she discovers that her husband has meanwhile remarried, she figures that "I thought I come for him. I see now, I come for all of you" and thus renounces any liberation that is exclusively individual and becomes an Underground Railroad conductor. Her leadership is recognized by the group to the point that when she goes into an epileptic spell, they assume, "Minty's peculiar that way" rather than doubt in her. Still, when the group questions her order to cross a river although some members cannot swim, she pulls her gun and offers them the choice, "Now, you be free or die" to initiate them into the struggle she faced. Epic music follows her miraculous crossing of the neck-deep water after which she insists to be only called by her self-chosen name of Harriet by the "freedom-seeking slaves" who nickname her Moses. Although she performs communal care, Harriet grounds her mission in an individual call from God, "Seem like I learned to see and hear God like some learn to read a book. I put all my attention on it. And without question." Thus, Harriet's illiteracy never poses any obstacles, since her inner voice is her guide.

While Harriet's divinely ordained mission may or may not accurately reflect the conditions of her life on the frontier between slavery and freedom, I argue that this neo-Western film participates in contemporary culture wars over American history. At a time when gender performances are politicized, Harriet is depicted as a communal mother who cross-dresses, refuses to pose in photographs with male collaborators, and pulls her gun on her sister who will not flee with her just like on the Black tracker who eventually joins her cause. She is labelled an "abolitionist in Blackface" as if she was part of a conspiracy that steals from Southern plantation owners and proudly calls herself "Moses, the slave stealer." Still, Harriet continues her mission while insisting to her mother, "Mama, I ain't no angel come to take you to heaven. I'm Minty come to take you north" in a clear rejection of the Victorian cult of the female angel in the house. Appropriately, her former mistress plots to burn Harriet at the stake "like Joan of Arc" who also transgressed the gender binaries of her time to follow God's plan for her. Through solidarity and collaboration, Harriet enlists other slaves in her missions who also cross-dress or pass as white to outsmart slaveholders. This way, Harriet's group unsettles the racial hierarchy from within by challenging identity categories which would be equally provocative today, as

conservative outrage over transsexual teenagers and identity politics suggest. During their final faceoff, Harriet once again proves how she has always already subverted her master by correcting his impression that she prayed for him when he was sick as a child. She recalls, “I asked God how a sickly little boy could think he owned me.” In the footsteps of cinematic Western heroes, Harriet rides off into the sunset on his horse and is only seen again motivating her Black troop to shoot the enslavers with the reminder, “We’ve waited years to be allowed to fight in this war against our own enslaver. You ready to kill the snake?” Of course, reptilian imagery had just been famously applied by President Trump to migrants (Pinchin) whereas in *Harriet*, the snake image is applied to the enslaver.

***Terror on the Prairie*: Restoring Settler Domesticity**

By contrast, *Terror on the Prairie* from 2022 will be shown to stand as an example of conservative Feminism. It literally exists due to the conservative politics of its lead actress Gina Carano. The well-known former mixed martial arts fighter and fitness model used to star in mainstream productions until she allegedly compared being a Republican in America to being a Jew during the Holocaust on social media—an appropriative narrative (Castillo). Then, she refused to abide by California’s masking and vaccine mandates during the pandemic (Burroughs). Following these controversies, the conservative American website *The Daily Wire* embraced Carano and produced their only Western to date in which she would star (Castillo). *Terror on the Prairie* was filmed in Montana, where the fictional plot is also set just after the Civil War. Carano plays a woman from St. Louis, Missouri named Hattie McAllister who is homesteading with her husband John and two children but initially dislikes the frontier lifestyle.

Like in classic Western female conversion narratives, Hattie initially rejects her lifestyle and is instead depicted in Marian poses as a loyal wife and mother who dutifully performs her chores with her baby always by her side. In an early scene, she is hesitant to use violence against a writhing, hissing snake that approaches her baby. Although her husband shoots it, he later insists, “Deep down, you’re the toughest woman in the territory.” Indeed, without flinching, she stitches the wounds of an Indigenous woman whose husband gratefully gifts her with a dagger and symbolically transfers the power to defend the land to her. Hattie must comply since John claims it is “our dream to build a living on own land.” At a first glance, John could appear as the Western hero because of the secret he hides from his admiring son. Hattie’s revelation that John was not a sharpshooter in the Union Army but that “Pa used to be Rep. Things weren’t simple back then” unsettles their son but is interrupted and relativized by the arrival of a gang of men on horseback.

When the leader of the group expresses his discomfort to “talk business with a lady,” Hattie immediately lets her son answer for her and offers to cook them breakfast, thus accepting the conservative role of the housewife that they project upon her. The leader detects Hattie’s Missouri accent, which he shares. She amicably

lets him cradle her baby to the Confederate anthem “Dixie Forever/Down with the Eagle/Up with the Cross.” But only after she notices the dried scalps they carry on their saddles and how suspicious they become of her son when he identifies the “Rep song,” she slips bullets into her apron in a gesture symbolizing the will to defend her family. Immediately, she pulls her gun on them with the words, “I don’t feed killers in my house” that again demarcates her authority as the lady of the house in line with conservative gender roles. Appropriately, her strategy to defend herself and her children from the enraged men is to barricade herself into her house although she straps on their gun belts. She even points her gun at them through the window while casually breastfeeding her baby. Hattie is not only physically fiercely protective of her family but also of her husband’s image in her son’s eyes. She clarifies in her longest speech in the film that “Your Pa wasn’t a rebel. He may have been gun fighting for the South but he ended the war as a patriot. Sometimes, you wake up and realize you’re on the wrong side of things.” Her words do not only underline her husband’s morality, but also imply her acceptance of him with his Confederate past in the name of freedom of conscience which also legitimates contemporary conservative Feminism.

Nevertheless, Hattie does not condone the mission of the men to punish traitors to the Confederacy such as John. She never echoes their disdain for “the tyrant Lincoln.” Instead of directly attacking the men or calling on an authority to help her, she sends smoke signals to her neighbor whom the men slay while reprimanding her that “it’s not dignified of a woman to holler.” Yet, unlike Harriet, Hattie never abandons her feminine gender role, as she teaches her son how to cook coffee in their hideout. She reminisces about meeting John and realizing that she wanted to marry him because “nothing in this world would ever cause him to give up and whatever would come, he would stand up and protect me” which describes her ideal of masculinity. The viewer is paradoxically made to believe in John’s efficacy as a defender of his family although at this point, he is only shown rejecting the advances of a prostitute after being denied jobs in town. When her son points this out to Hattie, her response is that “You’re your father’s son, it’s our turn to protect him” which acknowledges the fact that they must rely on themselves but still ascribes a superior status to the father. Indeed, when John does arrive in a *deus ex machina* moment by jumping on the back of the group’s leader who is revealed to be his former Captain, he invokes the Confederate code of honor to not hold women captive, as if this paternalistic set of rules still applied to them. Still, John is captured as well and forced to march in shackles alongside Hattie, who loyally vows, “I’m not leaving you. Now or never.” Back home, she accordingly distracts the men from executing John by promising them sex but stabs and shoots two of the three remaining men while John shoots the third on his horse from a distance. Hattie and John stand as a golden couple worthy of their land as they kiss while their house burns down. In the final scene, Hattie, unlike any classic cowboy, is not seen riding into the sunset but towards her husband who is already busy building a new house where their lost one stood.

The Western: A Flexible or a Confining Genre?

To sum up, the production of *Harriet* and *Terror on the Prairie* at the same historical moment characterized by cultural wars between intersectional and conservative Feminism, points to the flexibility of the Western genre. Rather than subvert the formula of the genre to bring women to the forefront of action, the filmmakers can be said to have integrated their different “Feminist” politics into the aesthetics of the genre because of its ideological tenacity. As a historical genre, the hero in Western novels had already anticipated Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis before its articulation upon the close of the frontier in 1893.

Soon after Western films entered cinemas, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s brought forth Black-led musical Westerns, as studied by the media scholar Julia Leyda. Importantly, these films did not primarily intend to show Black heroes to white audiences, but to let Black audiences repurpose the mythic frontier origins of American identity for themselves. In Leyda’s words, “these movies assert the rightful place of African Americans at the moment and the location of the nation’s most heroic embodiments, the western frontier. The constructions of Black masculinity in these films... actively participate in the formation of an identity that is uniquely African American” (66). I suggest that in 2019, *Harriet* follows in this tradition of revisiting the Western mode to assert cultural pride in African American identity, including through the use of call-and-response gospel songs that Harriet is heard singing. Significantly, the film gives a lead role to a Black woman by literally showing her freeing herself from the stereotypical role of a slave. Unlike in the 1920s and 1930s, however, Harriet drives the plot. She does not merely portray any man’s one-dimensional love interest. However, she is never shown fighting any Indigenous people which is common for Black Westerns that aimed at allegiances with white society (Leyda 61). Instead, she only fights those Black characters who collaborate with slaveholders as trackers and is not explicitly shown killing whites. So, the strategy of *Harriet* to use the Western mode to tell African American history might not be new, but its take speaks to the cultural moment of its production.

In contrast to *Harriet*, *Terror on the Prairie* expresses reactionary politics although it aligns itself more with the classic structure of Hollywood Westerns at a first glance. As described by John G. Cawelti (88), it is a classic tale of a relatively refined woman who converts to the violent frontier lifestyle for the sake of her husband that would have been progressive in the 1950s, but is not culturally subversive anymore in 2022. Particularly, the film’s usage of the word “terror” in the title cannot be detached from the contemporary term “War on Terror” with its imagery of a home front that is under attack by external forces of evil. Actually, the counterterrorist imaginary goes back to Puritan captivity narratives from the frontier era, as the cultural critic Richard Slotkin argued. Unlike Westerns, these narratives might have centered white settler women like the paradigmatic one by Mary Rowlandson (Slotkin 42). However, she portrayed herself as a damsel in distress to warn settler men of the fate that could befall them if the latter did not militantly expand white “civilization.” As Slotkin

summarized it, “This is the paradigm: the American in his pastoral country, troubled by an obscure malaise, a sense of weakness and threat, finds in the first assault on his world and values the concretion of all terrors and villainies, both cosmic ones and ones which are intimate parts of his own family or his own being. His world view polarizes, he suddenly perceives his role in the drama as that of victim” (51). Although *Terror on the Prairie* casts the Confederate avengers in the role of the villains, it is easy to imagine how Hattie and John act according to this dynamic that Slotkin mapped which has meanwhile become synonymous with American expansionism rather than justice. So, the very different takes on the Western through the intersectional Feminist lens of *Harriet* and the conservative Feminist lens of *Terror on the Prairie* to contemporary American polarization, given that they are made for completely different audiences. For example, admirers of Harriet Tubman could hardly be imagined to sympathize with John who did fight for the slave-holding Confederacy at one point. Or, those who applaud Hattie’s performance as a housewife would likely condemn Harriet for leaving behind her husband to escape slavery. Yet, as explained above, both films recur to the Western aesthetic and their female leads share traits with the traditional frontier hero type. An explanation of their differences can be found in John Storey’s theorization of popular culture itself. He outlined that “A fourth definition contends that popular culture is the culture that originates from ‘the people’. It takes issue with any approach that suggests that it is something imposed on ‘the people’ from above” (Storey 9). Yet, in the current polarized climate of American society, progressive liberals and reactionary conservatives each claim to “authentically” constitute “the people” and attribute the role of the imposing “above” to the other group, even beyond the political arena. At the same time, Storey reminds that commercialization leads to the proliferation of any people’s culture. Thus, the different publics implied by *Harriet* and *Terror on the Prairie* already point to the rivalry between polarized superstructures who benefit from the cultural wars. In the end, the differences between the two films discussed in light of the movements they represent, speak to an ongoing cultural divide at the heart of American society that shows no sign of halting at what used to be its most unifying historical myth, that of the Western frontier.

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REVIEW ESSAY

Grzegorz Welizarowicz

A Dispatch from California: *Blackbox* at UC Riverside, Fall Season 2023

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Abstract: This is a review essay on Rickerby Hinds' new play *Blackbox* which premiered in October 2023 at the University of California Riverside. The play tells the history of an unsung American hero, Henry Box Brown who escaped slavery by mailing himself in a wooden box. It is argued that the play is an important contribution to the growing body of hip-hop theater works and offers an interesting and compelling example of theatrical experimentation.

Keywords: Rickerby Hinds, hip-hop theater, Henry Box Brown, gospel, faith, slavery

According to both Daniel Banks, the editor of *Say Word! Voices from Hip Hop Theater: An Anthology* (2011), and Nicole Hodges Persley, the author of *Sampling and Remixing Blackness in Hip-Hop Theater and Performance* (2021), Rickerby Hinds is one of the groundbreaking pioneers of hip hop theater. His most successful play to date is the research-based *Dreamscape*. It uses beatbox, dance and poetic storytelling to tell of the real-life police killing of a Riverside teenager sleeping in her car on a Christmas night in the late 1990s. The show's cast consists of a beatboxer and an actress/dancer. Hinds has toured this portable show internationally bringing it to Poland on multiple occasions (most recently to Gdańsk in May 2023). Its film adaptation entitled *My Name is Myeisha* was released in 2018.

Hinds studied theater at the University of California Riverside (UCR), his mentor being Chicano playwright Carlos Morton (the former UCR theater professor was recently awarded with the 2023 Black and Latino Playwrights' Distinguished Achievement Award). In 1990 he premiered his first play, a futuristic battle of rappers entitled *Days to Come*. After acquiring his MFA from UCLA, he became the faculty member of UCR's Department of Theatre, Film and Digital Production. His other works include *Blackballing* which Hinds describes as "a lot like [George C. Wolfe's] *The Colored Museum*," *Our Little Secret* which he considers his "most important play," *Birthmark* composed of a mixed collection of hip-hop songs and gospel religious

music, and *Keep Heads Ringing*, an adaptation of Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*. In 2002 he founded the Cali IE Hip Hop Theater Festival (a.k.a. Cali Fest) which along New York City's Hip Hop Theater Festival became, according to Banks, "the most enduring [presenter] of the genre in the United States" (2).

Blackbox is Hinds' newest project. The play was commissioned by Washington D.C.'s Ford's Theater's Legacy Commissions program established in 2021. According to Ford's website, the purpose of the Legacy Commissions is to serve as "an artistic incubator for stories about social justice and racial history and explores the varied experiences of underrepresented characters and lesser-known historical figures... responsible for changing the course of civil rights and equality in American life" (Ford's Theatre).

In *Blackbox* Hinds tells the story of Henry Box Brown, an enslaved African American who in 1849 mailed himself to freedom in a wooden box. The play's material is derived mostly, but not only, from two versions of the autobiography Brown wrote after his escape. Hence the program reads: "Story by Henry Box Brown. Adapted by Rickerby Hinds" (Hinds 1).

The new hip-hop drama was first workshopped in D.C. in February 2023. In the fall that year it was further developed with the help from the CalArts Center for New Performance and the Environmental Systems Research Institute, Inc. (ESR). Produced by Hinds' department in collaboration with Inland Empire's innovation hub Opportunity to Advance Sustainability, Innovation and Social Inclusion (OASIS) and directed by Thomas F. Defrantz it opened at UCR's University Theatre on October 5, 2023 for a limited run through October 14th. It was at this venue that *Days to Come* was performed some thirty years earlier and for the playwright the October nights stood as a full-circle moment.

Because Hinds is the darling of the city the premiere had an aura of communal celebration and brought together a diverse audience. In attendance was Patricia Lock Dawson, Riverside's mayor—the opening was billed as part of "Arts with the Mayor" series—who delivered the warmest welcome emphasizing her gratitude to Hinds for his commitment to the community. This was of course especially the reason for celebration by the black residents of Riverside and the support and pride with Hinds' achievement was palpable.

Before the show an elegant magician was showing card tricks and coin illusions in the theater lobby. Outside, a merchandise table with *Blackbox* branded t-shirts and caps was set up. This demonstrated that *Blackbox* was no ordinary production but Hinds' largest project to date with a big budget and a marketing strategy intended, as he revealed, to take the show all the way to Broadway.

While chatting spectators were taking their seats and some still lingered outside to wow at the conjurer's tricks an enigmatic character puzzling with gender ambiguity—slim, shaved head, black pants, and a gray waist-high jacket—stepped casually on stage confusing us whether the show had already begun. He/she glanced whimsically at the audience, playfully smiling, casting demonic frowns. This was "the Spirit" portrayed mesmerizingly with dancer's flexibility by Jasmine Gatewood.

While lights were progressively lowered, and a barely audible ambient murmur or hiss insinuated itself into our perception the Spirit arranged elements of the set before disappearing in the wings.

Set designer Christopher Scott Murillo packed the stage with wooden boxes of various sizes. The biggest and padlocked was at the center. A movable backdrop consisted of large wooden planks placed horizontally. Spaces between them were suggestive of prison bars but were actually meant to signify the inside of the box that Brown used in his escape. The playwright's vision was to take the audience inside the box and the OASIS and science grants were intended to enable him to hire engineers to transform the stage into a turning device which would render the precariousness of being locked in and shoved around in a tiny enclosure. The premiere however lacked these technical innovations. Hence the production's visuality was limited to the set's interaction with subtle light changes (by Ben Tusher) and video projections (by Fallon Williams). The latter were reminiscent of iconic cut paper art by Kara Walker.

The actual show begins when bright lights flush the stage and against a crimson backdrop two characters face the house. Dressed in a black tuxedo and matching top hat is Brown portrayed by Andrew Hardin. Next to him is Gatewood this time as Brown's assistant wearing a glimmering red jacket with gold buttons of circus extraction. They are grinning.

After his daring escape the real Brown moved to England to avoid being captured when the 1850 Fugitive Act was passed. There, he established himself as an entertainer, magician, conjuror, mesmerist, and public speaker performing the story of his escape to support the anti-slavery cause. Thus, when Hardin begins with "I, Henry Brown!" and in an old-fashioned high-brow English denounces "those bloody, filthy... / dealers in human flesh" (Hinds 1) the audience in the Riverside theater becomes an audience in an abolitionist circuit: we are, as if, witnessing Brown's very act from the past. Hardin/Brown then declares: "I, a long despised and down trodden bondman... / will arise! / And assert my title to freedom if only in God's eyes" (Hinds 2). Then, against the background not of snares but African drums, he proceeds to perform a trick of disappearing himself from the box in the center. The Spirit closes and locks the lid. She waves a big white sheet over it. When the box is opened however Brown is still there. The trick has not yet worked but this sequence is a pretext to begin telling his life's story.

What follows is a detailed, first-person tale of Brown's journey from birth (in 1815 or 1816), through childhood and adolescence, slavery's brutality, and tragic disappointments to his escape in 1849. The playwright wrote magic tricks into the piece and performed by Hardin (the actor learnt them in a few weeks under the guidance of illusionist Naathan Phan) they simultaneously anticipate Brown's transformation into a magician in his later life and further support the illusion of watching Brown himself. This device collapses and conflates time, performative frames, and spatial reference points. A retelling which is clearly in the present (suggested by the hip hop tempo, the impeccable, metacommunicative timing of the

actors, the video, music, light changes, etc.) is also an approximation of a nineteenth-century convention with its costumes, language, tricks, crimson drapes, etc. Distance between a theater in Riverside and an English Victorian one is magically bridged and a sense of metatheatrical interstitially, transporting the audience into a cognitive third space is engendered. In *Dreamscape*, Hinds creates a spatio-temporal vortex by slowing down time to a few seconds during which his protagonist is shot but the spectators retain a separate observers' viewpoint. Here, the creation of this spatio-temporal borderlands involves/envelopes the audience which signals a ritualistic potential of the piece.

The tricks performed by Hardin act themselves interstitially as they are simultaneously entertaining (surprised audience reacts with laughter) and deeply symbolic for they illustrate Brown's journey in life and the horrors of slavery he had endured and now reports on. If pulling flowers out of his sleeve corresponds to the naivete of the protagonist as a child in another trick Hardin cuts a rope which, when unrolled, is whole again. This stands for slaves' forestalled hopes of freedom. Later Hardin performs a classic top hat trick. What he pulls out however is not a rabbit but eggs, sausage rings, and a cantaloupe. This playfully and yet darkly signifies Brown's sharing of food with "forlorn" (Hinds 12) slaves. In another trick Hardin rips paper to pieces but then magically unfolds it and a chain of voodoo dolls is unfurled in an image dialoging with the finale of the Aunt Ethel scene from *The Colored Museum*. Gatewood then separates these dolls with scissors and each falling silhouette stands for a member of Brown's family disappeared forever. A poignant metaphor of families destroyed by slavery's inhumanity dawns on us and the scene, in its affective status between entertainment and terror, has an effect of Barthesian punctum. Similarly powerful is a trick when Hardin pulls a thick Bible out of a giant stick – a metaphor for the coercive nature of religious instruction in the South.

Gatewood's character is not only a hand to the star performer. The Spirit has an interstitial, ambivalent status as well already anticipated by the early pre-show appearance. Embodying various personas, it is a chameleon transitioning seamlessly between genders and races: slave masters who speak in a bitter, elongated drawl; Brown's loving mother; a proud woman who dispels his fears of the master as God; a gospel choir; a judge, etc. The Spirit is the figure of the borderlands, a cypher, an empty signifier, a potentiality who meanders between realities, always busy, jumping into action or lurking in the shadows, arranging the set, changing the characters' costumes. Gatewood's voice is malleable, at times soft and then powerful. Her facial expressions offer everything from comical relief to sublime dread. Her Spirit is the embodiment of alert mindfulness.

The tricks and Gatewood's impeccable theatricality notwithstanding it must be noted that most of the October show is delivered as an extended monologue by Hardin/Brown and this emphasis on telling rather than showing became burdensome as the show progressed. Perhaps the problem lay not in the text itself but in Hardin's flat delivery: if the script calls for a change in voice, for example in the childhood section, the actor did not do it at least to this viewer's ear. He issued mostly fast-paced

cascades of words and if this method is of hip-hop provenience it is bound to sound tedious if no variety is added.

Thus, despite the show's undeniable linguistic, visual, and sonic lyricism we became numbed, and it was only midway through the show that the audience was reawakened. The highlight of the play is an ingenious adaptation of Nat Turner's confession delivered as a sermon in a sanctified church. Hinds writes in the script: "HENRY becomes NAT TURNER Minister of Freedom. He is a Black Preacher of the Gospel—Fearless, inspired, filled with the Holy Ghost" (25). Nat Turner then tells the story of his spiritual development, his vision, his revelation, his identification with Christ. The speech was truly a theatrical feat: against a slowly intensifying accompaniment of church organ, bass guitar and drums Hardin stood behind a church pulpit assembled from boxes by the Spirit and delivered an expert showcase of African American passionate religious oratory. His tone as well as rhythm finally changed and corresponded to the intensity of the speech's content and the music's build-up. In the climax he was hoarse and roaring. Gatewood's brilliant laughs, ad libs, antiphonic cries added to the efficacy. This electrifying sequence was then abruptly cut short and a cold sentencing of Turner to death was pronounced. We were left stunned, breathless.

This was the apex of the show but as such it came too early for as the play returned to its previous tempo Hardin went back to his earlier tone and manner and this went on for another good while. This structural imbalance is a problem Hinds might want to resolve before his Broadway pitch.

On an aesthetic level, however, the section indexes black religious practices as the deep roots of hip hop theater which Hinds had earlier explored in *Birthmark*. As the central moment in the play which focuses on the individual's spiritual commitment against all odds it supports what seems to be the overarching theme of the play: faith and religion. On the one hand, Hinds explores faith as a force which mitigates suffering, inspires individual transformation, propels to agency and self-determinacy. In other words, this is the faith consistent with what Dwight N. Hopkins has called the black "theology of liberation" (22). But, on the other and in parallel, Hinds tackles religion's role in sustaining the rationale for ruthless subjugation, the complicity of the institution in the criminal acts of slavery. In this double critique, sympathetic and scathingly critical, Brown and Hinds are not unlike Frederick Douglass who, while embracing the merciful aspects of Christianity condemned the slaveholders' version of it as "the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of libels" (Douglass 121). And this is not far from the blues of, for example, Son House who, in the words of Joseph J. Lynch, "expresses an uncomfortable relationship with faith" (132) and an "implicit critique of institutional religion" (133).

Hinds grew up in the church of Seventh Day Adventists and admits that part of his aesthetic is derived from the practices of the sanctified church. In a conversation with the author, he revealed that in his work he wants to tap a similar emotional intensity one encounters in such religious practices. But he is also a

historian and understands the paradox of black faith which emerged out of the entanglement of Black fervent spirituality with equally fervently inflicted lethal cruelty sustained by the authority of the Bible employed by white Christians, to cite Hopkins, “in a self-serving and racist interpretation” (21). Hopkins adds: “The white man believed he replaced the mediating and liberating role of Jesus Christ” (22).

This complexity is revealed in the trajectory of Hinds’ protagonist who grows to “suspect strongly slave-holders’ Christianity” (Hinds 47) yet never loses his connection to subjectifying transcendence. In fact, his decision to mail himself is a result of his prayers and visions. Like Turner he hears and heeds the voice of God. He understands the words “Go and get a box” as the “heavenly revelation” (Hinds 48). In effect, like Turner again, he becomes hierophantically attuned to His will, he is His transmitter. And it is in this sense that we should also understand Brown’s show we are observing, as another instantiation of his role as His messenger. As His vehicle he wants to transmit this higher Power to his audience. By way of Brown, Hinds’ ambition is to extend this to his viewers too.

And in this context a note on soundscapes designed by Jeremiah Turner is due. As mentioned before, Gatewood’s first appearance is set to an ambient murmur. Later, African drums, murky howling wind, dark echoes, a close thunder add emotional depth. The show’s primary sound signifiers however are the gospel and church worship music suggested by the sound of the organ, vocalizations, and *a cappella* samples from spirituals. If the slave masters’ church music is received text-based hymnody of Western origin, “theologically dense and multivocal” (Marini 280) and, as musicologist Stephen Marini says, “express[ing] a hermeneutic of suspicion rooted in radical spiritual doubt” (287) the show’s organ-based soundtrack is mostly monochromatic and monochord: wide patches of static sound rather than progression of melodies. Music here does not represent doubt or spiritual idealistic individualism. It does not have a developmental structure. In other words, the sound is non-teleological. It expresses unresolved tension and synchrony, rather than diachrony. It is communal and affective. Only in Turner’s sermon and the gospel music finale do we hear chord progressions and there are only two moments when something more complex, more modern is sounded: framing the piece, a polyphonic, synthesized celebratory organ fanfare which may be rendered as “Star Wars Bach” plays twice during the two attempts at escape from the box. In other words, appropriating and subverting the church music the sound in *Blackbox* operates as an affective tool, critical discourse and a signifier of interstitiality as well as of intersubjective, transontological and transtemporal communication.

The last scene is a reprise of the opening. The Spirit locks Hardin in the box. When Gatewood opens it, she jumps inside and points to an aisle in the auditorium at which Hardin is already standing in the spotlight—the trick has worked, Brown has finally broken free. The fanfare subsides and the two start singing an energetic version of a gospel classic “Thank you Jesus” as a finale. The escape from the box is identified with the escape from bondage and both are identified as deliverance. The song is ecstatic, and the euphoric audience joins in. In truth however this is a

bittersweet moment for although we are happy to jump up and sing along there is an aftertaste of the play's overall message which critiques religion from the start as not only a path to individual salvation but also as an instrument of sustaining unequal power differentials.

Following Eduard Glissant and Walter D. Mignolo we can think of this effect as the creolization of dominant, universalizing religious/epistemic certainties from the perspective of "globality" (Glissant in Mignolo 77), from local, implaced history (in this context the history of slavery and black emancipatory impulse), from the point of view of difference hitherto reduced to inferiority in the production of which religion has been implicated. Because Hinds appropriates the master codes and rearticulates them with a difference the play becomes what can be called the epistemic borderlands. In its interstitiality (suggested by the setting, time frames, Hardin's illusions, music, ambiguous characters, thematic focus) between the official and the subaltern it can be thought of as an enactment of what Mignolo calls "border gnosis" (84) which stands for the positionality at the threshold or the "/" of epistemologies, worldviews, histories and a practice which reevaluates domination from the margin. Here the border lies, on the one hand, between the master and his pretense to universality and transparency and, on the other, the (emancipated) slave with his right to pluriversality and, after Edouard Glissant, "opacity" (55). This position in-between, on the edge of epistemologies and hermeneutics gives the piece its ambivalence and hence, I would argue, assures its artistic efficacy and transformative potential.

Arthur Jafa has proposed three central concepts in hip-hop: "*flow, layering, and ruptures in line*" (Rose 38). Hodges Persley foregrounds the concepts of sampling and remixing in her discussion of hip-hop theater. How does *Blackbox* measure against these concepts? If theatrical sampling is, as Hodges Persley says, "borrowing characteristics of racial identity to reproduce ... expressions of mainstream understandings of how race is lived" and "[r]emixing is the act of recombining what has been borrowed and connecting it to existing aspects of identity and thus transforming both parts into a new configuration" (7) then clearly *Blackbox* does both and more. It takes the dominant as well as the subaltern forms, narratives and perceptions, and contrasts, clashes, remixes and reconfigures their relationships in effect producing a new theatrical hybrid which engenders a zone of ontological liminality. Tricia Rose explains the work principles of flow, layering, and ruptures in line effect: "theoretically, one can argue that they create and sustain rhythmic motion, continuity, and circularity via flow; accumulate, reinforce, and embellish this continuity through layering; and manage threats to these narratives by building in ruptures that highlight the continuity as it momentarily challenges it" (39). *Blackbox's* narrative and performance are clearly grounded in the principles of flow and layering: the fast-paced, rhythmical speech and poetic nature of the script, the repetitive structure of stories and illusions, the show's frame device, the layering of locations, etc. If "rappers layer meaning by using the same word to signify a variety of actions and objects" (Rose 39) this type of layering is also present in the script,

for example: “Guess it is the mail” says the Spirit to which Henry replies “Yes, I thought, it is a male indeed” (51). Rapture in line is identifiable in the sublime terror underpinning most of the narrative, the illusions breaking the flow, the abruptness with which Turner’s sermon is cut, the sermon itself as a rupture to Henry’s narrative, the spatio-temporal vortex the show engenders, the whimsical nature of the Spirit. The institution of slavery itself stands as a rapture par excellence. On the other hand, the monotonous delivery of the lead actor suggests that the principle was not exactly the guiding rule of the production. Had it been, it could be concluded that the piece successfully repurposes the vocabulary of hip-hop to venture into the arena of gospel, faith, history.

Blackbox joins a growing collection of plays recounting the lives of African American heroes and heroines. *Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad* produced by the Virginia Repertory Theatre and *Fannie (The Music and Life of Fannie Lou Hamer)* by Cheryl L. West are but two examples of such productions. What distinguishes *Blackbox* is that Hinds tells his story by referencing the black cultural matrix in an unorthodox and innovative way which once the structural problem mentioned above is resolved may assure its broader success. However, at the same time, if the playwright eyes Broadway, he may consider taking it on the road in the South first to test how this unorthodoxy resonates among those who have an emotional stake in the story. If Hinds can build reputation there, he may eventually scale it up for Broadway. The advantage of the show in its current form is that it can tour on a budget.

In conclusion, *Blackbox* is a unique new play by an important American theater innovator. Although in October it was still a work in progress the play already revealed itself as inspired. It combines a history lesson with lyrical, visual, and aural poetry to provide an immersive, thought-provoking, emotionally, aesthetically, and epistemically complex experience. Its greatest achievements are: the creation of a synchronous theatrical space-time between the present and the nineteenth century theater and the nuanced critique (via content, presentation, and music) of the role of religion in the history of slavery/emancipation. *Blackbox* promises to be a valuable contribution not only to the ongoing conversation about the history of slavery and the African American experience but also to the debate on how to make American theater compelling.

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REVIEWS

Henry James. *Watch and Ward*. Edited by Pierre A. Walker and Jay S. Spina, Cambridge UP, 2023, 340 pages.

The twenty-eight-year-old author must have been proud when his first novel—quite short, but still more substantial than tales, travel articles, or book reviews he had published hitherto—was serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly* from August to December 1871. When it came, however, to reworking the serial text into a book form (the usual procedure for James and his times), the text posed a problem. It required massive revisions that threatened to take the energy needed for the next projects. Instead of patching up imperfections, James, pragmatically, turned to *Roderick Hudson*, which was serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly* from January to December 1875, and published the same year by Osgood in Boston. This full-length novel pleased James, and he claimed, henceforth, that it was his first. And indeed, in a sense, *Roderick Hudson* was his first novel. The reworked version of *Watch and Ward* appeared at Osgood three years later, in 1878. By that time James had published five books. The incentive to take up the early text, eventually, was a negative one. Because of his rising popularity as the author of *Roderick Hudson* and *The American*, there was a threat of a pirated edition, which he thought advisable to preempt (“Introduction” xxxviii).

Given its publication history, *Watch and Ward* holds a special, and tricky, place in The Cambridge Edition of the *Complete Fiction of Henry James*, whose General Editors follow the textual policy of adopting “the text of the first published book edition of a work” and emphasizing “the first context in which it was written and read” (“General Editors’ Preface” xv). *Watch and Ward* both is and is not “first-thing” James. The General and volume editors of The Cambridge Edition wisely and commendably refrain from “emphatic interpretations or... critical arguments of their own” (xvi), opening this field to the readers, while providing them also with the necessary information and tools, especially, “the social, political and cultural contexts of James’s period” (xvi). The contemporary reviews discussed in the Introduction to this meticulous edition of James’s Cinderella of a novel expose readers’ trouble with James’s story of Roger Lawrence and his teenage ward. The reviewer for the *Nation* objected to its “allegorical thinness” and called the book’s conclusion “vulgar” (qtd. in “Introduction” xli). All the same, both the serial text and the book earned the young author money (lvii–lviii).

In their insightful introduction, Pierre A. Walker and Jay S. Spina not only trace the novel’s publication history, but also locate its thematic scope within James’s oeuvre, revealing his experimentation with literary motifs and settings. Even

though coinciding with his early “international” tales and immediately following his extended travels in Europe, *Watch and Ward* is a novel with American settings and characters (xxxv). It shows, nevertheless, affinities with his fiction of the international theme (lv). Nora Lambert, as Walker and Spina prove, foreshadows Daisy Miller’s (doomed) independence (xliii-xliv) with one crucial difference; in Nora’s case, her “Grand Tour” of Europe reaches its educational aim, which “can hardly be said of Daisy” (xlv). And, of course, Nora Lambert does not die in the end. The novella “Daisy Miller,” which turned James into a famous author was serialized in 1878 and published in book form in 1879. It is fascinating to see how the stories of Nora and Daisy complement each other. The “family” resemblance has also been recognized between Nora and other later James heroines, including Isabel Archer. Walker and Spina carefully weigh these interpretations (xlv). Comparisons of characters, settings, and motifs in *Watch and Ward* with those in James’s later fiction, offered in the Introduction serve perfectly their purpose to weave the largely forgotten early novel into the rich tapestry of his oeuvre. What they add to the state of research is the pinpointing of the numerous quotations from and allusions to various literary sources that have escaped the attention of scholars before (lv). Their meticulous study of textual variations and of the many changes that James introduced in the book edition not only shed new light on the novel, but also give a much-needed insight into James’s working habits.

At the early stages of the composition and serial publication, the short novel went by the title “Roger’s Little Girl” (Introduction, xxxii), which—I would argue—fitted perfectly James’s attempt to settle accounts with the staple motif in the American fiction of the 1850s and 60s of a middle-aged man (raising and then) marrying a precocious girl (with Louisa May Alcott’s fiction as one of the exemplars). Walker and Spina quote James’s critical review of Alcott in this respect and, referring to Alfred Habegger’s analysis, show how the young novelist, nevertheless, availed himself of the same stale motif (xlvi). Habegger’s argument that James managed to subvert it is probably a well-meaning stretch. Looking further afield, Walker and Spila offer an impressive list and discussion of both American and European literary variations on the motif of the older male guardian and his young female ward (liv). They thus open the floor to comparative analyses beyond the hackneyed and limiting view of the novel as a reworking of the story of Pygmalion.

It may have been Leon Edel who first argued in his biography of James (*The Conquest of London*) that *Watch and Ward* resembles the myth of Pygmalion (qtd. in Introduction, liii). What this interpretive strategy entails, however, is aestheticizing the relationship while treating the female character as an object (a sculpture). What it in addition covers up is the institution of guardianship and the complex interplay of legal, economic, and—yes—sexual roles involved in a relationship with a minor. James did not study law (though briefly) for nothing. Both Nora and Roger pose (though sparingly) legal questions. The whole spectrum of the advantages and disadvantages of such a relationship (whether legalized or not) is best seen in comparison. On the one hand, a little girl raised by her future husband may gain an

excellent education in the best social circumstances available, as Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg, an Austrian poet of the Baroque did. On the other hand, a little girl may become a victim of downright pedophilia, as exposed in Toni Morrison's novel *Love* (2003). Thus, with his first novel, Henry James put on the literary table, a burning issue of interlocked age, class, and gender relations.

In 1843, the year of Henry James's birth, Margaret Fuller published in *The Dial* magazine her memorable manifesto, "The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men. Woman versus Women," which appeared two years later in a revised book version as *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Nearly three decades later, the position of a woman in society was still subject to many pressures, as *Watch and Ward* demonstrates. The young novelist's grand project of portraying a young American woman, realized so much more fully in his later fiction (for example, *The Portrait of a Lady* or *The Bostonians*), may explain why he embarked on it with high hopes. Like Fuller, James equates femininity with childhood, but he offers, eventually, feeble hope for the woman's growth. In addition, he explores her chances against the backdrop of transcontinental America, staging the invasion of uncouth or sleazy representatives of the frontier (most notably Nora's father) in the civilized Northeast.

Watch and Ward consists of eleven chapters, one short of a dozen, as if James were hiding the real final chapter up his sleeve. It is a dramatic irony par excellence that James's Norwegian namesake Henrik Ibsen's three-act play *A Doll's House*, which premiered by the end of 1879, featured another Nora, a wife and mother stifled by the male-dominated society. This may well be the missing Chapter XII, though set in Norway, with Mrs. Nora Lawrence as Roger's "little girl" forever.

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Peter Charles Hoffer. *The Brave New World: A History of Early America*. 3rd edition, Johns Hopkins UP, 2023, 595 pages.

Since its first publication in 2005, Peter Charles Hoffer's *The Brave New World: A History of Early America* has been a major reference for scholars of early America, students of history, and enthusiasts of the study of the American past. The publication of the third, revised edition of this textbook guarantees that it will retain this position for a long time. *The Brave New World* offers a multidimensional, panoramic view of American history from the earliest settlements to the end of the War of American Independence in 1783. The dominant theme in the 2023 edition is that of power, understood both in terms of the large-scale political rivalry and as a network of dynamic relationships in various local settings. Hoffer does not present, however, a strictly political history of America: he is interested in the ways in which power manifests itself, how it is opposed, and how such processes result in the creation of specific historical communities.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part, "Worlds in Motion" discusses the early settlement of America, the European context for the colonization of the continent, and the seventeenth-century growth of Spanish, French, and English colonies. In the first chapter ("The First Americans") Hoffer briefly presents the history of the migrations from Asia since 30,000 BP, outlines the varied development of regional Indian cultures, thus sketching the context for the first encounters between Native Americans and Europeans. In a parallel way, he gives an account of Europe in the 15th century, focusing on the forces which put exploration, discovery and colonization of new lands in motion (Chapter II, "Europe in the Age of Discovery, 1400-1500"). The following chapters discuss the Spanish Empire in the Americas ("The Spanish Century, 1492-1588") and the early rivalry between the French and the English for domination in North America ("Rivals for the Northland: England and France in America"). The three chapters that follow focus on the English settlement in different regions of America: the South ("The Planter Colonies"), New England ("A New England"), and the Middle Colonies (Chapter V. In the final chapter of Part I ("The Critical Years, 1675-1700"), Hoffer returns to a general interpretation of the state of the English colonies, arguing that the last decade of the century, with Indian and slave uprisings, local insurrections and such dramatic events as the Salem witch trials, represented the "critical years" in the history of British America, manifesting a breakdown of the social order and leading to a reformulation of the imperial policy by the London authorities.

The second part of the book "From Provinces to a New Nation" is devoted to the history of British America from the end of the seventeenth century until 1783. The major point and organizing principle for Hoffer's narrative is the claim that it was the adoption of direct management of the colonies by the imperial administration that provided a decisive step in the development of eighteenth-century America, as the strengthening of the economic ties to Britain through the policy of mercantilism greatly increased tensions between the colonies and the mother country. This, in turn, contributed to the maturation of the colonies as social and political bodies, initiating the processes that would eventually lead to their independence.

This point is developed in several chapters, which discuss, in turn, social ("Provincial People and Places in the Eighteenth Century"), cultural ("Common Pastimes and Elite Pursuits"), economic ("Mercantilism and Markets"), and political history of the colonies in the eighteenth century. Hoffer, paying close attention to regional differences, describes how the colonial culture gradually became "American" and how mercantilism existed in terms of the actual economic practices. The final chapters (13, 14 and 15) offer comprehensive accounts of the course of the French and Indian War and of the War of Independence and the resulting emergence of the United States of America.

The 2023 edition incorporates the scholarship on the colonial and revolutionary eras published since the first publication of the book. The scope of the narrative has been extended to cover all the New World empires and to bring together the histories of African, Caribbean, European, and Native American

people. There are more detailed accounts of the Spanish missions in the Southwest, French settlements along the Mississippi River, and Dutch trading posts in New York. The book is focused on British America, but is definitely not “anglocentric,” as the author presents a wide network of complicated relationships among people, nations and states which influenced the development of British colonies and their ultimate break from the Empire. Moreover, there is more emphasis on the so-called “settler imperialism,” a system of power perpetuated by settlers rather than the British imperial institutions that imposed repressions on native peoples. The new themes incorporated into the third edition of *The Brave New World* include a more detailed treatment environmental history, slavery and the slave trade, religion, science and technology, as well as the daily lives of ordinary people. Combining elements of Atlantic History with a Continental perspective, Peter Charles Hoffer delivers an impressive study of vast early America, helping the reader to understand this complicated and fast-changing world.

Hoffer is an academic well familiar with the latest theoretical and methodological developments in the field, but he is also a great storyteller, writing in an engaging and accessible style. Thanks to his ability to seamlessly weave narrative and analysis, the text reads easily and is understandable to a broad audience. The wide historical generalizations help to interpret the course of early American history, but they are accompanied by vivid descriptions and anecdotes, which provide rich detail and give the readers a better understanding of what challenges, sufferings, or pleasures life in early America brought to the indigenous people and to the European settlers. The author refers to—and profusely quotes from—a rich variety of primary sources: letters, diaries and memoirs, economic and government records, as well as pamphlets and books. The result is a comprehensive and substantiated account of the history of early America history.

Hoffer’s text does not, however, provide detailed bibliographical annotations to the secondary sources used in writing the book. Hoffer’s claims are not validated by direct references to previous research on which he heavily relies, which may be treated as a fault in an academic publication. However, the choice to keep the text free of references makes it more accessible and easier to read. The reader gets a powerful, authoritative, personal interpretation of the history of early America. In the place of notes, a bibliographical essay is offered at the end of the book, with a survey of relevant books and articles devoted to the topics discussed in individual chapters. Compared to the earlier editions, the essay has been expanded to cover the new aspects of the textbook and to bring the discussion of the historiography up to date.

The interesting new feature of this edition of the book is maps, which enable readers to follow the story more easily, visualizing the geographical and cultural landscapes of the discussed historical processes and trends. There are also two chronological lists of the major events discussed in the two Parts of the textbook. There are just a few illustrations and photographs, the readers being supposed to rely on the author’s story-telling ability rather than on the visual material for picturing the reality of the historical worlds.

Hoffer's book is wide in its scope and it would be difficult to find an aspect of early American history which is neglected in its narrative. The author's choice to focus on such themes as the reciprocal interactions between European colonists and Native Americans, the economic underpinnings of colonial society, or the evolution of colonial political structures, at the expense of, for example, gender history or intellectual history, reflects Hoffer's academic interests and his general understanding of the foundations of American life. The chief value of the book lies in its balanced and holistic perspective, and the continuing emphasis on the complex interdependence of political, economic, social and cultural processes.

Thanks to its comprehensive scope, balanced perspective, and engaging narrative, Peter Charles Hoffer's *The Brave New World: A History of Early America* continues to be a worthy contribution to the field of early American studies. Hoffer successfully incorporates new research, pays attention to indigenous perspectives and differences of colonial experiences. The book helps both the academic and the general reader to better understand the complexities and dynamism of early America. The emphasis on cultural interactions, economic foundations, political evolution, and social structures provides a broad and nuanced understanding of early American history. While the size of the book makes its use in general surveys of American history difficult, it is a text suitable for specialist courses. Individual chapters can be recommended as stand-alone texts in courses in American economic, political, and cultural history. *The Brave New World* can be used as a reference text and as an introduction into a more detailed study of any of the numerous interconnected aspects of early American history which it discusses. It is a book which will be also interesting for any history buff, as it vividly pictures the environment which early Americans inhabited, paints lively portraits of both famous and less-known colonial characters and offers a context in which the emergence of the American nation and the creation of the United States may be more easily understood.

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Filip Lipiński. *Ameryka. Rewizje wizualnej mitologii Stanów Zjednoczonych* [America: Revising the Visual Mythology of the United States]. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2022, 623 pages.

Filip Lipiński's *Ameryka. Rewizje wizualnej mitologii Stanów Zjednoczonych* is a monumental work. Comprising over six hundred pages and featuring around three hundred illustrations, the majority of which are printed in color, the monograph offers a comprehensive study of American iconography, skillfully conceptualized within a transdisciplinary framework, including psychoanalysis, postcolonial and decolonial studies, feminist, gender and queer theories, as well as revisionist tools worked out within the scholarship of New Criticism, postmodernism, and

art criticism. The book engages with foundational tropes and concepts that have created the myth of America: the assertion of the nation's exceptionalism, the idea of American wilderness, the impact of industrialization and urbanization on the country's self-definition, and the declared ethos of equality, happiness, and justice for all. Lipiński attentively traces artistic engagements with the essential flaws of the myth, reflected in the ongoing systematic racism, and, more broadly, the intersectional discrimination and violence that radically questions the country's foundational ideals.

In the Introduction, Lipiński lays out the temporal and conceptual spaces of his study. He abundantly quotes from the revisionist classics who, since the 1960s, have argued that, from the beginning, America was an "ideology in the making" (Sacvan Bercovitch) that "casts its image far beyond the national borders" (Robert Kroes) and constitutes "an element of the imaginary life of every human being" (Timothy Garton Ash). The word "America," which all too often is used as a synonym for the country's name, is an image and a myth, argues Lipiński. The two concepts are imbued with so much symbolic and economic power that the relation between the country's material presence and the globally circulating fictions becomes significantly blurred. The author quotes from the postmodern thinker Jean Baudrillard whose classical study of hyperreality and the precession of simulacra in the context of the United States' cultural functioning has established a common trope of the country's conceptualization. "America is neither a dream, nor reality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved," asserts the French postmodernist (Lipiński 22). Lipiński goes on to sketch the historical trajectory of this utopia, created through ideals such as democracy, egalitarianism, and freedom, which during the Enlightenment period gave rise to the idea of the American dream and the assertion of the country's exceptional vocation. This ideology, the Introduction makes clear, has historically led to heartbreaking tragedies of enslaving Black people and a genocide of Indigenous inhabitants. The closing section of the Introduction reconstructs a critique of the medium and image, elaborated by prominent scholars of art and culture, including W. J. T. Mitchell and Rosalind Krauss. The Introduction closes by relating the foundational American ideology to the present moment of racism, emblemized in the murder of George Floyd. The author, introducing Mitchell's concepts of "critical iconography" and "the pictorial turn," sets scene for the methodological approach that he employs throughout the study. His aim is to demythologize the idea of America by critically engaging in the dynamics of the visual meaning-making from a position of someone who is a cultural outsider—a Polish scholar born before the political transformation of 1989, for whom America was initially a forbidden object of desire, then a supreme model of late capitalist culture and finally, an object of academic scrutiny and (de-) constructive critique.

Chapter One thematizes one of the most ubiquitous symbols of the United States, the American flag. The flag is theorized as a "pictorial matrix" through a

variety of uses—an image, a material object, a visual structure and through its meaning-making potential. Lipiński recalls the flag's origin that goes back to the process of separating the young state from the powerful Great Britain. He traces the flag's presence in the iconic images of the 19th-century landscape painter Frederick Edwin Church, the famous mid-20th-century conceptual experiments of Jasper Johns, in the arguably less recognized 1960s interrogations by William Copley and George Maciunas, and in Faith Ringgold's challenging series where the artist inscribes the horrors of the African American reality into the silent composition of red, blue and white. At the end of the 20th century, the feminist Barbara Kruger and the Black David Hammons related the myths associated with the flag with the somber scenario of a sexist and racist state. The two artists, Lipiński argues, claim the right to use the flag to publicize the mythical ballast that stands in sharp contrast to their lived experience. Another powerful interrogation of the flag's phantasmatic workings comes from Indigenous artists. Wayne Eagleboy and Fritz Scholder revisit hegemonic American history and use the flag as a vehicle that allows them to expose the symbolic, physical, and cultural violence done to the inhabitants of the continent after the European arrival. Numerous creations were also provoked by the passing of the 1968 Flag Protection Act, which prohibited the use of the flag outside of official contexts. Activists and artists Abbie Hoffman, Kate Millet, Yvonne Rainer, Scott Tyler and others probed the limits of censorship by engaging with the flag in politically provocative ways, especially in the context of the Civil Rights Movement's activities, the ongoing war in Vietnam, the counterculture protests, and the demands of the second wave feminists. The recent events, including the 9/11 attack and the American military mishandling of power in the Abu Ghraib, have brought a new wave of artistic engagements. Often, the flag becomes a locus of voicing pain and protest concerning American domestic and international doings. This way, as Lipiński makes clear, the flag continues to be a barometer of the political moment, or a dynamic pictorial matrix of self-reflection and criticism produced across the spectrum of the American art world.

Chapter Two looks at American history through the lens of the pictorial. Starting with Emmanuel Leutze's canonical painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware River* (1851), Lipiński analyzes the origins of the foundational American myths: the invincible leader, the vast land to colonize, the humble Black servant, the leader's unflinching gaze into the glorious future of the nascent country. Together with Leutze's other influential paintings, *The Departure of Columbus from Palos in 1492* (1855) and *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (1861), *Washington Crossing the Delaware River* promoted and solidified the myth America's sacred mission. As the myth started to crumble, suffragist (James Donahey), modernist (Grant Wood) and contemporary Black (Kara Walker) artists interrogated Leutze's painting in the context of American wrongdoings and injustice. In the mid-20th century, the usually associated with Pop Art Roy Lichtenstein, several times experimented with Leutze's iconography with an intent to express the transformation of American art and sensitivity. Other interrogations of Leutze's politics came from the New

York School poet Frank O'Hara, the African American artists Jacob Lawrence and Robert Colescott, the playwright Kenneth Koch, the Japanese American painter Roger Shimomura, and the Indigenous Canadian artists Rebecca Belmore and Kent Monkman. Lipiński demonstrates that, like in the case of the American flag, for over a century the founding visual myths have constituted a fertile site of artistic criticism, retaining relevance during the Osama Bin Laden murder, the Mexican migration, Donald Trump's presidency, and the ongoing struggles within the American population.

The following two chapters reconstruct the relations between the materiality of the American landscape and its socio-political uses. The 19th-century Manifest Destiny narrative unified the ideas of God, Americanness, and the American landscape, narrating the land as a territory of struggle to establish a paradise on Earth. The forests, mountains, and water reservoirs have been thought of as marked with a Godly mission, their vastness to certify the omnipresence of divinity. In the first half of the 19th century, the Hudson River School painters produced sublime images that established potent visual links between the settled land and Biblical scenes. Most saliently, the asserted union of the national ideology and the American landscape was imprinted onto the structure of Mount Rushmore where in the years 1924-25 four monumental likenesses of significant American presidents were carved. The facts that the site collided with the Dakota tribe's sacred location and that the protesters were forcefully removed forms a poignant comment on the internal contradictions of the American myth. Lipiński goes on to discuss numerous instances, painterly, photographic, and site-specific, that document the process of mythologizing and demythologizing of the American landscape. He follows the tropes that define the idea of America, among them the frontier, the Wild West, the cowboy, the western film, to show the ubiquity and power of their presence. Referring to the productions of Andy Warhol, Quentin Tarantino, queer cinema, and mainstream Hollywood, he applies Roland Barthes' conceptualization of the myth, as well as Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry to anchor his arguments in structuralist and postcolonial discourses. Lipiński concludes the chapters with a discussion of embodied, (auto-)representational, and gender performative dimensions of the demythologizing process which demonstrate the necessity to challenge the American ideology in a comprehensive way.

Chapter Six probes the ideas discussed in Chapters Five and Six in more depth. The author reconstructs the historical evolvment of critical race theory, focusing on the trope of Black invisibility, Du Bois's classical discussion of the veil of race and the phenomenon of the color line, Mitchell's study of racial trauma and Marlon Rigg's poignant documentary *Ethnic Notions* (1982) to present a survey of African American stereotyping and the artistic reactions in face of the overwhelming cultural entanglement of white supremacy and Black debasement. Artists as diverse as Melvin Edwards, Romare Bearden, Carrie Mae Weems, Fred Wilson, Kara Walker, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, and Jacqueline Tarry have interrogated the heritage of the enslavement period on political, social, psychological, and embodied planes. Their

works demonstrate that, while race is a fiction, as contemporary cultural studies scholars agree, it nonetheless continues, within the American myth, a very real marker of difference that translates into racial profiling, incarceration statistics and danger to the health and life of Black American citizens.

The last two chapters focus on one of the most iconic locations in the United States, New York City. Chapter Seven, titled "Traces of Modernism," surveys a very influential American art movement of the mid-20th century, termed New York School, or Abstract Expressionism. Lipiński perceives the movement as the culmination, and the last phase in the process of constructing the idea of America. Lauded as "the triumph of American painting" (Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*, 1970), Abstract Expressionist art dominated the American scene for almost two post-war decades and toured major cities in Europe. In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars revealed that the success of the movement was sponsored by the CIA as part of the country's anti-communist politics during the Cold War. In the 1960s, the sublime abstractions of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman were dethroned by Pop Art, which, among the violence and cultural turmoil, marked the transition into postmodernism. Pop Art, feminist and other politically engaged creators produced a vast body of objects, installations and performances that irrevocably intervened into the very core of American self-mythologization. Chapter Seven, the closing chapter in the book, makes clear that a similar process can be seen in the case of New York City. Lipiński demonstrates that New York, perceived for a long time as the gate to the Promised Land, with the welcoming figure of the Statue of Liberty, is in fact full of paradoxes. Central Park was built on an African American establishment, causing forced displacement; the Statue of Liberty oversees Ellis Island, where immigrants went through selection and families were torn; the famous grid was built on native land, which was leveled and chopped into even-sized blocks; the iconic Twin Towers were destroyed in the context of the American political and military engagement in the Middle East. The city, like a magnifying glass, concentrates facets of the American fantasy, constituting a fertile ground for artists to engage in political and social criticism, and forge new ways of understanding the complexity of the New World project.

Summing up, *Ameryka. Rewizje wizualnej mitologii Stanów Zjednoczonych* offers a panoramic survey of American art, discussed in relation to ideas instrumental for the country's mythmaking and through impactful theories of culture. Lipiński writes with passion, his narrative is approachable and lucid, even though he uses methodologies that extend beyond the non-academic knowledge of the humanities. The methodologies applied by the author prove extremely useful for framing his arguments and allow the readers not only to comprehend the history of American art, but also to trace the larger, domestic and global, transformations that converse with artistic practices and their scholarly conceptualizations. The monograph comes with a name index, which facilitates the reading process, as well as allows to quickly find a desired passage. However, since the author implements a wide spectrum of theories and concepts that cut across cultural, literary, and art studies,

a more detailed index, including both major concepts employed in the text, as well as breaking them down into more detailed subsets is recommended. Particularly useful is the book Summary that offers abstracts of all the chapters. The Summary not only scans through the visual material analyzed in particular sections of the book but also features (in bold print) the main argumentative lines concerning the relationship between art and the historic-cultural moment in the evolvement of the country. This overview will be particularly useful to readers who are not extensively conversant in the history of American (and general) art, and in the intricacies of the humanistic theories. Lipiński's book will find grateful readers among the general public, as well as students of cultural studies and art history, who wish to pursue an interdisciplinary and multidimensional critique of the phantasmatic character of "America."

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Piotr Skurowski. *Rasa, tożsamość, performans. Rasowość i jej konstrukcje w kulturze Stanów Zjednoczonych* [Race, Identity, Performance: Constructions of Race in US Culture]. Wydawnictwo Akademickie Sedno, 2022, 380 pages.

As the American public debate around ethnic identity and systemic injustices quieted down after the upheaval of post-George Floyd protests (2020-21), Polish readers got a comprehensive overview of American discourses on race with the publication of Piotr Skurowski's *Rasa, tożsamość, performans*. The book is especially relevant in 2024, as Donald Trump's "anti-woke" rhetoric positions race and identity as one of the central points of contention between Democrats and Republicans in the upcoming presidential election (Slattery and Layne).

At the outset of the book, Skurowski delineates the difference between understanding race as a social construct and the notion of racial essentialism. The author underscores the consensus on the constructivist approach to race in natural sciences while simultaneously pointing out the political expediency of strategic essentialism in various activist discourses. He also introduces the most important issues in the American debate around race in recent years (including but not limited to Obama's election, racial colorblindness, postraciality, white backlash, the #OscarsSoWhite campaign, and the Black Lives Matter movement). The book employs the concepts of performativity by Erving Goffman and Richard Schechner. Extrapolating their respective understandings of performance into the realm of American race relations allows the author to adopt a unique critical framework on various race-related phenomena (for example, the notions of racial authenticity, cultural appropriation, or racial passing). Skurowski also emphasizes the subversive, transformative potential of "performing race," i.e. (un)consciously adopting behaviors and aesthetic standards associated with a given ethnicity (13-15). After

all, to perform race is to emphasize its constructedness and malleability, defying the age-old yet all-too-prevalent essentialisms centered around scientifically disproven, biological notions of race.

Even though the book's primary focus is on the US, it draws parallels between American and Polish racial discourses. While emphasizing the historical differences and the resultant non-applicability of certain topics to Polish public debate (for example, the conversation around the cultural construction of whiteness is virtually non-existent in Poland due to the country's relative ethnic heterogeneity), the author discusses many interesting points of contact between our respective ideas of race. Skurowski writes about Polish discussions around activist calls to use racially non-discriminatory language (#DontCallMeMurzyn social media campaign), our dissimilar reactions to phenotypically and culturally different refugee groups (e.g., from Ukraine, the Middle East, and North Africa), or the increasingly visible adoption of talking points from the US culture wars (for example, highly polarizing and politicized debates around "wokeness," i.e. a strain of American left-wing progressivism accused of excessive censoriousness and political correctness) (20-22). As African Americans dominate the activist, intellectual, and artistic discourse around race in the US, their voices are prominent in Skurowski's book. However, the author goes beyond the black-and-white racial binary and discusses Native Americans (27), Hispanics/Latinos (31), Jewish and Asian 'model minorities' (38-44), and the so-called 'European' races (Irish, Polish, Italian) with equal scholarly care (34-38).

The first chapter, "Taxonomies, Hierarchies, Borders," underscores the arbitrariness and fluidity of the American conceptions of race. It tracks how definitions of race have changed throughout history and illustrates them with vivid quotations and testimonials, e.g. ones from eminent anthropologist Franz Boas and his famous student, Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston who first "became colored" (i.e., gained racial consciousness by moving out of her all-black hometown) at the age of thirteen (24). The chapter also emphasizes the binary understanding of race in the US. Despite pronouncements of racial colorblindness, postraciality, multiraciality, racial hybridity, anti-essentialism, or "layering" of identities (53-58), America remains a place where the infamous "one drop rule" often defines one's racial marking and ethnic self-identification (51-52). The first part of the book also discusses many controversial terms familiar to readers following American culture wars, e.g. Critical Race Theory, white fragility, microaggressions, white privilege, victimhood and cancel culture, white rage and backlash, or the New Jim Crow—providing valuable scholarly context for talking points frequently employed in the contemporary discourse of politics and social media (61-75). Aggregated in a review such as this one, the multiplicity of terms, names, and opposing voices might seem overwhelming to a reader not familiar with the subject matter of Skurowski's book; however, the author introduces them gradually, as well as provides them with clarifying contexts and illustrative examples.

The second chapter, "White Masks," tackles the phenomenon of light-skinned members of racial minority groups passing for white to enjoy privileges

denied to their respective communities. While describing the historical, legal, and scholarly context for racial passing, Skurowski uses the term to refer to the folk character of the trickster (i.e., an archetypal figure of an underdog outsmarting the ones in power; for example, by exploiting the cultural constructedness of ethnicity and white racist fear of miscegenation), and develops his thesis on the performative quality of whiteness (i.e., wearing the titular “white masks”) (83-85). Throughout the argument, the author reconstructs historical and contemporary examples of passing, recounting the fascinating stories of, among others, Hommer Plessy, James P. Beckwourth, or Anatole Broyard (89, 93, 98). The chapter also discusses the literary history of “passing novels,” “tolerance novels,” and the tropes of miscegenation and “tragic Mulattos” punished for their racial transgressions. Skurowski devotes separate subsections to his scrupulous close readings of William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1953), Frank J. Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912/1927), Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), George S. Schuyler’s *Black No More* (1931), Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000), Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998), and Brit Bennett’s *The Vanishing Half* (2020), solidifying the status of the aforementioned authors as pioneering if sometimes controversial literary figures.

The subsequent part of the second chapter analyzes the trope of the tragic mulatto in cinema, discussing movie adaptations of Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* (1934, 1959) and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (2021), as well as feature films such as *Lost Boundaries* (1949), *Pinky* (1949), and *I Passed for White* (1960). The final section of the chapter discusses the phenomenon of “acting white,” i.e. adapting the linguistic, cultural, and behavioral affectations usually associated with stereotypically imagined middle- or upper-class American whites (211-23). As demonstrated by Skurowski, the accusation of “acting white” impedes the academic performance of non-white students; emphasizing its historical and class dimensions, the author presents a nuanced portrayal of the problem. He also illustrates it with the help of a variety of heterogeneous sources, including relevant sociological and anthropological studies (John Ogbu, Beverly Tatum), conservative scholarly voices (Stuart Buck), and examples from left-leaning American satire (stuffwhitepeoplelike.com, *Saturday Night Live*).

The third and final chapter, “Black Masks,” analyzes the infamous phenomenon of blackface—a theatrical tradition of hyperbolizing grotesque racial clichés through dark makeup and outlandishly stereotypical behavior. Blackface was born out of minstrel shows, and arguably, its more subtle forms survive to this day in contemporary popular culture (for example, as discussed in the last section of the chapter, in some iterations of gangsta rap, reality shows, and comedy that inadvertently reaffirms stereotypes while trying to ridicule them) (330-343). At the outset of the chapter, Skurowski discusses Toni Morrison’s seminal book of cultural and literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), as well as takes inspiration from *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American*

Life (2012) by Karen Fields and Barbara G. Fields (225-229, 245). As argued by the authors above, historical exploitation and enslavement of African peoples stemmed primarily from the particular economic, cultural, and political interests of the colonizers; the concept of race was created retroactively to explain, rationalize, or justify exploitation and enslavement. By reversing the usual logic of racial thinking (race did not give rise to historical injustices, but the other way around), *Playing in the Dark* and *Racecraft* portray race as a widely shared delusion (hence the latter book's analogy to witchcraft). According to this framework, also echoed in Morrison's lecture series *The Origin of Others* (Coates, "Foreword" xi), race is a fiction created to excuse discriminatory behavior, as well as to project the dominant group's fears, insecurities, and fascinations onto the figure of the Other. Later in the chapter, Skurowski uses this line of thinking to once again underscore the performative nature of ethnicity. The author traces the stereotypical performances of race to medieval Europe, the Boston Tea Party, and the minstrel shows of the 19th and early 20th centuries (230-36), pointing out the irony exemplified by black performers attaining bittersweet fame by performing roles founded on their (self-)deprecation (238).

At one point in the chapter, Skurowski writes about the blackface phenomenon in the context of contemporary popular culture. The author discusses blackface in Hollywood movies (e.g., in the early 20th-century films such as *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Jazz Singer*, *The Littlest Rebel* and, in its less direct form, in the 1999 movie *Black and White*), cultural appropriation of black music (jazz, blues, soul, rock & roll, pop and, most recently, hip-hop), and the disturbing fascination with a distorted image of blackness exhibited by Norman Mailer and other Beatnik writers. While discussing Elvis, Eminem, and other artists, Skurowski employs relevant critical theories by bell hooks, Matthew Desmond, Mustafa Emirbayerthese, and Bill Yousman to delineate important distinctions between engaging in cultural cannibalism, drawing constructive inspiration, and following a trend (266, 276, 279). The book also discusses the bizarre yet ultimately well-intentioned occurrences of masquerading as a member of another ethnic group as a form of empathy or activism—for example, to intentionally suffer the consequences of racism (John Howard Griffin's social experiment documented in his 1961 reportage *Black Like Me*), or to become an integral part of the black community in Harlem (like Grace Halsell in her 1969 non-fiction book *Soul Sister*). Skurowski reflects on the gender dynamics of both of the abovementioned books, writing about Halsell's criticism of the post-segregationist South and Griffin's commentary on the so-called "good whites," i.e. liberals who use their professed progressivism as an excuse to get away with racial transgressions stemming from their cultural blindspots (295). As illustrated by the author, American comedy and satire issued the same type of critique through parodic "whiteface" imitations of Griffin's experiment (for example, in stand-up performances by Dick Gregory or in an *SNL* sketch starring Eddie Murphy) (297-99).

Skurowski ends the last chapter with a discussion of white-to-black passing. In the course of the argument, the author engages in an interesting reflection about the consequences of taking the claim about the cultural construction of race to its logical

extreme (for example, by making it entirely independent from biological ancestry and phenotypical traits). While Skurowski admits that some white Americans, such as Philipa and Paula Malone, engaged in “transracialism” (also known as “reverse passing” or “neo-passing”) to take advantage of the benefits of affirmative action, he has more compassion for Rachel Dolezal. Following the argumentation of historian Allyson Hobbs, the Director of African and African American Studies at Stanford University, the author sees Dolezal’s biography as an ironic parallel to the “tragic Mulatta” trope, i.e. an archetype of a black woman punished for racial passing (Dolezal’s racial transgression was to culturally code herself as black and falsely claim African American ancestry) (323). Once again, Skurowski uses the examples of Dolezal and Jessica Krug—a former associate professor at George Washington University whose “reverse passing” echoed that of Rachel’s—to engage in a reflection about racial performativity. Utilizing his outsider’s perspective, he offers insights usually absent from the discourses of the American press and academia (spaces that simultaneously benefit and suffer from their deep entanglement in the American racial predicament).

In the book’s conclusion, Skurowski reflects on the past and present of racial masquerades, pointing to the American public’s increased sensitivity toward racial transgressions (e.g., scandals connected with neo-passing or wearing blackface makeup on Halloween). He also writes about the non-essentialist notions of racial authenticity championed by, for example, Barack Obama and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (politicians accused of being “inauthentic” due to their mixed ancestry, current socioeconomic position, and refusal to embody certain racial stereotypes). Even though the author maintains his scholarly detachment and does not issue any declarative statements of support, it seems that he opts for racial performativity and the freedom to express one’s (non-)ethnic identity on one’s own terms—a stance exemplified by some black public figures (one could give an example of a cultural critic and writer Thomas Chatterton Williams or novelist Percival Everett) but vehemently opposed by others (e.g., Ta-Nehisi Coates and other prominent Afro-pessimists, that is, intellectuals who do not believe in the eventual reconciliation and full assimilation of black culture into the idea of Americanness) (344-46). Despite its pronounced focus on performativity, the book’s conclusion acknowledges the failure of the concept of postraciality. The idea, popular during Obama’s presidency, has been belied by Trump’s political ascendancy and was famously described by Coates as a reactionary *white backlash* (“The First White President”). As argued by Skurowski, the incessant discursive tension between the essentialist and constructivist models of race—a debate influenced by past resentments and persistent injustices—prevents people from embracing their mixedness, i.e. their polyphonic, multivalent sociocultural identities (347-49).

One of the explicitly stated purposes of Skurowski’s book was to introduce the Polish reader to the nuances, complexities, and paradoxes of American ideations of race (12). While the historical and theoretical parts of the book definitely fulfill this goal, literary and film close readings in *Rasa, tożsamość, performans* serve as

an example of how to employ these ideas to engage in richly contextualized cultural analysis. Moreover, discussions of popular culture (music, comedy, television) and current events (e.g., controversies around ‘neo-passing’) allow the book to stay in touch with the important debates outside of academia. Overall, *Rasa, tożsamość, performans* could serve as a solid scholarly foundation for a Polish-language survey course on the history of American conceptions of race. Providing a clear and exhaustive overview of the most important popular and scholarly discourses on the intersections of ethnicity and identity, it offers Polish readers valuable insights into issues central to American culture and politics. Moreover, as pointed out by Skurowski, while Polish people like to see themselves as racially colorblind, we might share in American racial thinking more than we would like to admit (20-22). Hence, Skurowski’s latest book can offer a critical outlook on the inner workings of race in the US while prompting a worthwhile introspective reflection on how American racial history is mirrored in our own worldview.

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Marcin Rychter and Mikołaj Wiśniewski, editors. *Kurt Vonnegut*. Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2023, 198 pages.

I have been a Kurt Vonnegut fan from an age when perhaps it was not such a good idea to allow me to be a Vonnegut reader at all. At thirteen I found his novels on my parents’ bookshelf, and was immediately intrigued by this foreign-sounding name amidst classics of Polish literature. The reason why my discovery was possible, I later understood, resulted from an almost Vonnegutian instance of historical irony; around the time *Slaughterhouse-Five* was being banned in some U.S. school districts, the novel made its way past Polish communist censorship and into our living room. I can only imagine what a treat it must have been to the Polish intellectual in the late

1970s. Now, many years later I have a much fuller understanding of why Vonnegut was so controversial in the United States, and can recognize why his work was fortunate enough to be published behind the Iron Curtain.

I suppose it can be said that it is also ironically fortunate that Marcin Rychter and Mikołaj Wiśniewski began working on their co-edited book of essays on Vonnegut's writing shortly before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, although this time, the fortune is marked by a far more pronounced sense of darkness. The editors recognize this in the opening conversation that serves as an introduction to the volume, and make the argument that at the moment of the publication of their book, the literary legacy of Kurt Vonnegut has sadly become more relevant to the European reader than it has been in the decades following the collapse of the Berlin Wall. But at the same time, the reasons for Vonnegut's relevance should not be limited to the political circumstance in which we have found ourselves after 24 February 2022. As the contributors to the volume convincingly show, it is wrong to categorize Vonnegut merely as a writer of his time, a postmodern classic, whose trademark characteristics can be used in textbooks and classrooms. Instead, as it clearly transpires from the pages of the book in my hand, Vonnegut also bears a resemblance to writers much younger than himself, the likes of David Foster Wallace, who is mentioned explicitly by Marcin Rychter and Piotr Kofta. When it comes to Wallace's postmodern literary forefathers, scholars are more likely to point to Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, yet I am not so sure we should exclude Vonnegut from this group, especially since the two Midwesterners seem to speak in unison on issues such as the pitfalls of convenience for contemporary American culture and the significance of basic human decency and honesty. Wallace and Vonnegut seem to also have much in common when it comes to their complex views on religion more broadly, and Christianity, specifically.

In Rychter and Wiśniewski's book, the issue of religion resurfaces a number of times as its contributors study the development of Vonnegut's literary career, identifying its hallmark novels as turning points for the emergence of the author's complex ethics and aesthetics. The reader thus becomes slowly aware, or perhaps is reminded that Vonnegut is preoccupied with issues of ethics as he pushes the boundaries of postmodern aesthetics. In this he stands out from most other American postmodern experimenters (the aforementioned Pynchon being a notable exception). Reflections on ethics and religion, as the scholars contributing to the book convincingly show, are heavily informed by Vonnegut's personal experiences of World War II, but at the same time they are filtered through a profound sense of humanism that oftentimes is hidden under a thin layer of misanthropy. Yet, it would be a mistake to call Vonnegut a misanthrope. His perspective on humanity resembles more that of a disappointed parent who has just witnessed their child do something terrible, a deed that goes against everything the parent believes in, but simultaneously does not undercut the parent's love for the child.

Another misconception that, to me, the book ventures to challenge has to do with characterizing Vonnegut as a pessimist. It is easy to see how the darkness

of much of his subject matter would lead one to such a conviction, after all, he does write about unspeakable cruelty, acts of genocide and even about the near extinction of the species, but at the same time his books can be seen as wake-up calls, attempts to draw our attention to the threats that we pose to ourselves. Almost always these are presented as absurd, which implicitly reveals Vonnegut's hidden belief in human reason, which is not to be confused with particular instances of reasoning. Marcin Rychter's analysis of *Timequake*, the closing essay in the collection, concludes on a hopeful note: humanity is capable of redemption on the condition that it plays an active role in that redemption, for it would seem, in hindsight, that the vast majority of the atrocities that have taken place in the 20th century were if not caused, then catalyzed by human passivity, our unwillingness to take responsibility, our complacency and our outright laziness. This is the argument Anna Warso is making in her reading of *Mother Night*, this is the threat Marek Paryż identifies in his essay on *Jailbird*.

The other source of hope to be identified in this book is connected with the way in which trauma can be dealt with. As I see it, the volume locates this issue on the other side of the spectrum of responsibility: in our attempts at preventing future atrocities, we should be prepared to take responsibility, but when dealing with the aftermath of such atrocities in the past, we should not engage in pointing fingers, Mikołaj Wiśniewski seems to be suggesting in his analysis of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. From the perspective of this essay, it is easy to see why Vonnegut's most famous novel would simultaneously cause controversy in the United States, and make its way over the Iron Curtain. The reasons for both have nothing to do with any profound reflections on the book, quite the contrary, what they have in common is the way they misrepresent the novel and its reflections on responsibility, with the American conservatives not being willing to accept responsibility for the carpet bombing of Dresden, and the Eastern European communists attempting use the blame in their propagandist discourse. But in reality, the writer's criticism has little to do with the kind of relativism that postmodern authors are conventionally accused of (especially by the conservatives), and is much more connected with the author's thoughts on the universally human propensity for evil: it seems much more decent and productive to recognize this potentiality in one's own camp than to focus on the blame in others, even if this comes with a risk of attack from bigoted opposition, Vonnegut seems to be arguing time and time again. Having revisited much of Vonnegut's *oeuvre* for the purposes of this review, it appears to me that it is bigotry that the author is most consistent in addressing over the course of his career. Adam Lipszyc recognizes this in his essay on *Cat's Cradle*. At its source, there seems to be the kind of human hubris that can be seen as a form of idolatry of reasoning that is described by Marcin Szwed's essay on *Deadeye Dick* and in Jerzy Krzemionkowski's reflection on *Galapagos*.

The aforementioned David Foster Wallace made the following observation about the consequences of such idolatry: "It is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms almost always shoot themselves in the head" ("This Is Water"). In *Timequake* World War II is depicted as "civilization's

second unsuccessful attempt to commit suicide” (25), and if we are inclined to agree with Vonnegut on this point, we should ask ourselves, why was this attempt unsuccessful? Psychiatrists observe that failed suicides are more often than not cries for help, and so perhaps we should see Vonnegut as one of the voices crying for help on behalf of humanity. With war raging in Ukraine and in Gaza, the value of such voices is hard to overestimate. Thus, the role of literature and literary scholarship, as this particular volume demonstrates, should not be overlooked in times of crisis.

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Amy Bride. *Financial Gothic: Monsterized Capitalism in American Fiction*. U of Wales P, 2023, 284 pages.

Since its conception in the eighteenth century, the Gothic has been associated primarily with narratives of terror, often dismissed as lowbrow entertainment for mass audiences and “unrefined sensibilities” (Kirkland 8). With time, while still rooted in popular horror, the genre started to evolve and spread across various literary and cultural forms, proving to be one of the most ubiquitous and influential artistic styles. But the coherence and permanence of the Gothic convention has always relied on its ability to reflect, albeit in highly exaggerated and extravagant ways, its cultural and political milieux, and to comment “upon the monstrosity of social and familial institutions” at a given historical time (Botting 171–2). Relying on a familiar set of figures and tropes, and transgressing the boundaries of a literary “genre,” the Gothic has developed into “a cultural code” and a language in which we have learned to address the troubling or unintelligible aspects of our existence. As book titles such as *Urban Gothic*, *Industrial Gothic*, *Medical Gothic*, or *Transplantation Gothic* imply, the Gothic idiom not only proves relevant in a variety of contexts, but also helps us understand the ambiguous and abject phenomena of everyday reality.

Amy Bride’s *Financial Gothic: Monsterized Capitalism in American Fiction* is another example of how the genre’s principal metaphors can work to provide original and unexpected insights into a non-literary domain. In a series of analytical chapters, the author traces the relationship between American literature and the history of finance across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to argue that, unlike realistic literary forms, the Gothic can be seen as a “mode through which contemporary finance and the financial crisis can be understood, communicated, and characterized” (25). The association between the Gothic and economics is certainly not new. The famous

first sentence of Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) referring to communism as "a specter" haunting Europe, as well as his later writings, drew attention to the issues of spectrality and monstrosity inherent in commodity production and capitalist economy. The Gothic imagination, complete with vampires, ghouls, and werewolves, pervades Marx's critique of capitalism, highlighting the era's anxieties about new forms of labor, commodity production, and industrial economy as such (cf. Smith). The Marxist reading of capitalism through a Gothic lens has been developed by various scholars, notably Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1993), which further explores the relationship between spectrality, haunting, and politics by linking it to the Freudian uncanny. In his re-reading of Marx, Freud, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Derrida elaborates on the Gothic aspects of the capitalist system, including the ghostly nature of paper money and the ambiguous ontological dimensions of finance. Naturally, Derrida's investigation into the Gothic aspects of economic processes has broadened our understanding of both the financial mechanisms and the mechanisms of the Gothic.

In *Financial Gothic*, Bride follows Derrida's lead by exploring the spectral features of capitalism and the liminal zone between absence and presence characteristic of both financial and Gothic discourses. While Derrida demonstrates the existence of "unseen forces at work within the capitalist market," Bride focuses on finance and the immateriality of different financial forms to demonstrate "how finance itself is, in its own right, a highly Gothic form of capitalism that naturally lends itself to fictionalization" (5). By looking at specific literary texts, the author explores the ways in which American Gothic fiction has responded to the economic situation of its time and how, simultaneously, various market forms have been influenced by popular fictional texts. What makes Bride's perspective especially intriguing is reading the history of finance alongside American Gothic literature's concern with issues of race and the haunting legacy of slavery. Although the scope of Bride's analysis is limited to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the author demonstrates how contemporary markets are rooted in the slave trade and how slavery was essentially itself a capitalist system. Drawing on the scholarship of Sven Beckert (2014), Walter Johnson (2013 and 1999), Carter A. Wilson (1996), and Eric Williams (1944), the book expains how the institution of slavery was created for purely economic reasons, and how it led to the development of global capitalism. Another consequence of the slave economy was dehumanization, monsterization, and the construction of the racial Other necessary for sustaining the system of oppression in the name of financial gains. It is this interconnectedness between the psychological and the material effects of slavery, between the fear of the Other at the heart of American Gothic and the financial fears of contemporary America, that gives Bride's book its haunting quality.

Starting with the 1929 Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression, *Financial Gothic* traces how American economic phenomena have been translated into the Gothic imagery in various texts of popular culture. Chapter 1 focuses on H. P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928) and James Whale's horror film *Frankenstein* (1931) as narrative responses to "the biggest financial disaster in American history" (32). While both texts

have been traditionally interpreted as reflecting racial fears, Bride demonstrates how Lovecraft's Cthulhu and Frankenstein's monster can also epitomize the monstrosity of the market and its financial threats. The author draws attention to the similarities between these textual monsters and the fantastical octopus-like creatures symbolizing the market in political cartoons popular at the time. Most importantly, she reveals the disturbing links between the historical processes of personification of the market and dehumanization of the African American to illustrate how race and finance have always been intertwined in American history and culture, and how the monstrosity of the capitalist market has inevitable roots not only in the slave trade, but also in the implied monstrosity of the black person. Both Lovecraft's story of Cthulhu and Whale's adaptation of Frankenstein, read separately and in conversation with one another, are shown as complex allegorical representations of racial and financial fears unsettling America.

In Chapter 2, Bride moves to the 1950s and the quintessentially Gothic trope of the haunted house to illustrate how the era's politics of suburban housing, consumerism, and credit, rather than being a fulfilment of the American Dream, created a sense of economic oppression and anxiety that could not be articulated openly. The house bought on credit and, therefore, "spectral due to the absent presence constituted by its physical materiality and negative capital value," could not be fully possessed by anyone, but instead "threaten[ed] to possess and absorb all of the occupant's wealth before becoming repossessed by the bank upon mortgage default" (84–5). For Bride, these financial terrors of post-war America manifest themselves most clearly in Shirley Jackson's classic *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), in which the young protagonist Eleanor is symbolically consumed and spectralized by the house she does not own. The chapter argues that by envisioning the house that haunts its present inhabitants rather than *is haunted* by its past, Jackson not only reformulates the Gothic haunted house convention, but also addresses the haunting future of her generation, whose "spectral" houses will continue to pose a financial threat. While Jackson is seen, in Angela Hague's words, as "a quintessential writer of the 1950s whose work dramatizes the concerns and fears of that decade" (74), Bride's reading of *Hill House* through a financial lens offers insight into a less often discussed aspect of the fifties' economy and, certainly, breathes fresh air into Jackson scholarship.

The next chapter explores the relationship between the deregulation of the financial market in the 1970s and 1980s, the figure of the vampire, and slavery. Although the vampire has been used before by Marx to refer to the life-draining, predatory nature of capitalism, Bride takes the discussion a step further by pointing to the financial deregulation's origins in the slave trade. Looking at vampire narratives from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to Anne Rice's *Interview With the Vampire* (1976) and George R. R. Martin's *Fevre Dream* (1982), the author argues that the revised, or "deregulated," vampires of both Rice's and Martin's novels should be seen as cultural allegories of the financial deregulation and as fictional figures through which the workings of the then contemporary market could be processed and understood

by readers. The fact that both Rice's and Martin's narratives are set in Louisiana, a traditional hub of the slave trade, again highlights the Gothic vampire's potential to combine the history of slave abuse with the inherent faults and abuses of the deregulated capitalist market.

The vampire is also the central symbol of Chapter 4, which explores Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) and Joel Schumacher's film *Lost Boys* (1987). While the impeccable exterior image and brand fetishism of Ellis' hero is symptomatic of the superficial commodity culture of the 1980s and 1990s, Bride interprets Bateman's identity as an insatiable consumer as yet another, hyperreal version of the Gothic vampire and "a depthless reflection of postmodern commercialisation" (159). Read in the context of the Baudrillardian simulacrum, the hyperreal finance of the last decades of the twentieth century—immaterial and seemingly unreal, especially through the use of computer technology—is rendered monstrous and abstract at the same time. As Bride demonstrates, the excess of commodities, excessive consumerism, and the emptiness of late capitalism create a hyperreal vampire-consumer whose unquenchable thirst for objects and brands turns him into "a product of and response to the postmodern, deregulated, and computerized-financial age" (182).

In the final chapter of *Financial Gothic*, the author turns to the 2008 economic crash and the surge in the wider popularity of the zombie, which *Time* magazine declared "the official monster of the recession" (185–86). In a fascinating close reading of Robert Kirkman's graphic novel series *The Walking Dead* (2003–19) and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), Bride examines the ways in which the two narratives reflect the apocalyptic landscape of post-2008 crash America. Again, Bride's most interesting observations are those regarding the interrelations between finance, monstrosity, and race. In both texts, the racially-coded depictions of zombies, combining the features of a Black slave with those of a mindless consumer, hint at the demonization of low-waged African American borrowers as responsible for the economic crisis. At the same time, since zombies, as a cultural symbol, have their origins in Haitian slavery, Bride argues that they can be seen as both the victims of the capitalist system that originated in the slave trade, and as black bodies rising from the dead to take revenge on the contemporary America that has risen to power through the exploitation of slave labor. Such a complex reading of Whitehead's *Zone One* illuminates the potential of the contemporary zombie to contain racial fears and prejudices, as well as to reveal the shady aspects of financial mechanisms and institutions that have always depended on the exploitation of the Gothic Other.

In its re-examination of some key American narratives of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, *Financial Gothic* not only exposes the monstrosity of finance, but also interrogates the complicated ties between the history of slavery, market operations, and the contemporary US economy. In her highly readable, well-researched, and utterly compelling analysis, Bride demonstrates how the Gothic, despite its surface artificiality, defamiliarizes our everyday reality, only to expose deeper social, cultural, or political contradictions. While the world of finance may

not be easily navigated by the average reader, *Bride* makes sure that we do not get lost in the abundance of specific terminology, and even supplements her study with a glossary of financial terms. Most importantly, however, *Financial Gothic* makes us see the importance of reading literature in a broad context, of discovering less familiar paths, and of exploring the haunted houses of American history and culture.

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Anna M. Brígido-Corachán, editor. *Indigenous Journeys, Transatlantic Perspectives: Relational Worlds in Contemporary Native American Literature*. Michigan State UP 2023, 222 pages.

This handsomely edited collection of essays began its own journey into being in 2018, at the symposium "Teaching and Theorizing Native American Literature as World Literature," and is the second volume that emerged out of that transnational, transcontinental, intercultural scholarly event. Given the symposium's venue—Valencia, Spain—it is not surprising that the scholars' "humble aim," as the volume's editor, Anna M. Brígido-Corachán, phrases it in the Introduction, was to "contribute to ongoing debates around Eurocentrism in academia both in the Americas and in Europe through a decolonizing lens that interrogates imperialist and racist legacies" (x). Privileging Indigenous methodologies and respectful of tribal-centered approaches to Indigenous cultures and stories, this collection examines the rich archive of Indigenous journeying practices, past and present, in the symbolic as well as literal sense of the term.

That revision of colonial narratives and recovery of Indigenous intellectual and artistic sovereignty are at stake is first announced by the book's cover. The reproduction of Red Lake Ojibwe Nation artist Jonathan Thunder's "On the Grave of the Giant" (2021) features a Native American couple harvesting wild rice from a canoe which floats over the sunken skeleton of the legendary giant lumberjack, Paul Bunyan, and the skull of his animal accomplice, Babe the Blue Ox (Rapu). A larger-than-life tall tale hero, whose fabulous strength, speed, and endurance were used in advertising campaigns aimed at attracting virile loggers, Paul Bunyan, accompanied by Babe, is credited with clearcutting the US Northwoods to the

Pacific Ocean (Keeler and Hellenbrand). The dispossession and deforestation of tribal lands—including the territory occupied by Jonathan Thunder’s people—and the corollary erasure of Indigenous America, animal genocide, and environmental degradation: these are the material consequences of symbolic myth. But Thunder’s picture celebrates Indigenous resurgence: the giant is dead, the trees have regrown, Native people are reconnecting with their traditions (wild rice harvesting), and the landscape speaks of renewal—the local interspecies relations which ground Indigenous identity seem to have been reestablished. The fish emerging out of the skeleton’s empty eye socket lays a claim to the present on behalf of all its relations whom the symbol of the modern settler state attempted to erase. Most probably a walleye, the official fish of Minnesota, it decolonizes the well-known logger myth by alluding to an Ojibwe twist on the story, in which Nanabozho the trickster wins a forty-day-long fight with Paul Bunyan by throwing a Red Lake walleye at him, thus knocking the giant off his feet and ultimately making him leave the land. Revisioning Paul Bunyan’s myth from the Ojibwe trickster perspective, Thunder subverts the customary story of Indigenous victimry by pointing to Indigenous survival and narrative chance. The coinages are Gerald Vizenor’s and the name of this Anishinaabe writer is often evoked in the book of essays which center on Indigenous resistance to manifest manners.

Before addressing in greater detail the book’s content, let us have another quick look at the cover. My point is that in the case of *Indigenous Journeys, Transatlantic Perspectives*, one *does* know the book by its cover. So the giant is dead, but his footprints are still there, the toxic fallout of his exploits symbolized by a pipe attached to the canoe’s side, as well as the Western style clothes and facial masks of the Native couple. Painted in the midst of the COVID disaster, the masks are an obvious sign of the times, but in the picture’s layered meanings, COVID is but the most recent incarnation of a series of deadly pandemics brought to Turtle Island by European colonizers. The pipe, on the other hand, a hint at the extractivism and other destructive geoengineering projects—with the Dakota Access Pipeline being the latest development—speaks of the environmental catastrophe which, although hidden from view, continues to ruin Native lives. There can be no miraculous restitution, the picture is saying; there is only translation, transformation, change. After all, the logger’s remains are still there, even though subdued by the abundance of returned life.

“On the Grave of the Giant” is thus a visual equivalent of the volume’s theoretical grounding in Indigenous methodologies, which converge on what Vizenor calls “transmotion,” a concept “directly related to the ordinary practices of survivance, a visionary resistance and sense of natural motion over separatism, literary denouement, and cultural victimry” (Vizenor 63). Transmotion refers to the natural dynamism of the Native world, shaped as it is by constant migrations, relocations, journeying practices—all of which respect no settler-state administrative borders. In Indigenous ontologies, fluidity, realignment, transformation are directly linked to the intricate connections between human and more-than-human communities

bound by ties of trans-species kinship. In such a network of relationality, even the boundary of the body is permeable. Stasis, closure are alien to Native philosophy, as they are to Native stories. As amply illustrated by the works of Indigenous literatures discussed in this essay collection, intellectual sovereignty of the Indigenous people transforms tales of victimry (the “vanishing Indian” motif) into stories of survivance. The future is always open. Such is the book’s overall theoretical paradigm, as carefully unpacked in the editor’s informative Introduction “Place Worlds in Contemporary Native American Literature.”

The collection gathers essays written by a renowned group of international scholars from across the Atlantic (USA and Europe), most of whom (with the exception of Kathryn W. Shanly) are not Indigenous, but all of whom are respectful students of Indigenous research methodologies. The “relational worlds” of the collection’s subtitle are diverse, ranging from relationality understood as land community (Glen Coulthard’s “grounded normativity”), to trans-species, trans-Indigenous, cross-worlds/cross-words, transcorporeal, transgenetic conceptualizations of relations. Each chapter presents a different angle on the topic, and this diversity is one of the volume’s unquestionable strengths. The Indigenous authors discussed here are mostly the well-publicized Louis Owens, James Welch, Simon Ortiz, Louise Erdrich, Heid E. Erdrich, Leanne Simpson, but also some lesser known but deserving of attention, like poets Ofelia Zapeda, Irma Pineda, Gordon Henry; the Ghanaian Ga / Fante writer Ayi Kwei Armah (Ghana); or the Salish visual artist Corwin “Corky” Clairmont.

Silvia Martínez-Falquina of the University of Zaragoza opens the collection with a chapter on “Grounded Relationality” in contemporary Anishinaabe literature. After an extended discussion of academia’s relational and planetary turns, she follows the articulations of Indigenous relationality, and more specifically of *mino bimaadiziwin*—“a radically expansive idea of interdependency” (7), which forms the basis of Anishinaabe understanding of the “good life”—in one poem and two stories. The lessons those texts offer, as Martínez-Falquina convincingly argues, can make a meaningful and much needed contribution to planetary well-being. Firstly, by demonstrating that relations, no matter how damaged, can always be restored, that resurgence is always possible. Secondly, vindicating place-thought and more-than-human agency, the Anishinaabe authors under review sketch out a response-able, consensual ethics of relationality, which is easily translatable to non-Indigenous contexts.

David L. Moore’s contribution to the volume follows the “web of identities” depicted in Louis Owen’s *Dark River*. The chapter, haunted by Vizenor’s theorizations, centers on the novel’s structure and textual analysis, bringing into focus Owen’s subversion of Indigenous “Chief Doom” by means of trickster hermeneutics and narrative chance. The rearticulations of Native identity that Moore traces in his sophisticated analysis of Owen’s storytelling, crosses tribal, generic, cognitive, species, and gender boundaries, leading the novel’s male protagonist to ultimately affirm the feminine in Grandmother Spider’s embrace, in a spin on the conventional horror-movie ending.

In “Cross Worlds: The Sight and Sounds of James Welch” A. Robert Lee (himself a transatlantic / transpacific figure, having held university positions in the USA, UK, and Japan), traces the colliding worlds of modernity and tradition, the overlapping tribal legacies of Welch’s mixed blood characters, the temporal crossovers and the 19th century transatlantic connections in the five novels written by the Blackfeet / Gros Ventre author. At the center of Lee’s analysis, however, is the exactness of depictions—the sounds and sounds of the chapter’s title. On the whole, the analysis is eloquent but somewhat trying in its accumulation of narrative detail.

The four chapters that follow (plus the already discussed chapter one) are, arguably, the best and most illuminating in the volume. Joanna Ziarkowska’s “Slender Vial of DNS—For Sale” tackles the challenges of biocolonialism, and more specifically, the disrespectful appropriation of Native people’s DNA for scientific and statistical purposes. Genomic articulations of Indigeneity, asserts Ziarkowska, violate the relational core of Indigenous identity, as well as reinforcing the “vanishing Indian” myth and, in consequence, weakening Indigenous claims to land and cultural rights. What follows is an elegant, carefully contextualized analysis of Heid E. Erdrich’s poems from *Cell Traffic* (2012), conducted in respectful dialogue with Kim TallBear’s articulations of the politics of tribal DNA (*Native American DNA*, 2013).

A tour-de-force discussion of the place of Indigenous literatures in the global literary canon, Kathryn Shanley’s contribution travels between the Montana of James Welch (and contemporary visual artist Corwin “Corky” Clairmont for comparison) and the postcolonial Ghana of Ayi Kwei Armah, locating the artists within “an Indigenous intelligentsia of outsiders” (110). What is at stake in this chapter is the recognition of Indigenous writers as active contributors to global consciousness and the transnational, trans-Indigenous circulation of ideas rooted in the shared colonial trauma and the ongoing extractivist violence of the settler state. The Fanonian existentialism, which, as Shanley illustrates, underpins Welch’s and Armah’s early fiction, amounted to a political statement in the 1960s and 1970s, when Indigenous people struggled for recognition and self-representation. The broken relations with local environmental communities and the resulting slow industrial genocide of culturally distinct worlds, which their work starts to evidence later, comes to the fore of attention in contemporary Indigenous art, as demonstrated by Clairmont’s exhibit *Two-Headed Arrow / The Tar Sands Project*, a work that documents the degradation of the Indian country between Montana and Alberta, Canada. Acknowledging the problem of aligning “world” and place-based literatures, Shanley nonetheless opts for inclusion as a way to “expand understandings of global citizenship and what constitutes civilization and indigeneity—two woefully loaded terms” (106).

Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz focuses his attention on the traveling of legal practices across the First / Fourth World barrier. His chapter examines reparatory justice—a practice long used by pre-modern societies—as a legal alternative / complement to punitive justice, especially with respect to members of vulnerable social groups and regions with a long and complex history of sociopolitical conflict. Conceptualizing crime as an act of violence against relations and communal values,

Ibarrola-Armendariz highlights the long-term advantages of reparation over mere punishment, the restoration of relations and the protection of victims' interests occupying pride of place. The stages of reparative justice, and the limitations of the process, are then traced in two Indigenous literary texts: Louis Erdrich's *La Rose*—the third part of the Ojibwe's *Justice Trilogy*, and Basque writer Fernando Aramburu's *Homeland*, both novels published in 2016.

A full-blown exercise at the decolonization of comparative Indigenous literatures is what comes next, with Anna M. Brígido-Corachán's chapter "Relational Bodies in Motion: A Trans- Indigenous Reading of Ofelia Zepeda and Irma Pineda's Place-Based Poetry." Both the Zapotec Zepeda and the Tohono O'Odham Pineda draw literary counter-maps based on Indigenous mobility rights in the people's walking on / with the land, a strategy which denaturalizes the fixed borders of the settler state. Reaching back to pre-contact imaginings of one interconnected territory of Native Americas, the poets additionally challenge the linguistic imperialism of English and Spanish in their bilingual poetry (Tohono O'Odham and English, and Diidxazá and Spanish respectively), returning local names to their original storied appellations in the tribal languages. The ensuing verse samplings by Zepeda and Pineda, in the eloquent analysis of Brígido-Corachán, succeed in sharpening the readers' appetite for more. Understandably, however, this would require much more space than allotted to a single book chapter.

The collection closes with Ewelina Bańka's reading of Simon Ortiz's poems from *Before and After the Light* (1994). In her chapter entitled "A Prayer from the Galaxy of the Soul," the author documents the Acoma Pueblo's symbolic journey from a sense of personal and history-induced desolation to the awakening of the sense of wonder when the poet reestablishes his connection to the wider community and the whole cosmos, assuming his responsibility for the world's continuance. As Bańka reminds us, in Indigenous worldviews one becomes fully human in the process of establishing relations and accepting responsibilities. The ability to recognize oneself as intimately related to all that exists ensures the continuance of the sacred journey of life. This is perhaps the book's most transcultural and much needed message.

On the whole, this book is a timely and successful contribution to the transnational Indigenous turn, this "necessary though contradictory critical framework in Native Studies" (287), as Shari M. Huhndorf aptly put it in her afterword to Ronald Niezen's *The Origins of Indigenism*. Having skillfully navigated the stormy waters of nationalisms (with their erasure of conflict and marginality), it centers on what draws Indigenous communities together across multiple boundaries, while the "relational worlds" of the volume's subtitle affirm mobility, multiplicity, Indigenous intellectual autonomy and representation. Still, what I feel to be a significant absence at this particular juncture of history is a sustained discussion of gender relations in transnational, trans-Indigenous perspectives. The transnational politics of Indigenous feminism could be an important aspect of such a publication, given the rising numbers of murdered and missing Indigenous women in the US, Canada, Mexico, and beyond the Americas.

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Jeff Kosseff. *Liar in a Crowded Theater: Freedom of Speech in a World of Misinformation*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2023, 368 pages.

In June 2024, the Supreme Court delivered a significant ruling rejecting a case that accused the Biden administration of unlawfully pressuring social media platforms to remove posts deemed misinformation about Covid-19 and the 2020 election (Faguy 2024). The lawsuit, brought by five social media users and attorneys general from Louisiana and Missouri, argued that such governmental pressure violated the constitutional right to free speech. However, the Court, in a 6-3 decision, determined that the plaintiffs lacked the legal standing to sue. While the decision was procedural rather than substantive, it marked a victory for President Joe Biden by overturning an injunction that restricted communications between social media firms and government agencies. This ruling allows agencies like the FBI to flag posts and accounts deemed threats to national security.

Justice Samuel Alito's dissent, spanning 34 pages, criticized the majority's stance, describing it as pivotal in the realm of free speech jurisprudence. He condemned the administration's influence on social media platforms as unconstitutional "jawboning," warning of its potential implications on future governmental control over public discourse. Despite lower court rulings favoring the plaintiffs' claims of governmental overreach, the 2024 Supreme Court's decision sends a clear message about the limits and complexities surrounding free speech protections in an era of rapid digital communication and regulatory challenges.

This decision also marks a departure from the arguments advanced in Jeff Kosseff's 2023 book, *Liar in a Crowded Theater: Freedom of Speech in a World of Misinformation*, which scrutinized the constantly evolving landscape of free speech from the nation's founding to the digital age. The author of the book is a professor

of cybersecurity law at the United States Naval Academy, who also authored a 2019 book *The Twenty-Six Words That Created the Internet*, pertaining to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act which protects online platforms from lawsuits based on user content. The titular liar in a crowded theatre is a play on words based on the phrase “fire in a crowded theatre,” which originates from the 1919 Supreme Court opinion in *Schenck v. United States*, a pivotal case that shaped the boundaries of free speech under the First Amendment amidst World War I.

The story of Charles Schenck explored in Chapter 1 exemplifies a great strength of Kosseff’s book: his exceptional skill in developing a multifaceted narrative for each case he describes. The author ensures that no detail or particular circumstance is overlooked, thereby providing readers with a comprehensive understanding of the intricate legal and historical contexts. Schenck, a prominent socialist, distributed leaflets urging resistance to the military draft, arguing it amounted to involuntary servitude and violated constitutional rights. Schenck’s conviction under the Espionage Act of 1917 and his subsequent appeal, asserting that the Act curtailed protected speech, serve as a crucial case study in the book. Through this detailed narrative, Kosseff illuminates the complexities and stakes of First Amendment jurisprudence, demonstrating how historical context, individual actions, and legal interpretations intertwine to shape the evolving landscape of free speech.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, writing for a unanimous Court, upheld Schenck’s conviction, asserting that in wartime, speech creating a “clear and present danger” to national interest could be restricted, likening it to falsely shouting fire in a crowded theater, thereby setting a precedent for limitations on speech during times of perceived crisis. As highlighted by Kosseff, Justice Holmes’s metaphor was inspired by the words of the prosecutor Edwin S. Wertz, who in a parallel case of a socialist Eugene Debs asserted that “a man in a crowded auditorium, or any theatre, who yells ‘fire’ and there is no fire, and the panic ensues and someone is trampled to death, may be rightfully indicted and charged with murder” (Kosseff 4).

In his book, Kosseff emphasizes that the Schenck decision laid the groundwork for subsequent First Amendment jurisprudence, influencing cases like *Brandenburg v. Ohio* in 1969, where the Court refined its approach to speech restrictions. The author presents how the Court, overturning the “clear and present danger” standard, established the “imminent lawless action” test, permitting limitations only on speech likely to incite imminent unlawful activity. This evolution, as detailed in the book, reflects ongoing debates over the balance between free speech and national security, shaping the interpretation of constitutional protections in modern contexts of advocacy, digital communication, and regulatory challenges.

By weaving together numerous case studies such as Schenck’s, Kosseff’s book offers a comprehensive and deeply researched account of a perplexing issue of protecting false speech from censorial power under the First Amendment. Indeed, in the United States it is very difficult to hold a speaker liable for false statements. The author’s goal is to explain why courts in the US set a high bar for protecting false speech, and, at the same time, he aims at advocating in favor of the robust

protections and against any haste measures curtailing free speech, which often arise from contemporary pressures.

The book unfolds across three parts, with Part I delving deeply into history of legal protection of false speech and spanning eight comprehensive chapters with interesting, yet initially less informative titles, such as Democracy, Truth or Opinion. In Part I, the author explores the historical development of robust legal protections for false speech, drawing from landmark First Amendment rulings, common law principles, and legislative statutes. Emphasizing the “marketplace of ideas” concept pioneered by the same Justice Holmes who wrote about the fire in the theatre in the *Schenck* decision, Part I contends that government intervention in speech is often deemed unnecessary due to the belief that truth will prevail in a free and open exchange of ideas.

Kosseff makes it explicit that in his dissent in *Abrams v. United States*, issued in November 1919, about eight months after his famous “fire in a theater” analogy in *Schenck v. United States*, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. embarked on a significant departure from his earlier stance. While the concept of “clear and present danger” evolved to “clear and imminent danger,” the author puts a strong emphasis on the fact that Holmes shifted his focus away from theatrical metaphors to advocate strongly for the protection of free speech. Criticizing the government’s prosecution of individuals distributing pamphlets deemed subversive, Holmes argued that such actions did not pose an imminent threat warranting suppression. He contended that even if the government could prove intent to harm, the severity of a 20-year prison sentence was excessive, emphasizing that personal beliefs should not influence judicial punishments. Holmes then laid out the foundational principles of what would later be recognized as the marketplace of ideas doctrine: “Persecution for the expression of opinions seems to me perfectly logical... But when men have realized that time has upset many fighting faiths, they may come to believe even more than they believe the very foundations of their own conduct that the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas” (Kosseff 14). This marked a significant shift from Holmes’s earlier approach in *Schenck*, reflecting his evolving belief in the power of open discourse and the resilience of truth in a competitive marketplace of ideas. This stance echoes Kosseff’s conviction that the government should resist the temptation to curtail free speech, even in the face of serious threats.

However, the subsequent seven chapters serve as a mild critique of the marketplace framework for its limitations and examine alternative justifications for speech protections, including fostering self-governance, ensuring transparency, acknowledging the uncertainty of truth, and holding individuals accountable for their responses to speech. What must be acknowledged is the remarkable depth of historical detail since each case discussed by the author unfolds into a rich narrative of events culminating in the court’s decision, exemplified by the landmark *New York Times v. Sullivan* in 1964.

Part II of the book addresses contemporary concerns surrounding falsehoods such as COVID-19 misinformation, election fraud claims, deep fakes, and conspiracy

theories like QAnon. While acknowledging rare circumstances where litigation and regulation may be appropriate, the author cautions against overreach in censoring false speech, arguing that proposals exceeding free speech principles outlined in Part I may undermine democratic values.

In Part III, the book proposes non-regulatory approaches to mitigate the impact of falsehoods and promote truth. These include empowering targets of false claims to respond effectively, granting online platforms latitude to moderate harmful content, fostering media literacy among the public to discern truth from misinformation, holding individuals accountable for their reactions to false speech, and rebuilding trust in institutions like government agencies and the media.

The historical value of the book as a chronicle of litigations concerning breaches of First Amendment rights is beyond any doubt. Editorial reviews have lauded its significance, with Senator Ron Wyden deeming it “required reading for any pundit, politician, or talking head who wants to opine on government regulation of Americans’ speech.” However, though I am not a lawyer, my background as a rhetorical scholar endows me with a keen eye for balanced argumentation and an acute radar for sophistry. I recognize that any side of an issue can be justified and artfully defended for the purpose of victory, no matter how deceptive it may seem.

Therefore despite Kosseff’s elaborate analysis of the concept of *truth*, I must confess I have a fundamental issue with a *lie*. What about meddling in election campaigns through the dissemination of blatant falsehoods which, despite the author’s fervent belief to the contrary, do not have the opportunity to be subjected to the scrutiny of the marketplace of ideas? Or even if they do, they never resonate loudly enough and are often dismissed? Nevertheless, these lies achieve results by swaying the voters, causing them to question the integrity of a candidate—such is the basic nature of a human reaction. This issue of lies yielding real consequences has, unfortunately, been somewhat dismissed in favor of overly optimistic belief in the self-correcting and thus self-healing nature of democracy. My argument may sound preposterous to a lawyer, but I am also a citizen. My freedom of expression ends where another’s freedom gets distorted or suppressed, whether consciously or not.

All in all, the fundamental question remains: Do I feel convinced by the author’s line of argument? Well, not entirely. However, this is neither the author’s fault nor the book’s shortcoming. Despite my hesitation to assume that critical thinking skills are universally applied in the marketplace of ideas, what this book has illuminated for me more than anything is that law is undeniably one of the most susceptible domains to the whims of changing times. What made sense for Alexander Hamilton or even Eminem in the late 1990s in my opinion might struggle to withstand the test of time amidst the current era of hybrid war and global upheavals which threaten the established order. If I were to suggest anything to the author in 2024, it would be a heightened caution in overlooking the arguments of the other side, particularly given the national security threats posed by trolling farms, widespread misinformation and deep fakes which blur the line between falsehood and truth, even “substantial”.

When times change, so too does the law. No wonder studying the vivid history of legal battles as Jeff Kosseff presented in his captivating narrative, often reveals more about a given period than traditional historical accounts or newspaper reports. Nonetheless, I do not advocate for switching gears and advocating censorship. On the contrary, I would argue that new circumstances call for new perspectives on both freedom of speech and censorship, balancing the advantages and drawbacks of each at a given time. Therefore, in light of the June 2024 Supreme Court decision, the author might consider writing a follow-up volume to his meticulously researched and profoundly compelling 2023 exploration of one of America's greatest treasures: the First Amendment.

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Robert A. Segal. *Myth Analyzed*. Routledge, 2021, 214 pages.

John Karabelas. *The Historical Value of Myths*. Routledge, 2023, 99 pages.

Academic interest in the theory, concept, form, and function of myth has been a continuous and cyclically renewed phenomenon ever since Plato, Aristotle, and Euhemerists. The list of those scholars who have conducted research into various dimensions of this one of the most enigmatic and illusive human creations that myth is, features such names as: George Frazer, Edmund Burke, Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, Ernst Cassirer, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Roland Barthes—to name just a few. Even though their work has provided us with a fairly firm grasp of the concept, myth continues to fascinate and to pose a challenge to contemporary scholars as evidenced by Routledge's "Theorists of Myth" series and the house's publication of (among other titles) Robert A. Segal's *Myth Analyzed* in 2021 and John Karabelas's *The Historical Value of Myths* in 2023.

Segal, in his book, focuses on the relation of Myth and Science, and the bulk of his monograph is devoted to comparing modern theories of myth, especially those concerning psychological and psychoanalytical reading of myths. His main thesis is that once myth studies approached myths as metaphorical/symbolical/allegorical stories of man's "inner world" (37) myth was lost to science, understood as the study of the natural, physical world.

Myth Analyzed opens with Segal's "Defense of Theorizing about Myth" (1), which defense constitutes the Introduction to the book (1-9). In it, Segal lays out not only the reasons for the continuous need to study myths academically, but also the methodological foundations to approach different myth theories. The Introduction is followed by a summary of "The leading modern theories of myth" (10) in Chapter 1

(10-25) in which the author skillfully provides the lineage of modern myth theorists from E. B. Taylor to René Girard and Walter Burkert in the context of myth's relation to science, philosophy, religion, ritual, psychology, and society.

Chapters 2-5 (26-99) are devoted to the analysis how psychologization of myths intensified in the twentieth century, in the works of Otto Rank, Freud, Jung, and D. W. Winnicott, who broke away from the 19th century tradition of myth studies represented by such scholars as George Frazer. In *Psychologizing myth* (26-45), the reader is presented with observations on myth's psychological nature—"the myth is about itself. It is not a biography but autobiography" (28)—i.e. myths such as that of Oedipus reveal to the readers the truth about themselves. The chapter also features reflections on contemporary myth-making practices involving stars and celebrities. The Rank on myth chapter (46-64) discusses the Rank's parting with Freud and his shift to focusing on myths as expressions of the trauma of birth (52). The chapter also presents Rank's formula of the monomyth, later developed by Joseph Campbell. In the short chapter on Freud's and Jung's studies of myth (66-73), Segal summarizes the works of the two of the most influential modern psychologists and their impact on the twentieth-century theoretical approaches to myth. Finally, in Chapter 5 (75-99), which is an extension, if not the repetition, of the three previous chapters, the author discusses psychoanalytical readings of Greek myths. This chapter is enriched by the presentation of Campbell's Jungian interpretation of hero myths in his attempt to formulate the monomyth of the hero's journey.

In Chapters 6 and 7 (100-137), Segal analyzes hero myths and the various concepts of the monomyth. First, he elaborates on Thomas Carlyle's study of "great men," *On Heroes, Hero-Warship, and the Heroic in History*, as well as modern heroes, which leads Segal to discuss the relation between myth and history (100-113). Chapter 7 is devoted to the analysis of the myth of the biblical King Saul through the prism of two concepts of the monomyth, one by Rank and one by Lord Raglan (114-137).

In chapters 8-10 (138-177), the author discusses the varying relationships between myth and science (138-153), and myth and politics (169-177), including a most fascinating presentation on myth as ideology in Chapter 9 (154-168). The final two chapters of *Myth Analyzed* pose questions on whether Hollywood stars (Chapter 11, 178-183) and the Gaia hypothesis (Chapter 12, 184-210) can, as Segal puts it, "bring myth back to the world" (178), i.e. bring it back from the psychological inner world into the external, physical one. His conclusions are that if films are approached as make-believe, they do reconnect myth to gods, i.e. to religion, i.e. to the world, and that the Gaia hypothesis can do the same only if it is treated the same way as Hollywood stars are. However, Segal's ultimate conclusion is that the "choices for theorists of myth remain either the nineteenth-century or the twentieth-century one. No twenty-first-century option yet exists" (206).

While Segal focuses on the psychology of myth, Karabelas turns his attention to myths as means of historical research, which approach he deems to be "often absent from discussions of mythology, which favour symbolic and psychological

interpretations" (*The Historical Value of Myths*). In Parts 1 and 2 of his book, Karabelas dives into the worlds of myth, history, Romanticism, and methodology of historical studies which ought to include myths.

In Part 1 (1-42) the author presents the ancient Greek approach to myths as testaments of historical events, and the "decadence of myth" (17), i.e. the decreasing relevance of their historical value in post-classical times. Chapter 1 (3-16) provides a summary of theories on myths' content, structure, and significance, as well as comments on Aristotle's thoughts on the relation between poetry (i.e. myth) and history, which lay at the foundation of historical studies of myths. In Chapter 2 (17-25), Karabelas discusses how, beginning with late antiquity, throughout the Middle Ages, up until the Enlightenment, myth steadily declined from its religious and educational significance to it being viewed, most notably by Voltaire, as "patent superstition and historical distortion" (21-22). In the final chapter of Part 1, Karabelas provides an overview of the works of R.G. Collingwood on fairy tales as myths, which demonstrate the methodology for the historical study of myth (26-42). The chapter can be read as Karabelas's attempt to give due credit to the somewhat overlooked Collingwood's contribution to historical studies.

In Part 2, Chapter 4 (45-76) is devoted to the discussion of how the historiography of the Romantic period, with its "deep engagement and sympathy with the cultures under examination" (83), renewed the historical approach to myths. The chapter ends with the author's analysis of the concept of Romanticism and the analysis of the relationship between history and political philosophy, which leads to Chapter 5, in which Karabelas presents the figures of two historians and political philosophers: Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre (77-84). In this chapter, Karabelas analyses the historical and political works of Burke, as well as de Maistre, and their connection to the study of myths. The focus of the chapter is on giving due credit to the "forgotten historian" (77), i.e. Burke, who, as a politician was, in the words of Lord Acton, "England at its best" (79), however, as a historian is undeservingly "less well known" (79). Karabelas emphasizes Burke's "contribution to the shaping of a new historical consciousness" (83), which as a part of Romantic historiography is vital to the historical approach to myths.

Karabelas finishes his book with a summary of findings on the historicity of myths, and a conclusion that myth and history vary mainly in the "breadth of their understanding and explanation" (93). The reason why it is possible to approach myth similarly to history is the fact that while the latter limits itself to "understanding and explaining human past actions," myth encompasses the entire human experience (93). In attempt to restore myth to historical studies, Karabelas argues that "the claim that the truthfulness of myth is compromised" is misleading (93), and expresses hope that "the kind of mind which created myths ... still resides in history" (95).

Both *Myth Analyzed* and *The Historical Value of Myths* are challenging reads, especially to those uninitiated into the myth studies, even though the authors do their best to introduce the concept of myth as clearly and comprehensively as the subject matter allows them to. The reader of Segal's book might be discouraged by

frequent repetitions of ideas, thoughts, theories arguments, and even entire passages of texts (e.g. Chapters 3 and 5) just as the reader of Karabelas might be confused by how much of his analysis is on history, Collingwood, and Romanticism, and how little (in juxtaposition) on the actual myth and its historical value. This is by no means accusation towards either of the authors, as both their works offer a vast context, which is worth knowing, if not required, when studying myths within the framework of the theories and methodologies presented by both scholars. It is up to each individual reader to decide whether to sift through the meanders of their narratives in search for specific information or to enjoy in entirety the breadth of knowledge to be found in both books. Both books will serve well those researchers already immersed in myth studies, and undergraduate students writing myth-related BA or MA theses (with some assistance from their supervisors).

Myth Analyzed and *The Historical Value of Myths* complement each other in terms of presenting a wide range of theoretical approaches to myth studies which developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as in earlier epochs. They also demonstrate how elusive and complicated the concept of myth is, whether as a tool to study humans and their experience, and as a manifestation of a deeper, collective unconscious. Both authors provide detailed and thorough analyses of what myth is, what approaches one can take to study it, and what functions myths might have, and the ultimate conclusion that the reader gets is that myth is, first and foremost, a tool to study humans. However, the question of which of the tools in the capacious toolbox of theoretical approaches to choose and how to use it efficiently is still open.

Personally, I feel that there is one more aspect in which *The Historical Value of Myths* complements *Myth Analyzed*. At one point of his book, Karabelas refers to myth as “a strange and remote spectacle” (3), not a text or a story or a narrative, but “spectacle.” While according to Seagal no twenty-first-century new myth theory yet exists (206), I believe Karabelas may have touched upon a new direction which myth studies could take. I wonder if thinking of myth as an “event” would help scholars fully comprehend the phenomenon.

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Empathic Imagining and Solidarity
in Latinx Transnational Migration Narratives

Réka M. Cristian

Healing Processes in Aurora Levins Morales's
Remedios and Medicine Stories

Richard D. Reitsma

LatinX Narratives of Belonging
from *The Squatter and the Don* to *Red, White, and Royal Blue*

Maja Piskadło

Parliament-Funkadelic and the Grooving Bodies
of Afrofuturistic Citizens

Atalie Gerhard

(Anti-)Liberational Feminism in the Neo-Westerns
Harriet (2019) versus *Terror on the Prairie* (2022)