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At the Crossroads of Ethics

An Introduction

Abstract: Hospitality, a seemingly benevolent human practice, exists within a paradoxical framework of inclusion and exclusion. As Jacques Derrida suggests in his concept of *hostipitality*, hospitality is never entirely pure but is instead bound by conditions, power structures, and social hierarchies that determine its limits. This issue of *Crossroads* critically engages with these complexities, particularly within American cultural, historical, and literary contexts. The featured articles examine the intersections of hospitality and exclusion, addressing issues such as racialized hospitality under Jim Crow laws, identity fraud within Indigenous communities, the spatial regulation of hospitality in elite leisure spaces, and the selective inclusion of immigrants in the United States. Through literature, history, and cultural analysis, these contributions reveal how hospitality, rather than being an unconditional welcome, often operates as a mechanism of control, reinforcing existing social and political inequalities. By exploring the ethical and political stakes of hospitality across diverse disciplines, this collection fosters a deeper understanding of how hospitality functions as both a gesture of openness and an instrument of exclusion. In doing so, it aligns with *Crossroads*' mission to promote interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and contrastive research in the humanities, urging scholars to reconsider the role of hospitality in shaping contemporary global identities and power structures.

Keywords: Hospitality, hostipitality, Jacques Derrida, exclusion, American studies, racialized hospitality, identity politics, interdisciplinary research

Hospitality is a fundamental yet paradoxical human practice. Emerging at the crossroads of ethics, politics, and social relations, it is often portrayed as a gesture of openness, an act of kindness extended toward the stranger, the foreigner, or the guest. However, as Jacques Derrida has argued, hospitality is never *pure*; rather, it is bound by conditions, obligations, and power structures that determine who is welcomed and under what terms.² At its core, hospitality is marked by an inherent tension: while it promises *inclusion*, it frequently operates as a mechanism of *exclusion*,

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2 See Derrida and Dufourmantelle (25); for more thorough analyses, see, for instance, Kakoliris (144–155), or Westmoreland (1–10).

reinforcing social, racial, and political hierarchies. In contrast to the utopian vision of an unconditional welcome, hospitality often emerges as a regulated and constrained process, where those who extend it wield authority over those who receive it. Derrida captures this contradiction in his notion of *hostipitality*, a term that fuses *hospitality* with *hostility*, reflecting the way in which the act of welcoming can also conceal forms of violence, surveillance, and control (“Hostipitality” 3–18).

This issue of *Crossroads* engages with this intricate interplay between hospitality and hostipitality, particularly within the American cultural, historical, and literary landscape. The collected articles explore how hospitality, as both a concept and a practice, functions as a site of negotiation—between self and other, citizen and foreigner, privilege and marginalization. By examining different modes of hospitality across time, space, and genre, these contributions illuminate how acts of welcome can be entangled with exclusionary policies, racial discrimination, and contested identities. Through literature, history, and cultural analysis, this issue attempts to map out the boundaries of hospitality and the consequences of the trespass.

The exploration opens with Julia Rogińska’s article, “Separate and Unequal—The Traumatic Consequences of American Hostipitality Based on Colson Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys*.” This study exposes the insidious ways in which racialized hospitality under Jim Crow laws functioned as a mechanism of dehumanization. By applying postcolonial and trauma theories, Rogińska dissects the systemic oppression of Black Americans, revealing how the illusion of equal treatment masked the reality of institutionalized violence. Her analysis of *The Nickel Boys* sheds light on the long-lasting scars of historical trauma and the ways in which racism continues to shape contemporary narratives of inclusion and exclusion. By foregrounding the lived experiences of those subjected to racialized hostipitality, this article sets the stage for a broader discussion of power, marginalization, and resistance.

Extending Rogińska’s ethical inquiry into the limits of welcome, S. Bilge Mutluay Çetintaş approaches the question of hospitality through the intimate terrain of autobiographical memory. Her essay juxtaposes the warmth of her 1976–77 American host family with the deeply unsettled racial and historical narratives she encountered in texts such as Alex Haley’s *Roots*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. The result is a textured, at times unsettling meditation on what Derrida calls “hostipitality”: the ineradicable entanglement of welcome and violence that shapes the lives of those positioned as strangers. Çetintaş shows how the rituals of *philoxenia* that sustained her exchange-year experience stood in stark contrast to the structural inhospitalities encoded in U.S. histories of enslavement, settler colonialism, and linguistic exclusion. Her reflection on the symbolic threshold of Ellis Island, with its bureaucratic scrutiny and the painful “Island of Tears” epithet, becomes a wider meditation on the asymmetrical obligations embedded in the host–guest relation. By moving between Greek *xenia*, Civil Rights–era resonances of “We Shall Overcome,” and the fraught multilingual negotiations of Kingston’s narrator, Çetintaş reminds us that hospitality is never a single gesture but a shifting constellation of power, vulnerability, memory, and desire—always shadowed by its hostile double.

From questions of historical trauma and lived experience, the issue moves toward the contested terrain of cultural authenticity in Elżbieta Wilczyńska's "Hostipitality—Pretendians in the Host and Guest Matrix." Wilczyńska examines one of the most fraught ethical dilemmas in contemporary identity politics: the deliberate adoption of false Indigenous identities by non-Native individuals seeking social, cultural, or institutional capital. Drawing on Derrida's notion of hostipitality and on Gayatri Spivak's idea of the "host from below," she exposes the complex power dynamics that govern who is permitted to enter Indigenous communities, who has the authority to speak on behalf of those communities, and who benefits from the symbolic currency of Indigeneity. In this analysis, Pretendianism emerges not as a benign error of self-identification but as a profound ethical breach—an act of occupation that violates the fragile protocols of welcome, recognition, and reciprocity on which hospitality depends. By interrogating the legal, cultural, and emotional consequences of race-shifting, Wilczyńska reframes hospitality in settler-colonial contexts as a field of contested permissions and asymmetrical obligations.

This focus prepares the conceptual ground for Jerzy Kamionowski's exploration of the visual taxonomies that have long structured racial belonging and exclusion in the American cultural imagination. Following Wilczyńska's examination of the politics of identity and belonging, Jerzy Kamionowski turns our attention to the visual grammars through which race has been imagined, codified, and enforced. His reading of Natasha Trethewey's *Thrall* uncovers the poem-sequence's sustained engagement with *casta* paintings, Enlightenment portraiture, and Christian iconography—visual regimes that do not merely depict racial difference but actively produce it. As Kamionowski argues, Trethewey's ekphrastic method exposes the mechanisms by which art stabilizes the fiction of race by "naturalizing its taxonomies," rendering hierarchical relations between bodies both legible and morally justified. Poems such as "Miracle of the Black Leg," "Taxonomy," and "Enlightenment" reveal how familial intimacy, scientific curiosity, and aesthetic convention can all participate in the disciplining of the mixed-race subject. In Kamionowski's analysis, hospitality appears less as a social practice than as an epistemic order: a system of seeing that determines who may be recognized, who must be classified, and who remains spectral within the cultural imagination. Positioned here, the essay forms a conceptual hinge within the issue — bridging Wilczyńska's ethics of identity and Wood's spatial politics—by insisting that before hospitality can be practiced, it is first visualized, and all acts of welcome unfold within these inherited structures of looking.

Shifting our focus from identity politics to spatial hierarchies, Karl Wood's "Hospitality and Exclusion in the Transnational Spa in the Long Nineteenth Century" investigates how spaces of leisure—Saratoga Springs in the United States and Baden-Baden in Germany—served as arenas where hospitality was performed, regulated, and withheld. Despite their ostensible openness, these elite spa resorts functioned as sites of exclusion, reinforcing racial, gender, and class-based distinctions. Wood's comparative approach reveals the paradoxical nature of hospitality in transnational spaces, where ideals of cosmopolitanism and welcome were systematically undermined by rigid social barriers. This article thus extends the discussion of

hospitality beyond the realm of interpersonal interactions and into the very architecture of social institutions.

Continuing this interrogation of hospitality's role in shaping national and cultural identities, Natalia Vysotska's "US Hostipitality through the Lens of Chinese American Drama" explores how playwrights such as Genny Lim, David Henry Hwang, and Lloyd Suh have engaged with the contradictions of American hospitality. By situating her analysis within the historical context of anti-Chinese immigration policies, particularly the Chinese Exclusion Act, Vysotska demonstrates how hospitality in the United States has often functioned as a selective and conditional privilege rather than an unqualified right. Through dramatic narratives, she reveals how Chinese American playwrights critique the mechanisms of exclusion, challenge racial stereotypes, and resist the framing of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. Her article highlights the vital role of literature and performance in exposing the camouflaged hostilities embedded within national frameworks of belonging.

While the thematic section of this issue foregrounds hospitality as an explicitly ethical and political problem, the two contributions gathered in the *Varia* section approach questions of inclusion, hierarchy, and access from oblique yet no less revealing angles. In her study of American food television, Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis traces the genre's transformation from postwar pedagogical instruction to contemporary spectacle and prestige streaming. Read through the prism of hospitality, food television emerges as a mediated threshold space: a site where viewers are invited to participate vicariously in practices of consumption, taste, and belonging, while remaining structurally excluded from the labor, material conditions, and inequalities that underwrite them. The shift from instruction to spectacle thus mirrors a broader cultural movement from shared domestic practices toward curated forms of access—where welcome is extended visually and affectively, yet carefully managed and monetized. Food television, in this sense, stages a paradoxical hospitality: one that promises intimacy and inclusion while reinforcing new forms of distance, hierarchy, and gatekeeping.

A different but complementary inversion of hierarchy is explored in Julia Helena Wilde's analysis of Martyn Beardsley's *Sir Gadabout*, where the carnivalesque logic of children's literature allows a nonhuman sidekick—a talking cat—to assume narrative and ethical authority. Wilde's reading situates the text at a playful crossroads between medieval hierarchy and modern subversion, where the rigid structures of feudal order are temporarily suspended through Bakhtinian reversal. Here, hospitality operates not as a social contract between host and guest, but as a narrative openness to the unexpected agent: the figure who does not properly "belong" within the system yet proves indispensable to its functioning. By granting agency to the marginal, the foolish, or the nonhuman, *Sir Gadabout* reveals how spaces of apparent frivolity—children's literature, humor, the carnivalesque—can become discreet laboratories for reimagining power relations. At this crossroads of play and critique, hierarchy is not abolished, but momentarily reconfigured, allowing readers to glimpse alternative orders of value and authority.

The issue concludes with a review by Magdalena Łapińska of Nicole Carr's *Black Feminist Mothering in 21st Century Literature: I Am Not Your Mammy*, which returns the reader to hospitality's

most intimate and ethically charged register: care, refusal, and the politics of relational labor. Łapińska's engagement with Carr's study foregrounds Black feminist mothering as a practice that both offers shelter and draws firm boundaries—an ethics of care that resists exploitation, sentimentalization, and coerced welcome. Positioned at the end of the issue, the review functions as a reflective coda, reminding us that hospitality is never merely about opening doors, but also about deciding when refusal is necessary for survival and dignity. In this sense, the *Review* section itself becomes a crossroads: a space where critical evaluation, ethical responsibility, and scholarly dialogue meet, reinforcing the journal's commitment to attentive, rigorous, and accountable forms of intellectual exchange.

Taken together, these contributions demonstrate the diverse ways in which hospitality and hostipitality manifest across historical, cultural, literary, and media contexts. By weaving together complementary perspectives, this issue of *Crossroads* not only interrogates the ethical and political stakes of hospitality but also reaffirms the journal's long-standing commitment to interdisciplinary and cross-cultural inquiry. Indeed, the thematic focus of the issue resonates deeply with the philosophy of *Crossroads*, whose mission is to foster contrastive, cross-linguistic, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary research across the broad fields of English language studies, linguistics, and Anglophone literatures. Through its multifaceted engagement with hospitality—approached from literary, cultural, historical, and theoretical vantage points—this issue embodies the journal's dedication to expanding scholarly conversations across disciplines, traditions, and borders. The transhistorical and cross-cultural reach of the contributions further reflects *Crossroads*' role as a forum for dialogue between diverse methodologies and academic perspectives, particularly in relation to enduring questions of race, power, identity, and exclusion.

Ultimately, owing to the critical rigor of the contributors' perspectives, this issue—including its *Varia* section and concluding review—invites readers to rethink the role of hospitality in shaping national, cultural, and social identities not only in the American context, but also on a global scale. By bringing together voices from different fields and scholarly traditions, the volume encourages renewed reflection on the ethical imperatives that govern inclusion and exclusion, welcome and refusal, belonging and displacement. In doing so, it affirms *Crossroads* as a space for sustained critical engagement, intellectual exchange, and the ongoing interrogation of the structures that shape our shared human experience—an endeavor whose urgency is difficult to overstate in the present moment.

Paweł Jędrzejko

Guest Editor

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Separate and Unequal: The Traumatic Consequences of American Hostipitality Based on Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

Abstract: Within its near century-long presence, the Jim Crow era significantly stained American history, politics, and society. Through conditioned freedom and under the false guise of “separate equality” came mistreatment, hostility, and racial oppression of African Americans who, forced to a life in the margins, were neither invited nor accepted as part of the culture. The present paper aims to examine the repercussions of American hostipitality in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, delving into racial segregation and foregrounding its hostile and marginalizing nature. The analysis is conducted through the postcolonial lens of the subaltern social positioning of African Americans, supplemented by trauma theory as the novel, at its core, reflects a traumatic coming of age. African American subalternity is reflected in characters' erasure within the borders of society, which, in turn, is solidified in their internalized racism and, subsequently, racial trauma. Prisoned in their subalternity and treated as “the Other,” less valuable second-class citizens, the novel foregrounds the notion that the Jim Crow stereotype of intellectually inferior, idle, and unhygienic black Americans, led to the minority's oppressive dehumanization, especially visible through institutional racism – its executed expansion of racial disparity and psychological abuse.

Keywords: Colson Whitehead, racism, trauma, subaltern, postcolonialism, African American literature

Introduction

The complex history of the United States has been marked by many experiences of power imbalance directed at marginalized groups. White supremacist exclusion of minorities may be traced back to as early as the colonial period. Yet, while the historical treatment of Native Americans easily falls under the category of colonial persecution, the no less harrowing experiences of African Americans have become a borderline case of colonialism and postcolonialism, with critics opting for an ambiguous attitude toward its applicability to the minority, for

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with neither a territorial identity nor the usual element of physical separation from the metropolitan centre, black America cannot strictly be said to fit any standard model of the colonial or postcolonial experience. (Macleod 51)

Nevertheless, as cultural identity is “not an essence” but heavily depends on its positioning within the social structures and power relations, that of African Americans is reminiscent of colonial experiences. Given their treatment and subaltern positioning within society, African American culture may be conceptualized as postcolonial despite its apparent lack of lost territorial identity. Macleod points out that not only is the inclusion of African Americans in the postcolonial discourse epistemologically valid, but more importantly, it is politically necessary (53). Historically, African Americans have faced imperialist struggles analogous to the colonial experiences through exile from their homeland, social marginality, denial of their right to maintain their culture and language, and even their resistance to white supremacy embodied in their emancipatory actions. Furthermore, their experiences are often marked with what Frantz Fanon called “the psychopathology of the colonized,” manifesting itself in feelings of self-hatred, fear, and rage originating from internalized inferiority (55–56). In turn, African American colonial experience started with their enforced relocation and enslavement, and, consequently, their postcolonial experience revealed itself in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery, i.e., their struggles for equality during racial segregation.

Following slavery, the Jim Crow era proved to be yet another blemish on America’s history of race relations. The period widely limited African Americans’ right to complete freedom and violently marginalized the minority. Collectively and individually perceived as the other, the less worthy in the eye of the hegemonic and dominant white culture, the Jim Crow laws enforced African Americans’ inferior social standing and, in turn, took a psychologically detrimental toll on their identity, scarring it with trauma and internalized racism.

The *Separate but Equal* doctrine, which essentially legalized the segregation of African Americans on a national level, resonates with the premise of Derrida’s concept of *hostipitality*, wherein, paradoxically, the notions of hospitality and hostility fuse. At its core, as there is an inherent tension and power imbalance within the act of welcome itself, neologism challenges idealized notions of unconditional welcome and reveals the potential for exploitation and violence (Derrida). The premise of the doctrine assumed conditional freedom of African Americans based on the presumption that although the facilities were separate for each race, they remained equal. Yet, essentially, instead of welcoming formerly enslaved people as rightful citizens of the country, white Americans chose to maintain hostility and, under the pretense of “separate equality,” continued to further erase them from society.

Jerrold Packard in *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow* considers it “the most catastrophic decision in American judicial history,” given that the promise of equality within the frame of separation was never kept, as the amenities designated for African Americans were incomparably worse than those intended for white Americans (73). Underfunded and overcrowded,

the facilities failed to provide the same resources and opportunities that white Americans had unlimited access to. African Americans were, thus, further marginalized and oppressed, as the dominant part of society refused to acknowledge their right to citizenship, perpetuating the belief that America is a white man's country. To quote Packard, "fundamental to Jim Crow was the principle that any white person was superior to every black person, and conversely, that any black person was inferior to every white person" (87). The laws imposed segregation in every area of African American lives in the South, from entertainment amenities to essential ones, such as hospitals or cemeteries. With separate entrances, staircases, restrooms, and drinking fountains, African Americans were made to feel inferior and subjected to white Americans on the most fundamental level. Nevertheless, beyond the oppressive laws, one of the most insidious manifestations of racial injustice was the widespread abuse - physical, emotional, and psychological - inflicted on black individuals. This abuse, rooted in deep-seated racism, extended from everyday humiliations to brutal acts of violence, often carried out with impunity.

Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* sheds light on these harsh realities. Inspired by the uncovered horrors that took place at the Dozier School for Boys in Florida, the novel captures the story of two African American boys, Elwood Curtis and Jack Turner, and their time spent at the titular Nickel Academy. Their experiences of trauma, racism, and subalternity reflect the tragic consequences of American hospitality.

Traumatic Coming of Age

Thematically, the novel depicts a traumatic coming of age due to sustained racial abuse and enforced dehumanized inferiority. As Michelle Balaev remarks, "the trick of trauma in fiction is that the individual protagonist functions to express a unique personal traumatic experience, yet, the protagonist also functions to represent and convey an event that was experienced by a group of people" as "an 'every-person' figure," thereby both protagonists are employed as an extension of collective racial suffering, foregrounding the minority's psychological torments rooted in permeating idea of black inferiority and its subsequent systemic marginalization (155).

For trauma fiction, the plain narrative devices remain insufficient in depicting the chaos, confusion, and unease the traumatized must tackle; therefore, authors expand their boundaries to accurately portray trauma (A. Whitehead 82). Trauma is described as "anti-narrative," and placing it within the bounds of conventional narration is unethical, as it disregards the severity of experiences (Luckhurst 79–81). Trauma in *The Nickel Boys* is, thus, embedded into the novel's structure, as Colson Whitehead splits the narrative into two timelines, shifting the story between the past and the present to emphasize the traumatic consequences of the sustained abuse.

The first narrative timeline focuses its plot on Elwood Curtis' experiences. Elwood is a bright, idealistic teenager growing up in 1960s Tallahassee, Florida. His life takes a sharp turn when he is wrongfully convicted of a minor crime and sent to Nickel Academy, a corrupt reform school that is anything but rehabilitative. At Nickel, Elwood becomes a witness to and a victim of brutal physical and psychological abuse. As he physically steps into the building, the memories of his

previous life and aspirations lose merit. Becoming not a student, but a convict in the notorious institution involuntarily accelerates his coming of age, traumatizing him, as “[h]e’d started the day in his own life and ended it here” (C. Whitehead 52). The first night he spends at the school already puts him in distress, waking him from his sleep;

Elwood was asleep when a different roar commenced. It came from outside, a rush and a whoosh without variation. Forbidding and mechanical and granting no clue to its origin. He didn’t know which book he’d picked it up from, but the word came to him: *torrential*. (52)

Through the description of Elwood’s abrupt awakening, Colson Whitehead reveals the imminent trauma the boy will endure, employing Luckhurst’s “delayed decoding,” wherein the readers are gradually exposed to an underlying trauma through the tips of seemingly trivial matters (92). Unaware of the sound’s traumatizing origin and defining it as “torrential,” Elwood unknowingly foresees his impending psychological and physical suffering. The “torrential” sound Elwood hears on his first night at Nickel materializes later as an industrial fan, used to muffle the students’ cries of pain as they endure their punishment of being whipped by a leather strap.

The said (un)foreseen trauma is prompted by his strong sense of righteousness and morals as he intervenes to defend a younger colleague from bullying and sexual abuse. Paradoxically, however, his altruism is not recognized nor, for that matter, praised but becomes the cause of the corporal punishment he is forced to endure. Along with the bullies and the victim, he is taken to the White House—a benign-looking shed proving to be a chamber of torture.

The roar began: an even gale. Elwood’s chair vibrated with energy. He couldn’t figure out what it was—some sort of machine—but it was loud enough to cover Black Mike’s screams and the smack of the strap on his body. ... Then it was Elwood’s time. ... the gigantic industrial fan that was the source of the roaring, the sound that traveled all over campus, farther than physics allowed. ... Elwood held on to the top of the bed and bit into the pillow but he passed out before they were done. (C. Whitehead 66–67)

Essentially, Elwood and his peers are forced to endure a physical assault and racial violence of high magnitude, leading them to lose consciousness in a state of utter agony. Additionally, the White House itself is also employed as a form of delayed decoding of trauma, initially having its tormenting, sadistic nature obscured by the innocent-looking exterior. Echoing Luckhurst, the product of Whitehead’s practice is the feeling of unease, as the plot reveals the signs of trauma prematurely, preventing the linear causative deduction of trauma’s roots, which in turn further foregrounds its effect, as the signs are only inferred belatedly.

According to Freud, traumatic memory is hidden as a “tormenting secret” within the unconscious in an intact state, awaiting the implicit ascend to the conscious mind, as one’s traumatic memories tend to be forgotten only to belatedly re-emerge obsessively and repetitively (57).

In *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead manifests the concept through the employment of imagery and recurring auditory triggers—keys, footsteps, leather slap—as Elwood’s trauma from the event re-emerges from within his subconsciousness and repeats, torturing him at the least expected moments.

One afternoon Elwood was half dozing when the noise paralyzed him—the keys like a wind chime. Spencer was on the ward to see the doctor. Elwood waited for the sound of the leather strap scraping the ceiling before it came down...Then the superintendent was gone and the sound of the radio commanded the room again. He sweat through to his sheets. (C. Whitehead 78)

Whitehead employs the imagery of jingling keys—comparing them to a wind chime—to depict the haunting nature of trauma that reverberates in Elwood’s psyche. The trigger catalyzes Elwood’s startle response, freezing abruptly at the sound of the principal’s arrival. Despite the apparent lack of motion, physically, his body is put into a survival state, as if it were a prey in action, awaiting and preparing for the materialized reiteration of the encounter. Belatedly, the violence he experienced at the hands of Nickel’s staff manifests through insomnia, as he is tormented by nightmares reconstructing the event.

The more routine his days, the more unruly his nights. He woke after midnight, when the dormitory was dead, startling at imagined sounds—footsteps at the threshold, leather slapping the ceiling. He squinted at the darkness—nothing. Then he was up for hours, in a spell, agitated by rickety thoughts and weakened by an ebbing of the spirit. (152–153)

Echoing Caruth, his obsessive search for any indication of forthcoming trauma recurrence manifests the haunting nature of trauma, as Elwood’s mind is “possessed by an image” of the suffering (*Trauma* 5).

Anne Whitehead observes that repetition is another Freudian plot device used to evoke trauma within the narrative (86). Repetition is reflective of trauma, as the traumatic event recurs constantly, disrupting the plot’s linear progression. For Colson Whitehead, the element that repeatedly resurfaces within Elwood’s mind is ‘the leather strap.’

The said strap, however, is not exclusive to Elwood’s and other black students’ torture. Whitehead employs the imagery, repeatedly mentioning it throughout the narrative, to comment on the inter- and trans-generational trauma of slavery, which still haunts African Americans. Upon their punishments in the White House, black students are reminded of the sadistic tool of torture used by white supremacists to maintain control over their slaves—whipping. Caruth understands intergenerational trauma as a contagious pathogen that infects those who were uninvolved with the traumatic event, forcing them to absorb the ancestral psychological suffering (*Unclaimed Experience* 24). Colson Whitehead presents the passing of intergenerational psychological wounds from the perspectival power imbalance, somewhat materializing it through the

eyes of the white school's staff. In turn, the image only further foregrounds the traumatic scars left on the slaves' and their descendants' psyche, forcing them to both physically and mentally reexperience the vicious racial abuse. It becomes poignantly apparent that the sustained abuse is not an individual experience, but a universal one woven into the fabric of American society, making racism an ever-present systemic problem.

Although it appears that Elwood survives the Nickel's horrors and reaches cynical adulthood, throughout the dichotomous narrative, readers unveil another protagonist—Elwood's best friend, Jack Turner.

He stumbled forward two steps and fell into the grass. Turner kept running. He asked himself later if he heard Elwood cry out or make any kind of sound but never did figure it out. He was running and there was only the rush and roil of blood in his head. (C. Whitehead 199)

In the absolute fight or flight to sustained psychological distress of seeing the death of his friend, Turner flees from the scene in an attempt to preserve his own life. In order to live, Turner is somewhat dehumanized and becomes prey to white hunters, forcing him to shut off his humanity. His trauma-induced survival mode reemerges in the threat of forthcoming death, making him rely on his primal instincts rather than emotions.

As Balaev explains, “silence is a rhetorical strategy” constructed through ellipses in order to not only mirror the unspeakable nature of trauma but also reveal the subsequent shift in the character's understanding of the world (162). Whitehead obscures Turner's survival within the narrative to manifest the emotional wound in response to the event. The following gaps in character expression center the narrative on the psychological impact of trauma and its consequences.

The said consequences of his flight leave the most tragic effect on Turner's psyche, ascending to his personality. Surviving the escape reflects on his still forging character, as, psychologically scarred, he decides to assume Elwood's identity “to honor his friend. To live for him” (200). Yet, the life he never had a chance to experience, the goals he never had an opportunity to achieve, and the unnecessary death he had to suffer all contribute to Turner's self-condemnation. As trauma renders him overwhelmed with guilt and depression, Turner cannot stop blaming himself for his friend's death, chastising himself for surviving in his stead. He does not see himself as Nickel's victim, but the sustained trauma forces him to perceive himself as the perpetrator, believing he is the cause of Elwood's demise. As Caruth remarks, “it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis,” Turner's trauma is laced with survivor's guilt (*Trauma* 9). The psychological anguish and guilt obsessively haunt his spirit, forcing him to impose a plethora of expectations on himself, trying to become “a man he thought Elwood would have been proud of” to atone for his death (C. Whitehead 202).

Hostipitality

Elwood and Turner's traumatic coming of age is prompted by a chain reaction of singular events, or punishments, executed through Nickel's racist practices. Upon the ever-present psychological abuse, the racist attitude the Nickel Academy enforces is that of the African Americans' worthlessness. According to Stokely and Hamilton, there are two forms of racism – individual and institutional,

[t]he first consists of overt acts by individuals, which cause death, injury or the violent destruction of property. This type can be recorded by television cameras; it can frequently be observed in the process of commission. The second type is less overt, far more subtle, less identifiable in terms of specific individuals committing the acts. But it is no less destructive of human life. The second type originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society, and thus receives far less public condemnation than the first type. (4)

Within the narrative, Whitehead traces institutional racism's effects on African American minds, which reinforce the idea of their social insignificance and subservience to white Americans. The systemic discrimination materializes within the depicted academic institutions' attitude towards African Americans, complicit in fortifying their inferior social standing. Within the walls of the institution, black students are constantly reminded of their inferior position within the social hierarchy. The academy conditions them to dehumanize themselves, trivializing their worth, perceived as one of the least valuable coins, the titular nickel, essentially valueless to American society.

Derridean concept of hostipitality, which turns into hostility, also emerges within the practice of institutional racism in the novel. Although the school is supposed to reform both its white and black students, the institution employs double standards when it comes to assessing their performance and treatment, not only focusing more attention on black students' misconduct, but also, consequently, punishing them more severely. The institution—a supposed sanctuary for troubled boys— in reality, functions as a site of brutal discipline, racialized violence, and systemic abuse. This duality is central to Derrida's notion of hostipitality—the Nickel academy “remains master ... who defines the conditions of hospitality” and, essentially, welcomes in order to control, punishes in the name of care, and offers protection while enacting destruction (Derrida 4). Whitehead essentially comments on the paradoxical promise of equal reform of all juvenile offenders, which, in reality, amounted to race-conditioned brutality and erasure of black students' dignity. Additionally, by retaining the historically accurate name of the aforementioned torturous hut, ‘the White House,’ the author makes the extensivity of racial segregation taking place not only at the school but nationwide more apparent. Whitehead employs the imagery of the presidential residence, the pillar of American democracy and freedom, and contrasts it with racial violence and power abuse. Not only does the chamber of black students' torture represent the physical iteration of their sustained trauma, but its name also echoes the system's and, consequently, society's mockery of the lawfully promised ‘separate equality.’

The police are another institution which systematically fortifies the ‘conditioned welcome’ and embeds the idea of inferiority into African American sense of self.

The officer ... was a white man with a pistol so despite his dishevelment he sent a vibration. Along the street men watched from porches and smoked and gripped the railings as if afraid of falling overboard. The neighbors peeked through their windows for a view, connecting the scene to events from years before, when a boy or a man was taken away and he was not someone who lived across the street but kin. Brother, son. ... He handcuffed Elwood to a metal bar that ran behind the front seat and didn’t speak for two hundred and seventy-five miles. ... The officer told the white boys that they were sitting with a car thief and Billy laughed. (C. Whitehead 43–45)

Upon the arrest, the officer somewhat boasts his dominant social standing, intimidating everyone by showing that he is the one who has the upper hand and holds power, reminding the boy of his inferiority by refusing to acknowledge his presence and dehumanizes him by assuming his culpability—executing the role of a master who “must be assured of his sovereignty over the space and goods” and oversees the conditioned welcome enacting hostility (Derrida 14). Compared to the other detained teenagers, Elwood is forced to sustain mockery for the crime he is believed to have committed. Whitehead essentially unravels the fact that the ‘separate but equal’ treatment of African Americans is not the only notion granted under condition, but so is the entire premise of black freedom. Elwood here serves as an everyman character, and his detention is seen as a rather universal experience, as when his neighbors watch him step into the car, the image becomes all too familiar, proving the individual tragedies behind the mass incarceration of African Americans.

Across the nation, connivance becomes apparent as the systemic abuse by both Nickel and the police proves widely allowed, unsupervised by the government or external organizations. Furthermore, “the way Turner saw it ... it was people” who complicitly agreed to pretend not to see the school’s racial barbarity (C. Whitehead 103). Yet, institutional racism is not the sole lens through which Whitehead reflects on hostipitality; through his protagonists, the author depicts two vastly different views on the imposed hostility disguised as supposed welcomeness.

Initially, while Elwood and his attitude serve as a comment on playing the role of a guest, Turner, a foil to Elwood’s character, is an extension of the role of an intruder. Prior to his detention, Elwood gives into the societal ‘invitation’ following the rules set out by the host—the white majority. “The serious young lad heaving his freight of the world’s knowledge,” thoroughly aware of education’s significance in amelioration of black living standards, from an early age, he starts to dedicate his time and efforts to his scholarly duties, ambitiously dreaming of becoming a university graduate in the hopes of not only improving his future, but his entire community’s living prospects—which manifests a firm belief in constructing meritocratic black prosperity and, thus, society’s hospitality (14). Although he is aware of black Americans’ struggles, idealizes Martin Luther King Jr, and partakes in civil rights protests, his actions never exceed the rules of the

conditioned societal welcome; that is, until he is wrongfully detained for alleged carjacking and sent to Nickel. Once at Nickel, he becomes an intruder, or an enemy, undermining the host's—school's—authority by stepping out to defend a colleague or trying to uncover the institution's embezzlement practices instead of staying a subservient and quiet guest, which, ultimately, leads to his demise—"Anyone who encroaches ... on my sovereignty as host, I start to regard as an undesirable foreigner, and virtually as an enemy" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 53–55).

Turner, on the other hand, starts off as an intruder within the system, who is unable to adhere to the rules and, essentially, due to a teenaged emotional outburst, ends up at Nickel Academy. There, however—again, a foil to Elwood's idealism—Turner's coping mechanism to sustain Nickel's trauma is a cynical lack of attachment and numbness to the reality he is forced to face. In turn, he begins to play the role of a guest, conscious of the fact that he will not "be treated with hostility so long as he behaves in a peaceable manner in the place he happens to be" (Derrida 5). Unlike Elwood, Turner does not pay attention to a righteous code of ethics nor the belief in black meritocracy but instead pragmatically conforms to Nickel's unsaid conditions—"Another one of these dummies ... You're getting along. Ain't had trouble since that one time. They going to take you out back, bury your ass, then they take me out back, too. The fuck is wrong with you?" (C. Whitehead 172). Turner is the realist—he understands from the outset that hospitality is invariably laced with hostility and that institutions exist to control, rather than protect, which explains his skepticism and pragmatism. Ultimately, it is he who survives precisely because he recognizes from the start that hospitality inherently carries a threat.

African American Subalternity

Not recognized as an integral part of the society but merely as guests, African Americans' experiences are reminiscent of the colonial power imbalance, placing them on the subaltern social standing, oppressed due to the color of their skin. According to Antonio Gramsci, the term 'subaltern' as such refers to lower social classes that "are subject to the initiatives of the dominant class," socially and politically inferior to the power-holding majority (21). The postcolonial understanding of the concept additionally focuses on the experiences of the previously colonized groups, which are rendered marginalized, socio-economically outside of the hegemonic power structures and discourses, as "in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak" (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak* 287). The subaltern 'cannot speak' because their perspectives are silenced and unacknowledged by the oppressing majority.

Connected to the concept of subaltern is the postcolonial interpretation of 'the Other,' which analyzes how the colonizing groups constructed the prevalent identities of the colonized, perceiving them through pervasive stereotypes as different and consequentially inferior to white men (Thomas-Olalade and Velho 33). The subaltern and their struggles are, thus, invisible to the dominant white eye, only existing within the frames of immortalized stereotypes, heavily dependent on their social positioning, and unable to claim neither their history nor identity. Hence, when it comes to African Americans, their collective suffering is rooted in the insidious trauma

of racism, which, as Craps foregrounds, is historically specific but does not refer to a particular traumatic experience, but rather the structural trauma of minority's oppression (32)².

As Anne Whitehead observes, postcolonial and trauma fiction overlap, for both delve into the processes of memory recovery and acknowledge the repressed experiences (82). Therefore, Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* may be classified on the border of both genres, as the novel depicts the postcolonial perspective of racial segregation while simultaneously discussing its trauma and public remembering.

The essential thing Whitehead does to reveal the polyphony of silenced subaltern voices, is simply engage and pay respect to the real story and its victims—the uncovered burial ground of the Dozier School for Boys in Marianna, Florida from 2014. In a 2019 interview he admitted that the injustices surrounding the institution made him morally compelled to articulate the suppressed perspectives—“the fact that no one's ever held accountable, no one ever goes to jail ... made me feel very raw, and I think that allowed the story of Dozier to sort of ... settle in me. It was another example of just people who are powerless, people who have no defenses being abused by an institution. And the guilty go free, and the innocent suffer” (C. Whitehead in Davies). The tone of uncovering repressed narratives is set on the very first page of the book through the metaphor of a ‘secret graveyard,’ which in reality was a place of slaughter ground and mass execution of the students;

Even in death the boys were trouble. The secret graveyard lay on the north side of the Nickel campus, in a patchy acre of wild grass between the old work barn and the school dump. ... All the boys knew about that rotten spot. It took a student from the University of South Florida to bring it to the rest of the world, decades after the first boy was tied up in a potato sack and dumped there. (C. Whitehead 1)

Whitehead deliberately starts his narrative with the burial site—it is as if the story itself remained buried with its victims. The loaded silence is not only the result of suppressing the subaltern, but it is also caused by the collective trauma of racial abuse and the pervasive death at the hands of school staff, exemplifying what Felman and Laub believe is a crisis of witnessing, as the experience of enforced racial inferiority at Nickel was the type of “event that produced no witnesses” (80). Over the years, the physical and psychological suffering remained disguised, as neither the murdered victims nor the living survivors could convey the institution's cruelty. Additionally, the trauma endured by the students was a medium of Nickel's prevention of truth emergence. Finally, “by virtue of the fact that the subaltern's inability to speak is predicated

2 Maria Root, who coined the term insidious trauma in *Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality*, characterizes it as an experience of oppression not through overt physical abuse, but psychological one, affecting one's identity. Although her definition initially referred to female experiences of existing in patriarchy and rape culture, its premise is reflective of any type of oppression, including racial persecution.

upon an attempt to speak, to which no appropriate response is proffered”—for decades, no one was willing to listen and ‘dig’ for the truth (Spivak, *Responsibility* 62).

Structurally, Whitehead depicts the silence by splitting the narrative into two timelines—the early 1960s at Nickel and contemporary times of ‘Elwood’s adulthood.’ As stated before, within the dichotomy, Whitehead obscures another protagonist—the voice which survives to tell the story, Turner’s.

Assuming Elwood’s identity, the psychologically wounding nature of Turner’s experiences is silenced between the narrative timelines. His traumatic silence, for decades, renders him unable to express the pain, as he disguises himself in an attempt to shield his soul from the borne psychological distress. The catalyst to break Turner’s concealment (and, in consequence, involuntary reticence) is the discovery of unmarked graves on Nickel’s grounds and their subsequent exhumation, “he knew he’d have to return. The clutch of cedars over the TV reporter’s shoulder brought back the heat on his skin ... It wasn’t far off at all. Never will be” (C. Whitehead 6). It is as if, on the one hand, he was given a chance to ‘speak’—as if someone was willing to ‘respond’ to his accounts of Nickel atrocities; and on the other, as if someone ‘unburied’ his own secret, willing to recover the erased perspective, for, as he describes, “Silence was all the boy ever got. He says, ‘I’m going to take a stand,’ and the world remains silent” (205).

The thought of Elwood’s body being buried in the secret graveyard prompts him to reveal his side of the story and real name.

“I used to live there,” Turner said. His tone. “Elwood?” Like testing the ice to see if it’d bear her weight. “I was at Nickel. That’s the place. I told you I was in juvie, but I never said the name.” “Elwood. Come here,” she said. He sat on the couch. He hadn’t served his time, as he told her years ago, but ran. Then he told her the rest, including the story of his friend. “His name was Elwood,” Turner said. ... She took his head into her lap as he wept, running her thumb over that stray-cat notch in his ear. The scar she never noticed but was right in front of her. (202–203)

Recounting his experience and finding the voice to speak out on the endured atrocities, Turner undergoes a process of trauma’s ‘double wounding.’ Caruth marks double wounding as the psychological wound’s severity intensifying within its belated reemergence, for “an event ... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again” (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). As Turner braves himself to tell his story, he relives the trauma surrounding the event, somewhat retraumatizing himself, as the experience revives not only within the frames of his consciousness but also rematerializes through his words, uttered for the first time. Nevertheless, catharsis came not only through tears but also the presence of someone who was willing to listen, offering him solace and braving him to embrace his true identity.

Identity-wise, crucial to the understanding of the African Americans’ subaltern positioning is W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness, in which;

the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 8–9)

Essentially, African Americans must manage a dual and contradictory identity, being a part of the country that continuously detests them, and, due to the dominance of white culture, are forced to assume the racial expectations white America imposes. Black identities are, thus, involuntarily affected by white perceptions of the racial minority. Supplemental to Du Bois' idea is Frantz Fanon's concept of internalized racism, which asserts that under the white gaze, African Americans' sense of self is compressed to the existent racist conceptualization of the minority, as "the black man stops behaving as an actional person. The goal of his behavior will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth" (65). Internalized racism is, thus, a consequence and a detrimentally harmful coping mechanism to the insidious trauma of racism and dehumanizing nature of subalternity.

Within the novel, Whitehead symbolically disguises the phenomenon in the two protagonists, illustrating the tension between internal identity and external perception. At its core, while Elwood manifests the idealistic notions of blackness and firmly believes in racial meritocracy—representing the black perspective; Turner and his cynicism serve as a reflection of the way white Americans perceive the racial minority—inferior, untrustworthy, dangerous—and throughout the narrative both protagonists are forced to learn of how this perception constrains black identities.

Elwood becomes aware of it while awaiting his execution—in the loss of hope, he comes to understand that he, echoing Du Bois, was "born with a veil," and thus, despite his efforts, he could never exist outside the fixed presumption of his race (8). His belief in meritocracy and higher imperatives was paradoxically a form of denial of the racist reality imposed and instilled in black Americans. Sardonicly, he parallels his confinement to Martin Luther King Jr.'s imprisonment, remarking on the empty platitudes of King's call for love and righteousness in the eye of immortalized black Americans' inferiority. He admits he cannot "make that leap of love," losing faith in King's preaching, crashing his ideals with the cynical reality of African American struggles, and ultimately understanding his own subservience (C. Whitehead 194).

Nevertheless, the most profound example of double consciousness is written into the cause for Turner's detention. Working for white men, he somewhat subconsciously adheres to the white majority's idea of African Americans, serving and appeasing them, until another black employee points out his enacted pretense.

This one night I was on my break and I go out for a cigarette behind the grill. ... He says to me, 'I see you out there, nigger, putting on a show. Why you always shucking and jiving for these white people? Ain't nobody ever teach you self-respect?' ... and he knows I'm not going to do anything. Because he's right in what he said. Next time I was on a shift, I don't know, I started doing it differently. Instead of joking with them, I was mean. ... End of the night, I'd been taunting this fucking peckerwood the whole game ... Next week I saw that guy's car in the parking lot and I threw a cinder block through the window and the cops picked me up. (92–93)

Upon the cast aspersions, Turner is made aware of his affiliation to white men, disrespectfully betraying his black community. Additionally, as he perceives himself “through the eyes of others,” the attack on his pride somewhat uncovers his suppressed idea of black submission to the dominant white majority, which, unknowingly at the time, reinforced the stereotype of intellectual inferiority (DuBois 8–9). Paradoxically, however, upon his fit of rage and subsequently inflicted self-hatred, Turner internalizes the other racist perception of black Americans as aggressive and savage threats to the dominant society.

Conclusions

The term “Jim Crow” originated from one of the first blackface minstrel shows performed by Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice, who capitalized off the caricatured presentation of African American struggles of enslavement. The ill-famed character surreptitiously wove itself into the fabric of American society, catalyzing racial segregation—a period of continuous race-conditioned violence and marginalization. Although African Americans were promised “separate equality,” wherein they would be provided with the same amenities and opportunities as white Americans, the state of said “equality” was marked by profound disparities, which only further excluded them from society.

As Derrida denotes, the word ‘hospitality’ “carries its contradiction incorporated into it”—hostility (1). An essential paradox is inscribed into its notion wherein the host must assert their dominance over their guests to maintain control and remain “master in [their] own home” (7). Fundamentally, therefore, the host/guest relationship is marked by a power imbalance, and the inherent trait to a position of a guest is inferiority, if not submissiveness, to established rules and masters. American history-wise, within “separate but equal” doctrine, black Americans were, thus, not recognized as an inherent part of the society, but rather solely invited into it as its guests and oftentimes perceived as intruders—‘an open welcome to the Other, but a limited and regulated welcome designed to protect myself and what is mine and welcome the Other only to the extent that these things are not threatened’ (Fagan in Kakoliris 34).

Prisoned in their subaltern social positioning and treated as “the Other,” the less valuable second-class citizens, the stereotypes of intellectually inferior, idle, and unhygienic, or aggressive and savage black Americans led to the minority’s oppressive dehumanization, especially visible through institutional racism – its executed expansion of racial disparity and psychological abuse.

To quote Balaev, trauma “inform[s] the new perceptions of the self and the world,” tragically and irreversibly scarring one’s identity (150). In *The Nickel Boys*, through both protagonists’ racially caused psychological suffering, Whitehead offers a poignant insight into the dehumanized psyche, succumbing to the psychologically detrimental feelings of invisibility within societal frameworks, self-inadequacy to the dominant culture, and internalized racist self-hatred weighing in on their identities.

As Sharp remarks, “In many subtle yet important ways, the traumatic experiences of segregation continue to inform the way race is discussed and experienced in the twenty-first century” (5). Indirect in its nature, contemporary racism takes the form of microaggressions by which African Americans are degraded, yet again, to an inferior standing in the social hierarchy. Similar to their invisibility in the previous century, a significant number of African Americans are still forced to live within the margins of society, continuing the vicious cycle of poverty and incrimination.

While it’s been decades since the civil rights movement dismantled racial segregation, African American presence in society still hinders on condition—as exemplified by imprisonment rates, police brutality, or, most recently, scaling back equality programs. Perhaps slightly in platitudes, but the only remedy to America’s racist colorblindness would be, in turn, a shift to equal and vibrant color visibility.

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Hospitality versus Hostility in the United States: An Exchange Student's Reflections

Abstract: In this essay, the idea of hospitality and/or hostility is set against, and compared to, the author's own memories as a high school exchange student during the 1976–1977 academic year and works such as Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976). Definitions of hospitality in ancient Greece and Derrida's definition of hospitality and "hostipitality"—the inherent hostility within hospitality—will also be used to explain the unique position of African Americans, Native Americans, and Chinese Americans within the United States. Specifically, this essay will focus on how the aforementioned works portray a negligent, careless, and unfriendly society that is hostile toward ethnic groups: slave traders capture Africans, separate family members, and sell them for their labor; settler colonials do not respect Native American land and treat indigenous populations as unwanted others; and Chinese immigrants experience communication difficulties because of language barriers. The friendly welcome of the American host family towards the exchange student is juxtaposed with the idea of inhospitality as conveyed by select mainstream works published during the same period, thereby presenting the multifaceted nature of host-guest binary in the United States.

Keywords: Hospitality, hostility, Jacques Derrida, *Roots*, *Ceremony*, *The Woman Warrior*

Mevlana Celaleddin-i Rumi (1207–1273), the revered Sufi mystic and poet who chose Anatolia as his home, is the supposed writer of a well-known emotional verse that could be called one of the ultimate expressions of welcoming strangers, regardless of their social standing:

Come, come, whoever you are,
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.
It doesn't matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.

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Come, even if you have broken your vows
a thousand times
Come, yet again, come, come.

Yine gel, yine gel! Kim olursan ol, yine gel!
Kâfir, mecusi, putperest olsan da yine gel!
Bu bizim dergâhımız ümitsizlik dergâhı değildir.
Yüz kere tövbeni bozmuş olsan da yine gel!” (Şafak 75)²

In these lines the invitation to become part of the Sufi community is enthusiastically encouraged for those who are willing to embrace a new perspective and lifestyle that could eventually lead them to the path of becoming believers in a community.

Centuries later Emma Lazarus (1849–1887) wrote a poem titled *The New Colossus* (1883) to raise funds for the construction of the pedestal for the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. In a similar vein to Rumi, the narrative voice is directed towards those the poem addresses, guiding the immigrants to new possibilities denied to them in their earlier lives:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” (Lazarus 202–203)

2 Authentically ascribed to Mevlana Celaleddin-i Rumi, this verse appears at the seventh volume of *Mathnawi* or *Masnawi*, the collection of spiritual poems derived from Quran and everyday life. The seventh volume was not written by Rumi but compiled later by his followers. Thus, it is quite likely that this particular verse was included by scribes, and ascribed to him, although the meaning of the verses is in line with Sufi tradition. In fact, the verses have also been ascribed several other Sufi poets, including Ebû Saîd Ebu'l-Hayr who had lived two centuries before Rumi (Şafak 75).

Although centuries and geographies apart, in both expressions the invitation entails or hints to a change to one's previous life and the call to be a part of a new community, whether one decides to enter Rumi's covenant by repenting and starting over, or whether one decides to leave the ancient world to embrace a life in the new world. The affinity between the two calls may be more than a casual coincidence. At the time Lazarus wrote her poem, Transcendentalism was influential in New England. Lazarus was not directly affiliated with the Transcendentalists: she was Jewish and interested in helping immigrants in need; yet, she also admired Ralph Waldo Emerson, the leading figure of Transcendentalism, was affected by his ideas, met him on multiple occasions, and dedicated the main poem of one of her poetry collections to him with the inscription, "To My Friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson" (Lazarus, *Admetus and Other Poems*). Several critics have documented the Eastern sources and particularly Sufism—not specifically Rumi—among Emerson's inspirations in structuring his ideas. The Sufi concept of inclusivity and congregating, or assisting, people without discrimination appeals to Transcendentalists. For example, the Transcendentalists were ardent abolitionists and several members of the Club helped runaway slaves along the Underground Railroad. Thus, Lazarus could have easily been inspired by her colleagues' viewpoints when composing her thoughts. Her poem was eventually carved on a bronze plaque and placed on the pedestal of the statue in 1903, although she did not live to see it. The exact replica is now located in the Statue of Liberty Museum (Statue of Liberty).

In the New York Harbor, Liberty Island neighbors Ellis Island, the location that processed the immigrants arriving mostly from Europe. From 1892 until 1954, about 12 million immigrants passed through the island and although only two percent were denied entry, the anticipation and the possibility of refusal caused the island to be nicknamed the "Island of Tears." The nickname also refers to an eye test for trachoma, since the inspectors used a buttonhook to examine under eyelids, a short but painful procedure. The hospital on the south side of the island treated infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and diphtheria, prolonging the process of entry for some immigrants (Bayor 47, 59, 66). The Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island became real and symbolic thresholds for newcomers. Yet, issues of receiving migrants and refugees have changed over time, depending on the social and political rhetoric of the certain eras. The historical record documents that American immigration hospitality has not been the same for particular ethnic, racial, and religious groups, contrary to what is expressed in Lazarus's poem.

Crossing symbolic and/or physical thresholds is a necessary act when entering another home or country. Immigrants and travellers still have to cross thresholds when entering other nations: customs and passport control at airports, train stations, or seaports. They need to gather pre-approved documentation or visas, fill out declaration forms, and wait in immigration lines for their passports to be processed before receiving their luggage and entering a new country, which is not an easy endeavor. One has to be motivated with a sense of mission to undergo this trouble, whether the travel is a temporary or permanent journey. Once the bureaucracy related to entering another country is completed, the traveller faces attitudes in the host country that may or may not be positive. These (un)favorable encounters are the result of particular political,

cultural, social, and economic conditions and are forged with discursive practices related to the guests' specific positionality.

In ancient Greece, the word *Xenos* refers to a stranger, foreigner, or traveler. *Xenos* are guest-friends, different from *philos*, who are local friends or relatives. And this relationship is bound by the rules of *xenia* (guest-friendship). *Xenia*, the Greek concept of hospitality, entails a moral obligation that involves generosity, gift exchange, and reciprocity. The rules of *xenia* are clear: the host provides the meals and shelter and the guest is required to respect the host and not be a threat or burden. In ancient times, Gods would act as travellers-in-disguise; therefore, a stranger could be a deity-in-disguise. Zeus was called Zeus *Xenios*, the protector of strangers, since he tested mortals by dressing up in ordinary clothes to see if he would be given shelter for the night. He would oversee the practice of *xenia* and inflict misfortunes upon those who fail to provide him with hospitality (Ogden 239). Generosity and courtesy toward strangers are expected behaviors. Plato describes four types of strangers (*xenoi*) that should be treated with respect in his *Laws*: summer travelers (tourists), inspectors who wish to observe temples, those who have a public business, and visitors who are sent by other states on official business (Plato 435–470). In *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Homer discusses several examples of *xenia*: the Trojan War occurred because Paris violated *xenia* by abducting Helen, the wife of the host. During Odysseus's journey, the Phaeacians welcome him after the shipwreck and help with his return trip. Thus, hospitality in ancient Greece is an act tied to obligation, virtue, and honor.

My personal account of crossing the threshold to the new world to experience *philoxenia* (friend to the stranger) was probably not unique but certainly noteworthy when compared to other not-so-fortunate individuals and groups. When I first travelled to the United States, I was sixteen years old, a high school student from Gaziantep, a city near Türkiye's Syrian border. I was chosen as an AFS (American Field Service) student after a rigorous selection process to determine whether the young candidates had the ability to adapt to situations other than their own. That particular year sixty-seven AFS students from Türkiye attended high school in the United States for a year. In August 1976, we all arrived in New York and participated in a three-day orientation program at Long Island University's CW Post campus with other AFS students from different countries. After the program, the students were sent to meet their host families. The bus to northern Maryland carried three of my Turkish friends whose destinations came before mine. When my last Turkish friend got off the bus in Delaware, I could not contain my emotions and started crying. The idea of being a stranger in an unknown land suddenly struck me and the awareness of loneliness was too much to bear at that young age. As the bus drove to its final destination, the Danish student, Leah, with whom I became good friends later on, took out her guitar and started to play and sing to cheer me up (bless her heart wherever she is): "We Shall Overcome / We Shall Overcome / We Shall Overcome Someday / Deep in my heart / I do believe / We Shall Overcome Someday." Given the circumstances, as ironic as it may sound, the song did the trick. I stopped crying and joined in—reluctantly at first, but enthusiastically eventually. Our little group of five students from different countries sang joyfully until we arrived at our

destination to meet our host families. I took a deep breath, got off the bus, and hugged my American mom, dad, sister, and brother for the first time. Since then, that family, who greeted me with open arms, became my American family and I became their Turkish daughter.

At the time, I did not know the context, or the cultural or historical importance of that song we sang together on the bus. I had not heard of Pete Seeger, who had popularized this old hymn. I was ignorant of the fact that African Americans embraced it during the marches and gatherings of the Civil Rights Movement. Nor did I know that the symbolical gesture of crossing your arms in front of your body, holding the hands of the person next to you, and swaying while singing, was as an act of solidarity, inspiration, uprising, and lifting of the spirits. Yet, only a little more than a decade before, Martin Luther King, Jr. had delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (1963) where “We Shall Overcome” was repeatedly sung in Washington DC, which I would visit several times during my stay in the area. Silly, young, bewildered me . . . lost in my own emotional reaction, how was I to know that I was being introduced to something profound, something meaningful then. How was I to know that places were sites of contradictory experiences, or “heterotopias,” as Michel Foucault had aptly observed a decade before I arrived in the United States.

The 1976–1977 school year was going to present me with possibilities to learn about African American experience. Observing how African American students kept sitting in the back row in the student cafeteria—not because of segregation but because of the comfort of “group insularity,” in Cornel West’s words—my curiosity was piqued (West 215). I wanted to learn more about their mannerisms and vernacular expressions. That year my American family encouraged my host sister, brother, and me to watch Alex Haley’s *Roots*, the television miniseries adapted from the eponymous historical novel. The story of Kunta Kinte, a young man kidnapped from Gambia and brought to the United States on a slave ship, sold at auction in Annapolis, Maryland, and the experiences of seven generations of his descendants were etched on my mind as images of the history of slavery. For Kunta Kinte and all other enslaved Africans, the living and working conditions were clearly not hospitable, but hostile. Thousands of African slaves brought to the United States were deprived of the rights extended to white immigrant arrivals. They were considered property that could be sold or transported. Depending upon their master’s compulsions, they could be whipped, coerced into labor, and forcefully separated from their families or children. Women could be sexually assaulted and other slaves were unable to protect them (Halabi 34). The history of the United States is full of the hostile treatment of workers, whether they were brutally abducted to provide free labor on southern plantations or whether they arrived willfully, commissioning their future labor as indentured servants.

African American slavery is an example of how early *de facto* racist acts turned into practices framed by the laws of the state (*de jure*) to exploit and objectify laborers. “Strangers” that are acquired as goods cannot have the status of honored guests and thus, the rules of hospitality would not be applied to them. Disregarding certain others is actually a conflicting attitude with respect to “traditional southern hospitality,” a phrase associated with the charm, kindness,

friendly, and welcoming manners, that has been used to describe Southern states. Writing during the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement, historian and activist Howard Zinn calls this discrepancy a paradox—"A Southern Mystique"—because newcomers are categorized depending upon their skin color. African Americans are not on the same level as white guests or strangers. Years of Jim Crow practices in southern states clearly testifies to the prejudices toward those whose skin color differs (Zinn 50). When a group of people are labeled and viewed as "inferior" and marginalized, the members of that group are pushed to the periphery. As Jacques Derrida has described it, the politics of hospitality maintains the difference between a "foreigner" and the "absolute other." Foreigners may or may not receive warmth and kindness from the host, but the "absolute other" can never receive hospitality (Derrida, *Hospitality* 82).

While problematizing the concept of hospitality, Derrida asks several questions: When does the hospitality start, with the invitation or with the visitation? Who is the "host" and who is the "guest"? Who is assisting whom?—That is, who presents and who receives? And does the "host" or the "guest" pose a potential threat to the other? (Shepherd 55). Derrida starts with the concept of hospitality, which opposes hostility, as necessary and good. He describes it as "a right, a duty, an obligation, a law," of welcoming the stranger, on the condition that the welcoming agent, the host remains "proprietor, the master of the house, on condition that he guard the authority of the self-at-home" (Derrida, *Hospitality* 5). Therefore, "the law of hospitality" is limited by the "law of house," which is Derrida's first conclusion in his etymological analysis. Drawing from Emmanuel Levinas's writing, Derrida argues that the offering of hospitality is not an act of independent freedom, but is rather a response to the Other, who is already within us. He also coins another neologism, "hostipitality," to express his understanding that a potential for violence is inherent within hospitality (Derrida, "Hostipitality" 3–4).

If slavery exemplifies the potential of a violent act from the host—or rather the master—as in the case of Alex Haley's *Roots*, the vampire myth acts in opposition by presenting an example of violence as indicted by the guest. Ann Rice's *Interview With the Vampire*, also published in 1976, builds upon the experiences of a vampire who goes through an existential crisis. The story—and the later film adaptation in 1994—incorporates southern gothic elements while assuming the basic characteristics of a vampire originally outlined in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Despite all their power and cunning ability, a vampire must be invited to enter a home, although the concealed hostility would eventually breach the safety and trust of the dwellers. The idea behind an invitation has to do with respecting personal boundaries and asking for the consent of the host to accept the stranger into the sanctity of the home. The vampire, after entering the household, does not respect those boundaries and violates the rules of hospitality by quenching their insatiable appetite for blood. Yet, these fantastic fictional characters could easily be adapted to real life vampire-like characters in American literature. Published a decade earlier, one such example can be seen in Joyce Carol Oates's short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (1966). Fifteen-year-old Connie is stalked by Arnold Friend, a man more than twice her age, in her home, when she is alone. Arnold Friend, the predator character, never

enters the house but stands outside the kitchen door behind the fence, while trying to persuade Connie to come outside. Connie declines and attempts to call the police to which Arnold replies: "Promise was not to come in unless you touch that phone, and I'll keep that promise . . . I ain't made plans for coming in that house where I don't belong but just for you to come out to me, the way you should" (27). After a lengthy exchange charged with the possibility of a violent act, Connie decides to cross the threshold from her comfort zone to the unknown, despite the possibility of encountering violence and the loss of her innocence.

The idea of violating the trust of the host and bringing devastation can also explain the European settlers' viewpoint. European settlers arriving to the United States felt superior to those who inhabited the land before them and did not treat the indigenous population with respect. Native Americans experienced a unique position as the host and the Other at the same time, and they became objects of a type of colonization and hostage within the host-guest binary. Although Native Americans were not "guests" but rather the legitimate "hosts," first the incoming settlers, then the nation-state, ruled over them. Indigenous communities were caught between the behavior of the host in acknowledging and welcoming the guest, and the behavior of the guest in graciously accepting the welcome of the host. In this case, the ancient Greek tradition of *xenia*, or hospitality, was infringed by the host. In the context of settler colonialism, the host-guest relationship is transformed into one of guest-hostage, in which the host community is threatened because its existence contests the efforts of the settler colonists to seize territory. Thus, the treatment of Native Americans represents a distinctive relationship between a host and a guest community, which becomes a relationship of conquest and colonization, rather than assimilation or integration (Halabi 27).

Before 1976, a few important Native American literary works, such as N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968), often credited as a watershed in Native American Literature, reference the concept of hospitality. The novel follows the character Abel's experiences both inside and outside the reservation, exploring the ideas of home, belonging, and hospitality. Adapted from Thomas Berger's novel of the same name, Arthur Penn's movie *Little Big Man* (1970) is another example that subverts the traditional western myth of cowboys vs. Native Americans. The 121-year-old Jack Crabb reminisces about being raised by the Cheyenne nation and recounts his attempts to integrate unsuccessfully into white society. He feels like an outsider in both communities, although the Native American tribe is portrayed in a much more sympathetic manner. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), one of the preeminent novels of Native American literature, was published the same year I was in the United States. The plot line follows Tayo, a World War II veteran returning to Laguna Pueblo Reservation, who deals with posttraumatic stress disorder as a result of being imprisoned by the Japanese army. He is partially rejected by his own community because he is of mixed blood, half Laguna and half white, and because his mother has left him to be raised by his aunt. Since he is of mixed blood, he is treated differently than his cousin in the household and among his friends. His fellow Indians, particularly Emo, taunt him by calling him a half-breed. However, as the story evolves, Emo is revealed to be the real

half-breed, poisoned by his internalized racist behaviors, while Tayo finds solace in native tradition. Upon the suggestion of his maternal grandmother, he decides to undergo a healing ceremony conducted by one of the tribe elders, which will be the first ceremony in his healing journey. *Ceremony* is not only a novel that shares Native American ceremonies of healing, but also a ceremony in itself with its unconventional hybrid narrative of poetry, storytelling, and prose.

Ceremony's plot incorporates sections that compare white and native attitudes towards nature and animals. As ranchers, for example, the white men raise a breed of cattle that is ill-adapted to the desert terrain and available food supplies, then fence them in so that they cannot run free. The white ranchers do not know that "cattle are like any living thing. If you separate them from the land for too long, keep them in barns and corrals, they lose something" (74). As hunters, the white men are also more destructive. In addition to unnecessary tree cutting, the white loggers hunt more than their need and shoot "the bears and mountain lions for sport" (186). The attitude that game animals are merely objects to destroy resonates in white society's outlook toward smaller animals and insects. The science teacher in the white school brought in dead frogs, "bloated with formaldehyde" for dissection, and laughed when a female student expressed that killing frogs would bring terrible floods (194). Another teacher taught Tayo to kill flies because "they are bad and carry sickness" (101).

Healing the community starts with healing relationships between individuals and the Earth. To do this, Tayo has to realize his own agency and take the control of his narrative. He must realize that the white man's definition and the boarding school do not define him. Tayo must counteract the story of the destroyers by choosing to live like his own people and must redefine himself as a Laguna man. He takes care of his family's livestock and goes to the mountain as part of his quest, but also returns to the traditional ways of hunting after coming into contact with the Mountain Lion, the prototypical hunter. Tayo, eventually, becomes a traditional warrior fighting for his own land and for the people who belong to it (Wieser 52).

Among all the diverse groups that are part of the United States, the African American and Native American experiences stand apart: Native Americans were already there when the settlers came, and African Americans were brought by force starting in the sixteenth century. When white settlers usurped Native American land, their situation changed dramatically. The Native American experience paradoxically evokes what Gayatri Spivak has called the "Resident Alien," or outsiders expecting "hospitality" from those whom they have colonized (302). Although Spivak talks about the Asian Indian colonial experience with reference to Derrida's *Of Hospitality*, under colonial conditions, the concept of hospitality is somewhat subverted in both examples. Curiously, the colonized become the somewhat despised guests of the colonizers, whereas in reality, the natives of any land are the hosts. Thus, the guest/host binary is reversed in both situations. The legitimate host is rendered incapable of being the host by the guest, and the guest usurps the position of the host, transforming the original host into "an absolute other." In the United States, this resulted in hostility towards Native American communities and those brought forcefully to fulfill the need for labor. The white colonizers also required the respect

given to the host as the “master of the house,” expecting loyalty and support “from below” (Spivak 308). Spivak problematizes similar kinds of colonial hospitality and gives examples from postcolonial literary texts to support her point.

Immigrants’ experience of American hospitality or “hostipitality” has also been documented in several texts. Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976), a fictionalized memoir recounting the childhood experiences of a young girl who is caught between her ancestral Chinese/Cantonese culture and the American culture of her upbringing in Stockton, California, is yet another ethnic text that exemplifies the contradictions of hospitality. The text is divided into five stories, and each episode tracks the development of the young girl as she transitions into the inspirational figure of the woman warrior. The sections tell the story of a particular woman who becomes a role model in the narrator’s life. These maternal figures are real and mythical, ghostly and palpable presences in her life.

The story starts with a warning from Kingston’s mother: “You must not tell anyone,” she says, before disclosing the story of Kingston’s aunt’s illegitimate pregnancy and eventual suicide by jumping into the drinking-water well with her newborn (3). This “no name aunt” becomes an absent presence throughout Kingston’s story, symbolically referring to Chinese patriarchal oppression over women in the text. The story is told to the young narrator as a cautionary tale: a warning not to humiliate her parents by behaving against the rules of the community and not to speak of familial shame. This opening section of disclosing, or not disclosing, through speech becomes the major preoccupation of the last section, in which the language barriers between host and guest cultures are described vividly.

The narrator’s approach to her mother tongue is ambivalent and almost hostile. Chinese is the language associated with her mother’s pestering, while English represents her individuality. She feels embarrassed by her parents’ lack of proficiency in English when her teacher calls them to discuss her education (165). She becomes angry when her mother insists that she should act as a translator. As she notes: “You can’t entrust your voice to the Chinese, either; they want to capture your voice for their own use. They want to fix up your tongue to speak for them. ‘How much less can you sell it for?’ we have to say” (169). The pressures she experiences cause her to become silent and temporarily lose her expressive nature. In time, she understands and embraces her family’s hybrid language—the mixture of Chinese and English—as a communicative tool that is empowering rather than limiting. Understanding between the host and the guest depends upon linguistic interaction for both parties. Travelers/immigrants arriving in cultures with language differences experience different spellings of their names or have trouble pronouncing the names of their hosts. This linguistic difficulty may be linked to a crisis of selfhood. The young narrator in *The Woman Warrior* says: “I could not understand ‘I’. The Chinese ‘I’ has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American ‘I’, assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight?” (166). Her initial quietness is thus bound to her struggle with trying to reconcile her conflicting linguistic inheritances.

The above-mentioned texts—*Roots* by Alex Haley, *Interview with the Vampire* by Ann Rice, *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko, and *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston—were published during my exchange student program in 1976–1977. They carry statements of American hospitality or “hostipitality.” In the host-guest binary, there is also the idea of temporality. Being a guest is defined by an acceptable time frame that is agreed upon by both parties. After all, an individual cannot remain a guest forever and the status can change with time. My first personal experience of American hospitality ended that year with mom giving me a large brown bag of homemade chocolate chip cookies to munch on during my long flight back home. An elderly lady accompanied by her husband sitting next to me on the plane curiously asked about my impressions upon learning that I was returning home after a year. Before I could answer, the gentleman said: “Honey, can’t you see she had a fabulous year!” pointing to my flowing tears of sadness caused by the parting of ways with my American family, while I clutched on that brown bag of cookies. Feeding others is one the major acts of hospitality mentioned in *xenia*, especially offering desserts and sweet snacks. I remember watching mom bake apple and lemon meringue pies and chocolate chip cookies from scratch while talking to me. Store-bought crust and cookies were unacceptable, and our dinners always ended with a piece of homemade dessert and a cup of brewed tea.

That high school year would not be last year I savored the home cooked meals with my American family. Six years later, I returned to the same home, used the same door key, and continued to be the live-in Turkish daughter again while earning an MA in English from the University of Maryland at College Park. They were the first to meet my fiancé, and after I had my own family, our transnational/overseas excursions to each other’s homes resumed, adding memorable moments to our lives. In 2017, Mom’s obituary listed me as her Turkish daughter. Two summers ago, my American Dad purchased a roundtrip ticket for me because he wanted to connect in person again. My American brother picked me up from the airport and drove for six hours so I could visit Dad in his retirement community. I stayed at my American sister’s home, sharing memories and savoring the homecooked meals and family tradition of drinks before dinner. The hospitality, kindness, and generosity initially extended to a stranger (me) turned out to be a special bond beyond friendship and duty, as they became my chosen family.

My personal experience with American hospitality is clearly different than the experiences described in the aforementioned literary texts. I was not a slave brought forcefully for labor, not a Native American whose tribal lands were claimed, and not an immigrant seeking to become a permanent resident. Thus, my temporary presence posed no possible hostility to the binary of host-guest relations. Each experience has its own nuances and distinctions; yet, when a threshold is crossed intentionally or because of circumstances, the hosts and the guests yield to the possibility of an exchange. One may learn to voice his/her experiences as Kunta Kinte did in *Roots*, rely on native traditions as Tayo did in *Ceremony*, find a suitable language as in the case of the narrator in *Woman Warrior* or, in my particular case, one may learn to bake apple pies and chocolate chip cookies from her host Mom or repeatedly be moved by her host Dad’s generosity, only hoping, one day, to be as hospitable to others as they were to me.

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Hostipitality—Pretendians in the Host and Guest Matrix

Abstract: The paper examines the phenomenon of Pretendians within the framework of the discourse of hospitality, as proposed by Jacques Derrida and Gayatri Spivak, following the trajectory of the host vs. guest (stranger) positions as they have shifted between Native Americans and Euro-Americans. Pretendians have been observed across multiple spheres of life and studied extensively as subjects of interest, scrutiny, and criticism. Legitimate Pretendians are welcomed by the nations they aspire to join, whereas racial impostors are either detribalized or denied enrollment. These outcomes often stem from issues related to colonialism, tribal sovereignty, or questions of propriety. The former group encounters hospitality, while the latter provokes hostility—or hostipitality, a term reflecting an oscillation between the two elements of this portmanteau. The negative emotions are ascribed to the imposition of the rules of hospitality by the current host of the US, which is interpreted as a self-colonizing factor, undermining Native American integrity as peoples who have a special status in the USA. The author explores how changing historical circumstances, from the precolonial period to the present day, have shaped these attitudes. The shifting host-foreigner paradigm between Native Americans and settlers, alongside various policies, has created fractures in identities and relationships, ultimately creating conditions in which Pretendians might have appeared, as it turns out, not only in the United States and Canada. The paper argues that the discourse of hospitality provides a nuanced framework for understanding Pretendians and the reasons for hostipitality towards them.

Keywords: Pretendians, Native Americans, hospitality, Derrida, identity

Introduction

The Pretendian phenomenon has opened up a Pandora's box of identity issues for Native Americans, raising questions such as: Who is a Native American? Who has the authority to determine this, and on what grounds? How does this affect Indigenous people? This phenomenon has been studied widely (TallBear, "Native American DNA," "Native 'Identity' Fraud"; Sturm²; Kolopenuk).

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2 Disclaimer: As Prof. Circe Sturm is an important source and authority for the paper, the author would like to acknowledge that at the moment of writing the paper (2024), the author was not aware of the accusations

Debates over Pretendians have sparked heated emotions ranging from enthusiastic acceptance to outright hostility. The former stems from admiration for those who claim Indigenous identity out of genuine love for Indigenous culture, while the latter arises from the recognition of the damage Pretendians inflict on the image, culture, and status of Native Americans, as well as the theft of economic, career, and advancement opportunities. One of the most robust indicators of this phenomenon is in U.S. census numbers: In the 1960 census, only 500,000 people identified as Native American (Passel 79); by 2020, that number rose to 3.2 million (alone—since 2010—11% increase) and 6.3 million in any combination (96% growth since 2010) (US Census Bureau). In total, the last census showed 9.6 million Native Americans and Alaska Natives (alone or in combination). A striking example of this unprecedented increase is among the Cherokees: in the 2010 census, 819,000 people self-identified as Cherokee, but by 2020, the number had reached 1.5 million (US Census Bureau). This phenomenon has been referred to as the “Cherokee syndrome”³ (Sturm 17; Qiu; “Who Belongs in the Cherokee Nation”).⁴ Naturally, this rise was not due to a significant increase in birth rates.

This paper will examine the Pretendian problem within the framework of hospitality as conceptualized by Jacques Derrida and further developed by Gayatri Spivak in her concept of “hospitality from below” (Puspa 16). Operating between the host-stranger binary and allowing for a reversal of their roles, hospitality engenders diverse relationships between the two, ranging from friendship to hostility, which is coded in the term “hostipitality,” essential for the present analysis. This term enables us to explore the conundrum of Pretendian identity in all its complexity, moving beyond a simple binary of oppressed/oppressor (Sturm 40–41; Muszeika 80–81) within the post-colonial studies or constructivist/essentialist perspectives in cultural studies (Sturm 31–2, 57–8; Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” *Representation*; Roth et al. 41). Such positioning helps us explain why the issue is so dramatic and how it resonates with contemporary perspectives on identity, belonging, and relationality embodied in Western and Indigenous views. The Pretendian phenomenon complicates the issue of identity, illustrating

made by Tribal Alliance Against Frauds that Prof. Circle Sturm herself was a “Pretendian”. She did not claim it openly, yet conceded that her link to the nation of Choctaw comes from her “family lore” but was not substantiated by any records or family acknowledgement. This does not repudiate her research on the topic, yet might constitute an explanation of her positive bias in her sympathetic and understanding attitude towards ‘race-shifters.’

- 3 The name Cherokee syndrome should be used cautiously, as – like many terms i.e., race, nation, ethnicity – is has been imbued with different meanings, some of them very derogatory. Sturm is respected for bringing attention to the phenomenon of mass self-identification as Cherokee, but she has been criticized for (1) the pathologizing language of “Cherokee syndrome,” (2) leaning too much on racialized frameworks instead of sovereignty, (3) blurring lines between citizens and claimants, and (4) writing from a non-Native perspective that some view as extractive (Qiu).
- 4 The U.S. Census Bureau reports on race and ethnicity, but “Cherokee” is not always a precise, stand-alone category. Some people may have selected “American Indian,” written “Cherokee” under “tribe,” or identified as ‘Cherokee plus another race’; hence, though the numbers suggest a trend, they are not very precise.

its entanglement in American history, post-colonial policies, and contemporary power dynamics. To this end, the paper will introduce Pretendians (who they are and their motivations for pretending to be an “Indian”) and then the theory of hospitality. After outlining Indigenous approaches to hospitality, it will cover key historical points in the relationships between Indigenous peoples and colonizers, highlighting—within the hospitality framework—the moments in which the prospective Pretendians may have emerged, and where their mixed relations ranging from hospitality to hostility were formed, breeding the attitude of eponymous hostipitality. The paper concludes with a discussion on current approaches to Pretendians, seen in any relational framework as “the host from below,” by American federal and state authorities and Indigenous nations, both federally and state-recognized. In the end, travestying Spivak’s words, the paper is trying to answer the question: ‘What would it be to be hospitable to [Pretendians]’? (Spivak 308).

To establish a framework for these reflections, it is worth recalling a quote by Duane Champagne:

The challenge for Native peoples in the 21st century is not necessarily physical survival or affluent survival, but rather surviving as Native communities that continue to be informed by Native worldviews, values, and philosophies. This does not mean that Native intellectual life will not change, but Native philosophies of the nature of human beings and of the universe are what justify the continuity and constitution of Native communities and their rights to self-government, territory, and cultural change. (329–330)

This quote exemplifies three threads woven throughout this discussion. The first emphasizes the inextricable link between being Native American and having Indigenous worldviews or values. For Native Americans, retaining this link is essential, as it defines them as a distinct ethnic community separate from the broader U.S. population. In this context, Pretendians—intentionally or not—undermine this link. The second thread challenges the first by assuming that all social or national groups evolve, sometimes shedding or modifying essentialist characteristics (Smith 20). Individuals may adopt views and values from other groups through intermarriage or moving away from reservations, thus evolving culturally. This aspect will be explored in the context of (de)legitimizing those who embrace dual worldviews or now seek to privilege their Indigenous identity. The third thread asserts that retaining core traits entitles this group to specific rights and privileges that foreground its existence. A problem arises when, to receive this entitlement, a nation must relinquish certain foundational traits, thus compromising the essential features tied to the first thread. This creates a paradox: Can Pretendians be seen as legitimate “altered” Indians who, after historical disruptions, seek to reconnect with their ancestors’ descendants to reclaim what colonization took from them? Should they be welcomed by the community they or their ancestors left and later had no more contact with? Or, as Deloria suggests, is it essential for nations to retain foundational traits by making it compulsory for the new members to have a lived Native American experience rather than a romanticized image of Indigenous culture

based on past visions, tenuous ancestry, or superficial participation in indigenous ceremonies to pass as a Native American? The answer hinges on how Pretendians are defined.

Pretendians and identity

Identity

Inherent in this analysis is the concept of identity, traditionally perceived as a sense of oneself. What is debatable is what constitutes the sense of oneself. There are many approaches to the issue. Erik Erikson claims that “the sense of identity provides the ability to experience one’s self” as something that has continuity and sameness, and to act accordingly” (42). The implication of this approach for a person who wants to fit a particular identity is to show a link between one’s uniqueness and sameness at the same time, between past and present, and then to manifest those links in one’s actions. Stuart Hall added two perspectives to the concept, one acknowledging that identity is a “being” rooted in shared culture, a sort of collective oneself (“Cultural Identity” 223), while the second arguing that identity is rather a ‘becoming’, “a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (225). Another scholar, Rogers Brubaker (29), criticized the very term “identity” as too ambiguous and vague, focusing instead on processes such as identification – the way people identify themselves—and categorization—the way others and institutions define people. His approach avoids “groupism,” the tendency to see groups as internally homogeneous, fixed, and often exclusionary; instead, it highlights commonality and connectedness across shifting contexts.

In this paper, the above terms will be applied to the identity of those who call themselves Native Americans and those accused of being Pretendians. The identity debate reopens the question of Indigenous identity: whether it is ‘inborn’—a matter of race, blood quantum, or DNA, and then we talk about an essentialist approach to identity (TallBear, *Native American DNA* 45–48; Roth et al. 42; Sturm 40–42; Smith 43–44)—or ‘acquired’ through culture and political membership (Sturm 40–44; Roth et al. 44–48; Hall *Representation* 5, 25). The second approach is named constructivism.

For Indigenous peoples, the U.S. census allows for self-identification as either a racial or ethnic group. Racial identity rests on perceived biological differences, while ethnic identity emphasizes ancestry, shared culture, and history (Brubaker 64–66; Roth et al. 41). Both are socially constructed, shaping how individuals recognize themselves and are recognized by others. Essentialist approaches argue that racial, ethnic, or cultural groups “share defining qualities, or essences, that are innate and unchanging and inform the nature, behavior, or abilities of group members” (Roth et al. 41), making Indigeneity a birthright tied to lineage and tradition. By contrast, constructivists view identities as fluid, contingent on social, historical, or geographical contexts (Roth et al. 42; Hall “Cultural Identity” 225). From this perspective, Indigenous identity may be affirmed not just by descent but also by cultural participation, self-identification, and community recognition. Constructivism’s emphasis on fluidity, self-identification, and process

provides Pretendians with intellectual cover to justify their claims, as it loosens the boundaries that Native communities have historically used to maintain their identity. However, it also acknowledges the need for recognition by people and institutions, framed as categorization by Brubaker. Yet, if we take seriously the relational dimension that Brubaker stresses in his notion of “identification” and the word “community recognition”/or categorization in the constructivist approach—with its emphasis on processes and contingent, situational, and relational nature of identity—then Indigenous community recognition remains central, and Pretendian claims lose legitimacy when detached from that grounding.

Pretendians – concepts and meaning

The Pretendians differ from Indian Hobbyists (Wilczyńska 348–9), or “wannabes” as they are also known in Europe, who adopt Indian culture, dress, and practices on a seasonal basis to “play Indians.” This phenomenon is often categorized as cultural appropriation, as Philip Deloria describes in *Playing Indian* (128–154). In the U.S., however, the phenomenon may be more complex. Consider this definition from the National Indigenous Identity Forum in 2022:

Pretendian is [a] person who falsely claims to have Indigenous ancestry, who fakes an Indigenous identity, or who digs up an old ancestor from hundreds of years ago to proclaim themselves as Indigenous. (Kolopenuk 469)

As the definition suggests, Pretendians fall into at least three categories: those who fabricate an Indigenous backstory entirely for personal gain and are deserving of the moniker “fake Indians” (Sturm 2; Hilleary “Going Native”); those whose disconnection from their tribes was involuntary and who now wish to reconnect for various reasons; and those with no biological ties who yet seek a more meaningful life by joining Native nations and embracing their culture. Overlap between these categories is possible, and clear-cut distinctions are sometimes impossible; perhaps each case of Pretendianism should be considered individually.

A striking feature of the Pretendian phenomenon is the sheer range of names used to describe it. From affirmative action Indians and Johnny-come-lately Indians to census Indians and appropriators (Chavers) or Google Indians, the labels are many. This text, however, will focus on the most central ones: race-shifters—because assuming an “Indian” identity involves a racial change, often from white but at times from Black; Indigenophilopaths—because Pretendians often claim pathological fascination with or love of Native culture; identity imposters—because the act of identity change is judged not only mistaken but deceitful; and wannabees—because they long to become Indians but can cite no authentic nation to which they belong (“Playing Pretendian”). These key names will be used interchangeably here, according to context.

Pretendianism is far from a niche; it is justifiable to examine the issue from different angles to avoid harmful stereotyping or naive acceptance of all claims made by race shifters. Following Circe Sturm’s caution, it can be reiterated that most Pretendians operate in good faith, “on the

firm conviction that they have Indian ancestors” (essentialist approach) (14), though conflicting narratives often arise from their stories, as reported by journalists and researchers (Chavers; Cyca; Hilleary “Going Native,” “Native American Tribal Disenrollment Reaching Epidemic Levels”; Kang). Therefore, statements about Pretendians must be made with care to prevent undue harm, while still pursuing the ultimate goal of survival of the communities as Indigenous people, as defined by Champagne.

Research to date (Sturm 11) has shown that individuals with illegitimate claims (first category) often commit fraud to reap specific benefits. Some artists wish to enter the Native art market regulated by the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990, e.g., the infamous case of Jerry Chris Van Dyke (Sutton); others want to publish within Native literature e.g. Timothy Barrus (Qiu), and still others to access the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion framework in academia (e.g., allegedly Elizabeth Hoover, Andrea Smith) (Hilleary “Native, First Nations Scholars”); access the Indian Health Care System; or secure casino shares distributed equally among tribe members, e.g., Ron Roberts (Younge), among other advantages. They are often motivated by a desire to shed stigmatizing labels e.g., “white trash” or “redneck,” and gain entry to a different race or social class (Gonzales 201–202; Sturm 10). Yet, this claim may be contradicted by the already high-profile positions many identity impostors occupy (Sturm 11)—as academics (e.g., Andrea Smith), lawyers (e.g., Turpel-Lafond in Canada, Cree), artists (e.g., Jimmi Durham), actors (e.g., Johnny Depp, Sacheen Littlefeather, Iron Caddy), and even politicians (e.g., Elizabeth Warren, Bill Clinton).

The second group is primarily motivated by a desire to re-indigenize. Some people have long been aware of having “Indian blood” or Indian connections in family history, but had not acted on it until recently. This is an explanation most commonly invoked. For others, discovering an ancestral link through a DNA test (TallBear 84–85, 89–90, 133–35), an archival search, an untested relative’s account, or a family legend has prompted them to seek a tribal connection (an essentialist stance). Some, after being adopted before the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 was passed, are now searching for their biological parents and community; still others initiate identity exploration based on physical characteristics associated with Indigeneity (e.g., straight black hair, high cheekbones, or slanted eyes) (an essentialist stance). A notable example here is the desire of some to join a tribe, or if denied, to form their own (Sturm 70). Such individuals claim that dislocation or forced assimilation severed their ties, as with some Cherokee people who avoided removal during the 1838 Trail of Tears, Black Cherokees/Chickasaws who were disenfranchised because of the notes on Dawes Rolls (Qiu), or the Black Dutch (Sturm 33). Now they seek to reclaim what they perceive as an almost irreparable loss and to do justice. This group wishes to reconstruct its identity, yet what its members miss is their lived experience or group recognition.

The third category consists of individuals from various backgrounds, primarily white (hence Pretendianism is linked to “white-coded Indians,” cf. Kolopenuk 468), who endeavor to reidentify as Indians for political, historical, or moral reasons. In the present day, Native American culture occupies minimal space in mainstream American life (Muszeika 17, 22; Silverman “Member’s View” 05:55–07:00)—whether in classrooms, literature, film, or public multicultural discourse—and often

bears stereotypes of poverty and marginalization. Yet, many Indigenophiles assert that they gravitate toward Indigenous groups because these communities offer alternatives to modern American culture: instead of individualism, a sense of the collective and community; instead of secularism, a spiritual life; instead of anomie and emptiness, a sense of life ingrained in the narrative of community and kinship. The list also includes those who wish to cast off the feeling of guilt imposed on white men by the neocolonial/settler narrative. Taking inspiration from Andrew Delbanco's 1999 book *The Real American Dream—A Meditation on Hope* (96–97), it can be even claimed that being Native today or shifting into the Indian is a way of realizing the American Dream because the Indigenous meaning system seems to be encompassing what American Dream promised – not only “upward mobility, enough economic success to lead a comfortable life” but also “exhortation urging all Americans to do better, to be fairer,” to have hope (Churchwell). American culture, based on the self-realization of an individual, the instant gratification of desires, neoliberal-driven consumerism, focus on property, decay of social networks, and the fall of the role of the family and kin, is seen as empty and unfulfilling, thus not instigating hope and transcendence (Sturm 83–85). Philip Deloria, in his book *Playing Indian* (95–127), had noticed this syndrome of redefining oneself to have a more self-fulfilling life, already among 19th-century Americans—Boy Scouts movements and environmental movements—yet, “the move was always about claiming to be indigenized, not indigenous” (Sturm 87).

The phenomenon of race-shifting might seem astonishing, as a few decades ago, very few people wanted to admit to being Indians; they shunned any connections with indigeneity and desired to pass for white or black. Before the 1990s, it did not pay to be an Indian, for so few economic, political, social, or cultural benefits were accrued to them because of colonial policy and the many losses it incurred. Now, however, for a handsome minority, the trend of being ashamed of being an Indian has been reversed, inspiring enthusiasm at the prospect of converting into one, thus breeding “Indigenophilopaths.”

It is interesting to note that the phenomenon of self-indigenizing has been reported in New Zealand and Australia, other countries colonized by Great Britain, though it pales in scale. In New Zealand, the first report about fake Maori was published only in 2024, and it concerned four academics who likewise sought career and academic benefits accrued to Maori (Galbraith 1–2) as well as a white-skinned group called Ngāti Hotu who claim to precede the Maori (Galbraith 2,4) and have originated ca. 200BC. However, the race-shifters have not been identified to the public, and the issue did not win widespread recognition. In Australia, in contrast, the problem is on the rise, as “more and more ‘opportunists’ are making ‘false claims’ to membership of Indigenous groups to scuttle resource projects seeking environmental approval (Karp and Middleton). A special Deep Fake Project has been set up to trace those ‘fake’ Aborigines, which so far has identified many academics or famous figures (*Dark Emu Exposed*).

How can Pretendians be connected to hospitality discourse and what new light can this discourse shed on the phenomenon? Do the recognized native nations welcome the aspiring Indians to increase their ranks, or do they mistrust them?

The Discourse of Hospitality

Hospitality is the act and practice of being hospitable (Manzanas Calvo and Sánchez 2). It involves a host and a guest, typically in the host's home, and assumes a welcoming attitude from the former towards the latter, along with an expectation of reciprocity. Hospitality determines who belongs within a given space, who has authority over its rules, and who can enforce them. It is essential to remember that "all the words that are readily associated with hospitality have evolved from the same hypothetical root 'ghos-ti'" (O'Gorman 7). In Indo-European times (c. 4000 BC), the word "guest" also implied "stranger." In often hostile tribal societies, strangers could be perceived as potential threats. The Latin cognate "hostis" also means "enemy" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 21, 43), as "the notion 'favorable stranger' developed to 'guest'; that of 'hostile stranger' to 'enemy'" (Benveniste and Lallot 61). These concepts underpin the contemporary discourse on hospitality, especially as developed by 20th-century French philosopher Jacques Derrida in his book *Of Hospitality* (with Anne Dufourmantelle, 2000). While Derrida's reflections address a European immigration crisis, they are broadly applicable, allowing us to interpret his "Foreigner Question" in more general terms.

Derrida presents hospitality as an aporia or antinomy (76). On the one hand, the host, by the laws of their land, has the right to invite the foreigner but also to "mark the limits, powers, rights, and duties" that the foreigner must respect. Depending on how the foreigner complies with the rules, this stance can create acceptance or resistance to the stranger's presence, ultimately limiting or even denying hospitality. On the other hand, the law of hospitality dictates that the "new arrival" should be offered an unconditional welcome (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 77). Unconditional hospitality allows for the possibility that the foreigner, as a guest, could ultimately take over the host's land, rearrange its laws, introduce new legal systems, and establish new networks of "communication and information," thereby creating "new spaces of hospitality" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 57). In this scenario, the balance between host and guest is disrupted, and their roles may be reversed. The original host may then become a hostage to the new host—an idea that seems applicable to the relationship between Indigenous Americans and American settlers, as will be further discussed.

Moreover, as a result of this invasion, the attitude of "true" hospitality displayed by the original host may morph into hostility toward the new host or foreigner. The original host, now "a colonized subject acting as host to a colonizer guest" (Puspa 20), also referred to as the "host from below" by Spivak (308; Puspa 21), may feel ambivalent toward the foreigner, a concept expressed in Derrida's notion of hostipitality—a portmanteau of hospitality and hostility. This term captures the clash of attitudes in the host-guest or host-stranger relationship, a fitting way to describe the complex stance of Indigenous Americans toward the American government. The now-subjugated host or "host from below" may either accept the situation or resist it, in the latter case developing hidden hostility toward the oppressor and fighting to reclaim their former status and rights, while anticipating a possible reversal of roles.

However, on the surface, the “hosts from below” are often bound to accept the laws imposed by the new host, as these laws also generate some benefits. This acceptance may eventually lead to a situation in which the “host from below” no longer views the new host—the Foreigner—as an invader or parricide (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 5). Spivak theorizes that this might occur if the foreigner is welcomed through the act of “forgetting the murder of the fathers” (309).

What, then, is the situation concerning Indigenous Americans and their relationship to their colonizers? Do they harbor hospitality, hostipitality, or hostility? And what role do the Pretendians play in the conundrum created by the reversal of roles between the original host (now “host from below”) and the new host, once a foreigner?

Hospitality among Native Americans

Before European settlers arrived, the American continent was inhabited by numerous Indigenous nations, both large and small. Their migratory trajectories brought them into contact with one another, which led to either hospitable relationships—if resources were plentiful—or hostility, if they had to compete for resources (Witgen 31). In cases of mutual prosperity, tribes formed alliances and strong bonds through trade, intermarriage, mutual support in warfare, or cultural exchanges. A natural result of these encounters was intermarriage and the mixing of different groups, as seen among the Civilized Tribes (Sturm 15; Churchill 47), as well as the Iroquois and the Sioux (Churchill 44).

Traditionally, Indigenous tribes “governed their citizens and territories based on their own understanding of kinship, ancestry, and history” (TallBear 4). An individual would either be born into or become a member of a family, clan, or tribe, and could trace their kin—close or distant—depending on whether the tribe followed matrilineal or patrilineal descent (Churchill 41). Whole groups could also be integrated through adoption or naturalization, such as captured prisoners or entire surrendered villages, who—if they survived and were not enslaved outside—eventually received the same rights as other members of the host tribe. Thus, tribal identity was not determined by genetics or race, as Indigenous groups did not recognize a racial hierarchy (Churchill 41), but rather by genealogy and lineage. As a result of these enrollment processes, all tribes were genetically diverse, with few individuals being “full-blooded” Cherokee or Lakota. Consider, for example, the role of “mixed blood” John Ross in the Trail of Tears, or Quannah Parker among the Comanche, both having a white parent (Churchill 44).

In terms of hospitality, Indigenous tribes set clear conditions for those seeking entry into their ranks: the former “stranger” had to meet specific requirements, and once these were fulfilled, they could become legitimate members of the tribe. This process created a “common pot”—a community cooperating and tightly interconnected for the common good and survival (Brooks 3–5), where loyalty and dedication to the tribe were essential. Over time, either the newcomer or their descendants would fully integrate into the host community. This shifting of identities was often formalized through ceremonies and gift-giving, which sealed new bonds (Witgen 384) formed through marriage, adoption, or naturalization.

While acknowledging the instances of hostility between Native Americans and newcomers that led to tragic conflicts (such as the Jamestown massacre of 1622 and the Pequot War of 1637), it is important to remember that when Europeans were arriving in moderate numbers, “the same time-honored principles” (Churchill 41) of hospitality prevailed. Early European immigrants, if they emerged unscathed from skirmishes, were often adopted, naturalized, or married into tribes, strengthening them militarily, economically, or culturally. Notable examples include members of Raleigh’s “Lost Colony” in Virginia, various English, Dutch, and Irish settlers (Axtell 168–206), as well as figures like Joseph Renville and Eleazer Williams (Clifton 31). Many runaway or freed Black individuals were also integrated. Thus, “foreigners” became part of the host society as they respected the host’s rules, and their or their ancestral kin’s “parricides” were forgotten.

All of this indicates that Indigenous people, as hosts, accepted individuals from diverse ethnic or racial backgrounds—whether Black, white, or otherwise—and established pathways for them to transition from foreigners to fully integrated tribal members. In this process, genes, bloodline, or skin color of the guests played no or little role in their eventual status within the community. Once incorporated, they might come to share the nation’s lifeways and traditions as well as increase the pool of genes defined as indigenous, which will appear essential in the 21st-century genetics.

Welcoming the Colonizer

At the moment of first contact, Indigenous nations were the hosts of their territories, which they held in deep reverence, stewarding the land according to their customs and viewing it as sacred—not as “terra nullius,” or vacant land, for the taking by “strangers.” Receptions of these foreigners varied widely (Kolodny 1), depending on each tribe’s previous experiences, cultural assumptions, and contemporary situation. For example, the symbolic meeting of the Puritans and the Wampanoags, which later inspired the Thanksgiving myth, was marked by Chief Massasoit’s calculated decision to welcome the Pilgrims as allies. In *This Land Is Their Land: The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving*, Silverman argues that Massasoit, facing the ravages of European-borne plagues and seeking stability, extended hospitality to the Pilgrims with clear conditions: newcomers needed permission to use the land and were required to contain their livestock while also learning Wampanoag customs, such as gift-giving and pipe-smoking (22).

Initially, Europeans respected the agreements they made with Indigenous people, but as their numbers grew, these contracts were increasingly violated; the newcomers imposed their laws, seeking sovereignty over lands to which they had no rightful claim (Gibson 236). Over time, in those territories, the Pilgrims began to act as hosts, leading to escalating conflicts. One significant example is King Philip’s War of 1675–76, which the Algonquin tribes ultimately lost. These defeats enabled settlers to assert dominance over Indigenous lands, establish their own rules, and expand westward as conquerors.

Under the “right of conquest,” European powers—and later the United States—laid claim to Native lands through war, purchase, or deceitful contracts. Through these treaties, the federal

government promised protection for some Native territories while designating tribes as “domestic dependent nations,” still hosts on reservation land but with limited sovereignty (*Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, 1831). This ruling effectively shifted the role of hosts into the hands of strangers, placing Indigenous lands under federal control and making tribes, in effect, hostages or “resident aliens” (Spivak 308; Puspa 21).

As settlers moved westward, this cycle of contact and conflict repeated itself with each encounter with new native groups, culminating in violent confrontations, such as the Plains Wars, where tribes resisted but ultimately faced defeat. The transformation from guest to host officially ended in 1871 with the Indian Appropriations Act, which declared all Native Americans wards of the federal government, making them “strangers” and subjecting them to federal and state laws. This change led to a significant loss of tribal membership, as Indigenous people were either confined on reservations or went to live outside of them, either assimilating or living on the margins, potentially losing personal or cultural connection with their tribes and national identity. The federal government expected that the members of tribes would eventually either die out or “reemerge,” not as Indians, but as Americans, with the memory of their original status as hosts fading from both individual and collective memory. What mattered was which attitude the “host from below” would adopt towards the foreigner (Gibson 425-450).

Landmarks in the Process of Turning the Original Host into the “Host from Below”

The Allotment Act of 1887, also known as the Dawes Act, profoundly undermined tribal sovereignty by placing the federal government in control of determining allotment rolls and establishing membership criteria. When federal agents created the rolls between the 1880s and 1920s, they determined the allotment size, depending on the enrollees’ age and household size, as well as laid the foundations for tribe membership by assigning each enrollee a degree of Indian blood (e.g., $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{8}$), based on parentage. Yet, no blood notification was given to the freedmen, who—by virtue of the 1866 Treaty with Oklahoma Tribes—became tribe members and, along with their descendants, received the same rights as members of all Civilized Nations in Oklahoma (“Playing ‘Pretendian’”). However, in the late 1970s, a lack of this notification allowed the BIA to refuse the freedmen membership legally. In this way, these Dawes rolls shifted identity from being tribal/national (membership, kinship, adoption) to being racial/biological (“blood quantum” as a criterion for determining tribal membership and eligibility for land allotments).

This federally imposed system severely limited tribal sovereignty by dictating membership and land use terms, effectively disenfranchising many full-blooded individuals by establishing guardians for them. During the already mentioned trust periods, the federal government held Native lands in trust, controlling their sale and cultivation without tribal consent, further undermining tribal autonomy. Blood quantum also indicated that those with less than “one-fourth degree of blood” were outright disqualified from the new rolls, the consequence of which was more land for the settlers (Churchill 50). With hindsight, it is possible to see how this practice

contributed to a possible rapture both among the original hosts (between the prospective Pretendians and the enrolled members of each nation, especially in the case of the Cherokee Nation) and in their relations with the US as the ultimate host.

In the enrollment process, cultural markers such as language, religious practices, and traditional regalia were also used to define “authentic” Indigeneity. However, many of the core aspects of native cultures had been suppressed, especially after the introduction of boarding schools focused on assimilation. Losing these identity markers left many Native Americans feeling they no longer belonged, and economic hardships on reservations forced thousands to leave in search of better opportunities, deepening the divide between those who remained on reservations, clinging to traditional ways, and those who assimilated into broader society. Those who stayed, often with higher blood quantum and less racial mixing, were sometimes stigmatized as resistant to modernity, yet they played the role of “host from below,” preserving the culture necessary for the survival of an integral Native community, as Champagne argued. Those who departed often felt pressure to hide or deny their Native heritage, becoming disconnected from their communities (Sturm 133–137) physically and relationally. This also shows how the future emergence of “Pretendians” was inscribed in the past events and practices.

In the 1950s, the federal government adopted the termination policy, aiming to dissolve tribal lands and disperse Indigenous communities. Termination sought to erase the original host’s cultural and physical presence, reducing Native identity to a mere ethnicity without the distinct rights promised in treaties to the original hosts. This policy was reversed in the 1970s, also under the influence of the Red Power Movement, and this led to a resurgence of Indigenous cultural pride (Wilkinson 89–150). This cultural revival forced the federal government to recognize tribal sovereignty through The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 and a series of court cases, relying on legal principles such as the federal government’s fiduciary duty to Native American tribes (through the Federal Energy Management Agency) (“Federal Trust Responsibility”). A notable example is the *Seminole Nation v. United States* case (1942), in which the U.S. government committed itself to “moral obligations of the highest responsibility and trust” toward Native American tribes (Wilkinson 61, 104). The government vowed to protect Native American assets and resources and serve as a trustee for Native American lands. These obligations were extended primarily to reservation nations, as it became in the federal government’s interest to limit the number of Native people and the size of the land base, already reduced by the aforementioned dislocation, removal, and assimilation policies like the Dawes Act or blood quantum requirement. When reservations revealed extreme poverty, disease, and stagnation, the government began providing welfare benefits and annuities, establishing a pattern of assistance. Today, these services include healthcare, food and housing support, educational scholarships, and more—entitlements that are sometimes sought after by Pretendians.

These shifts in policy and law prompted many tribes to seek federal recognition, especially after the economic shares of tribal casinos emerged in 1988. Federal recognition criteria required tribes to demonstrate an enduring cultural continuity and identity as well as blood-based lineage

dating back to the early 20th-century Dawes rolls. However, for many Indigenous people, this requirement evoked the same discriminatory policies based on race that had eroded their rights and autonomy in the past.

In this context, questions of Indigenous identity became increasingly complex. Who is truly “Indian”? Is it the reservation-based host preserving tradition and meeting federal requirements, or those who adapted to mainstream society and succeeded, albeit at the cost of shedding visible markers of Indigenous culture while, possibly, retaining Indigenous ways of thinking and spirituality? The latter has been the experience of many of the Pretendians from the 2nd category mentioned, and they have never before addressed the experience of exclusion. This complexity is heightened by the fact that those who left often intermarried with people from other racial or ethnic backgrounds, further diluting physical markers of Indigeneity, including the blood quantum. Without enrollment numbers, traditional Indian looks, or tribal language, how could they prove and display their Indigeneity without being accused of pretending to be Indian? (Sturm 6; TallBear “Native ‘Identity’ Fraud”).

The “Pretendians” in the Matrix Created by the Host and the “Host from Below”

Given that the federal government welcomed the federally recognized tribes as its indigenous partners, within a system referred to as divided sovereignty, the tribes are declared sovereign in their decision about enrollment requirements. Yet the federal government determines the overarching boundary conditions for membership, while Native nations can formally establish their own criteria for enrollment—such as choosing to use or avoid blood quantum measurements. However, most do rely on blood quantum, a prominent exception being the federally recognized Cherokee Nation. As a sovereign “host from below,” each native nation typically also requires applicants to prove descent from tribal members enrolled in the early 1900s, often equating descent with blood quantum metrics that range as much as one-quarter to as little as one four-hundredth Indigenous ancestry. Blood, then, serves as a metaphor for lineage, acting as a marker of Indigenous cultural and racial distinction, reflecting the colonially introduced system of racial categorization that Indigenous communities have since adopted, albeit with “hostipitality.” As Kolopenuk describes it, this system “produced Indianness as a matter of racial rather than relational identity,” and is seen as self-colonizing, undermining the attributes associated with a “host” (472).

While blood quantum is a common standard, the foundation of tribal identity is not primarily genetic but communal, based on interconnected relationships, shared traditions, and collective worldviews. In each community, each member knows how they are connected to others—whether by blood, adoption, or marriage—and can verify these connections. Thus, the first challenge for a “Pretendian” is proving “relationality.” When asked, “Who is your grandparent? Do you know them?” a wannabe must answer authentically, and their relatives must be able to verify their responses. If they are unable to do it, then the Pretendians face humiliation and disavowal,

as happened, for instance, in the case of Elizabeth Hoover (Kang) or Jimmie Durham (Pobric). Kolopenuk looks white but is an enrolled member of the Peguis Nation; she was not raised on a reservation, yet when questioned about her authenticity, she did not respond with offense or denial but instead cited family members who could affirm her heritage. She suggests that others also apply “Indigenous relationality” as a key test of authenticity—a way “the host from below” can uphold membership in line with Indigenous traditions (Kolopenuk 469).

Another method consistent with traditional values, albeit more severe, is “detrribalization” (Malinowskaya). If a Pretendian’s documentation is found to be fraudulent or lacks corroboration from other relatives, the individual or group may be “detrribalized,” effectively uninvited from the tribe (Malinowskaya; Hilleary “Native American Tribal” 19). This action, though counter to traditional Indigenous hospitality (constructivism or identification), is seen as a necessary measure to maintain the tribe’s reputation and protect its authenticity (essentialism) under the “divided sovereignty” agreement established with the federal government (TallBear “Native ‘Identity’ Fraud”).

The issue of Pretendians is sensitive because of the distinct legal rights held by Indigenous people under treaties and contracts dictated by or negotiated with the present host. Native Americans are recognized as rights-bearing subjects, with entitlements granted in compensation for past harms, by virtue of, for example, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990), the Child Welfare Act (1978), and healthcare systems. These rights, often hard-won from the federal government, are now perceived as privileges, prompting some non-Indigenous individuals to falsely claim Native identity to access them. Tribes are thus compelled to preserve their unique status by following the terms of divided sovereignty, even when these rules conflict with traditional customs of hospitality. “A host from below” has a right to protect their interest (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 46-47).

Despite these complexities, strong relations between tribal governments and the U.S. government remain vital to advancing the Indigenous agenda and achieving meaningful outcomes for tribes. The political reality is inescapable: the United States holds established political, economic, and cultural dominance. Some indigenous nations, however—like the Iroquois Nation (Hill)—reject this reality, expressing a desire, as Gayatri Spivak suggests, to “flip the roles by reinstating the colonized as host” (qtd. in Puspa 21), which is manifested in their consistent efforts to fight for their passports. Yet realistically, tribes will continue to operate within the framework of divided sovereignty. While this framework grants them special status, land rights, and certain benefits, it also ties them to the federal government, the current host, where the sole authority able to change their status is Congress. This arrangement fosters a lingering “hostipitality,” as tribal sovereignty predates the U.S., a fact that continues to fuel tensions and breed hope for a change or nostalgia. Meanwhile, Pretendians highlight the contradictions inherent in this framework, exposing how both Indigenous communities and settlers grapple with the effects of some historical policies and colonial legacies. Some Indigenous communities claim that they have already “forgotten” the past patricides committed by the Foreigner in the

colonial era; some will never want to forget, not only to bear a continual grudge for committed atrocities, but foremost to remember and honor ancestors and their lifeways. To this effect, as Champagne asserts, what should be prioritized is to “surviv[e] as Native communities that continue to be informed by Native worldviews, values, and philosophies” (329). Therefore, Pretendians should be dealt with accordingly, and any attempt at fraud should be disclosed and punished (TallBear “Native ‘Identity’ Fraud”).

Conclusion

This analysis argues that the concept of hospitality provides a valuable framework for understanding the Pretendian phenomenon, positioning these individuals as strangers to both the original and present hosts. Central to this discussion is Derrida’s notion of “hostipitality,” which encapsulates the duality of the host-stranger relationship, oscillating between hospitality and hostility.

The historical evolution of the host-guest dynamic between Native Americans and European settlers—and later American settlers—has led to complex reversals and reconfigurations of these roles. Federally recognized tribes, as hosts of their “nations and reservations,” may seek to extend hospitality to legitimate race-shifters who aim to reconnect with their Indigenous heritage. Such gestures could potentially enhance Indigenous cultural vitality, presence, status, and rights within the United States. However, some criteria—often imposed externally by the host-usurper, such as blood quantum requirements or documentation of ancestral enrollment rules—limit their ability to do so.

Referring to my initial question, “What would it be like to be hospitable to Pretendians?” it must be stated that welcoming Pretendians without scrutiny risks undermining tribal sovereignty and identity, potentially allowing individuals, particularly identity impostors, to exploit hard-earned rights and privileges secured through centuries of treaty negotiations and legal struggles. Consequently, while native nations might wish to offer hospitality, they often prioritize the interests and good of their own community over the desires of Pretendians, especially if the grounds for enrollment are dubious. They do it aware of the fact that their resistance to freely welcoming Pretendians is often approached as a guarded, even hostile, stance.

On the other hand, Pretendians, as strangers seeking belonging, frequently interpret this resistance as rejection. Their response may include frustration, defiance, or even hostility toward the nation they aspire to join. They may perceive the nation’s adherence to colonial-era constructs—such as proof of relationality to the community—as a betrayal, echoing the exclusionary practices of colonizers. For these individuals, the desire to reconnect with Indigenous identity feels, in their view, like sufficient grounds for acceptance and enrollment. If they are not welcomed, or uninvited (i.e., detribalized), they set up their independent tribes, with or without the state’s approval (Sturm 17).

This tension underscores the delicate balance that indigenous nations and the federal government strive to maintain in the host-stranger matrix, remembering that it is the present host that sets the criteria for acceptance, and second in line is the “host from below.” Protecting

the integrity of Indigenous identity and autonomy requires caution in addressing Pretendians, a phenomenon that reflects the enduring complexities of U.S.-Indigenous relations shaped by a legacy of colonialism.

Presented within the framework of identity theories, the problem of Pretendians exposes the limits of both “strict essentialism” (which can be exclusionary), “pure social constructionism” (which can be too open-ended and allows for fraud), privileging the concept of identification by Brubaker, as it emphasizes it as a process involving sacred values and relationality. This is so because indigenous identity as ethnic and national is best understood as “relational, political, and historically grounded”, requiring both descent and community affirmation.

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On “roots, pollution, and ... the [im]purity of lineage”: Race in Natasha Trethewey’s *Thrall*

Abstract. The purpose of this article is to explore how Natasha Trethewey—arguably one of the most important contemporary American poets and a mixed-race person—confronts the issue of race on various, though arguably inseparable, levels: personal, linguistic, and one pertaining to the history of humanity and the American nation. I operate within the frame of recent conceptualizations of race as a phenomenon rationalized by racism, following the poet’s trajectory present in her ekphrastic poems from *Thrall*—i.e., from roots of race represented in European visual arts (“Miracle of the Black Leg”) to its pollution and a question of (im)purity of lineage (“Taxonomy” and “Enlightenment”). At the same time, the article demonstrates how race, although it has been scientifically proven not to exist, is constituted by racism, to which it is a necessary excuse and alibi.

Keywords: black poetry, ekphrasis, mixed-race studies, Natasha Trethewey, race, racism

In critical studies of race, the attempts to overcome the negative burden of the past include Rachel Afi Quinn’s category of the “magic mulatto” and Trey Ellis’s concept of the “cultural mulatto.” The former term refers to the promotion of an ultra-positive image of a mixed race person—Quinn describes the “magic mulatto” as a “well-educated, economically privileged and aesthetically-pleasing person, whose hybrid cultural and racial identity makes him or her highly consumable and socially acceptable within a white dominant mainstream” (Pereira 126).² As Malin Pereira points out, Quinn proves that the “magic mulatto” does not really subvert or challenge American race-cum-class ideology, as it complies with the existing mainstream standards of beauty and social attractiveness. Nevertheless, this term can be applied to Natasha Trethewey, whose public image, judging by her photographs on the back covers of her four volumes of poetry and the front cover of the Natasha Trethewey special issue of *The Southern Quarterly*, is

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2 Quinn, R. A.: *From Tragic Mulatto to Magic Mulatto: Mixed Race Aesthetics and Exceptionalism in MAVIN Magazine*. 2013. Unpublished essay quoted by Pereira, *ibid.*, p. 126.

intentionally pleasing and ‘aesthetically correct’. Yet, even though the former US Poet Laureate can be characterized by the same adjectives as those used by Quinn in her definition of the “magic mulatto,” there is much more to it than that in her poetic persona, who may be more precisely classified as a “cultural mulatto,” described by Ellis as a person

educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures [who] can also navigate easily in the white world . . . We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white or black people... Today’s cultural mulattoes echo those ‘tragic mulattoes’ critic Sterling Brown wrote about in the Thirties only when they too forget they are wholly black. (235)

Arguably, cultural mulattoism represents not a rejection but an extension of one’s blackness, and in this way positively evaluates impurity. In this case, blackness is not a legal necessity/limitation or burden, which stigmatizes socially and marginalizes culturally, but an asset and advantage in the analysis and comprehension of not only American culture and history. Such a re-evaluation of blackness as a quintessentially positive component of a mixed-race identity is also emphasized in the term “mulattoesque blackness,” applied to Trethewey’s work by Michelle Elam (21), who used it to pinpoint the nature of the poet’s endeavors to reclaim black history and culture as an indispensable part of American national heritage. Moreover, this modification of Trethewey’s persona from an adult-child to a mature black mulatto makes it possible for her to overcome the personal experience of race/racism (as documented for example by such poems as “White Lies,” “Southern Gothic,” “My Mother Dreams Another Country,” “Southern History” or “Incident”), and move on to writing much more analytical ekphrastic poems, in which she dives much more deeply into the phenomenon of race to understand it and expose the role it plays in supporting racism.

Undeniably, race has always been one of the central issues that Trethewey explored in her poetry, and it dominated her fourth volume *Thrall*. I am going to investigate these explorations in three of her poems—“Miracle of the Black Leg,” “Taxonomy,” and “Enlightenment” to demonstrate that the poet’s intuition had brought her to a position pertaining to race which overlaps to a great extent with Donna J. Haraway’s anxieties concerning the phenomenon, and a claim made by W. J. T. Mitchell, who argues that race is in a sense necessary for racism as its perverse justification and rationalization. That is why we can witness its active presence in contemporary America despite the fact that race, understood as a biological construct in the material world, has been discredited and eliminated from the discourse by contemporary scholars. Nonetheless, before moving on to the analyses of particular poems, with an emphasis on the notion of race, there is a need to cursorily introduce and briefly discuss the present debate on the concept of race, as it confronts us with its complexity, uncovering the phenomenon as a paradox and conundrum. That conundrum is, for instance, well-documented in a book *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*

by a sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who explores various forms of “the strange enigma of race in contemporary America” (1).

Similarly, race has always been both a controversial and unavoidable issue in the United States. The philosophical and sociological analyses of its functioning in American history and the influence it has had on the country’s social dynamics suggest that race is not so much a biological reality as a pragmatic ideological construct that has allowed the maintenance of asymmetrical power relations between white Americans and the so-called “people of color,” particularly African Americans. Since Antony Appiah’s breakthrough essay on the illusion of race, published in 1985, which contains a famous statement that “[t]he truth is there are no races” (35) in the American scholarly race discourse, an emphasis has been put on conceptualizing it as an illusory phenomenon, the concept that eliminates the reality of race. Appiah’s statement brought an end to a dominant position of a standpoint labelled “*essentialism*” in Linda M. Alcoff’s nomenclature, which had held a position that race is “an elemental category of identity with explanatory power” (182); in consequence, this concept of race made it possible to pinpoint in “[m]embers of racial groups” some biological and characterological features (for instance *essentialism* is responsible for upholding a stereotypical perception of black people as cunning, lazy and stupid) as well as to identify “a set of [their] political interests, and a historical destiny” (182). By negating this argumentation with the discoveries of modern science, not only did Appiah discredit the hegemonic theory of race (in which it is taken for granted as something visible, thus obvious), but also shifted race from the field of nature into that of language.

Thus, race has become an ideological (i.e., discursive and artificial) construct located in culture. For that reason, Joshua Glasgow recommends a replacement of the term “race” with “race*,” where the asterisk signals the ultimate shift of the conceptual status of the term away from biology to the realm of the socio-cultural construction, from the natural to the artificial. Yet, as Mitchell acutely points out, “in eliminating biological discourse completely, . . . reconstructivism rejects the key element of genealogy and reproduction, the notion of race as constituted by ‘bloodlines’ as well as by body types” (188). That a thorough cancellation of biological features in the discourse on race would be a grave mistake is testified to, for example, by such researchers as Howard Winant, Naomi Zack, and Arun Saldanha. In the words of Saldanha, he himself, together with the other two scholars, is a practitioner of a “materialist ontology of race,” which grants that “there *are* phenotypical differences” whose “social force depends on culture, economics, and the law” (9).

Mitchell’s standpoint on the matter, which includes the biological underpinnings of race, seems to come out of the anxiety and uncertainty pertaining to a conceptualization of race that permeates Donna J. Haraway’s reflections. Haraway notices the dubiousness and simultaneous stubbornness of race as an active force in contemporary America, and observes that race

is a fracturing trauma in the body politic of the nation—and in the mortal bodies of its people.
 . . . Race is a peculiar kind of object of knowledge and practice. The meanings of the word are

unstable and protean; the status of the word's referent has wobbled—and still wobbles—from being considered real and rooted in the natural, physical body to being considered illusory and utterly socially constructed. ... Race, like nature and sex, is replete with all the rituals of guilt and innocence in the stories of nation, family, and species. Race, like nature, is about roots, pollution, and origins. Race, like sex, is about the purity of lineage. (213)

Thus, according to Haraway, race should be perceived as “the drama of inheritance of bodies, property, and stories” (213). As such, it has received much attention from writers of fiction and poets in the United States, both black and white, who have tackled it directly or reflected symbolically, and understood it as an essential component of a group identity or deconstructed it to expose its arbitrariness and oppressive nature. Toni Morrison, in her book-length essay entitled *Playing in the Dark*, observes that until very recently, “the readers of virtually all of American [literature] have been positioned as white” (xii). She is interested in finding out the answer to and explore the question that reads: “What does positing one's writerly self, in the wholly racialized society that is the United States, as unraced and all others as raced entail? What happened to the literary imagination of a black author who is at some level always conscious of representing one's own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be ‘universal’ or race-free?” (xii). And that there is nothing like freedom from race or the universality of whiteness-as-race is proven by Mitchell in his highly sophisticated conceptualization of the presence of race in social interactions between black and white people in America today. Mitchell's point of departure is an observation that on the one hand “[t]he idea that racial identity corresponds to some real substance in the physical world is generally understood to be a fallacy,” whereas on the other hand “[r]acism persists. Why?” (xi). To put it in other words, how and why something that does not exist in reality can have such a strong influence on social interaction?

The answer to the question posited by Mitchell, nevertheless, lies at the nexus of the physical materiality of the bodies (i.e., the material reality in which the bodies act or are objects of violent actions) and in the representation of the physical world in terms of Lacan's modified triad of “psychological and semiotic ‘registers’” (16) (the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real), where racism (*nota bene* not race) is located in the Real (i.e., in the unspeakable wild zone of trauma). And this—as race is “constructed out of the Symbolic and the Imaginary”—leaves race out of Lacan's scheme. As a result, the critic adds a fourth sphere to the scheme profoundly altering it, a sphere that he identifies as “Reality,” where “racism is the brute fact, the bodily reality, and race is a derivative term, devised either as an imaginary cause for the effects of racism or as an attempt to provide a rational explanation, a ‘realistic picture’ and diagnosis of this mysterious syndrome known as racism” (19). The significant linguistic operation of changing our expectations concerning derivation proposed by Mitchell allows him to draw a conclusion that “[r]ace is not the cause of racism, but its excuse, alibi, explanation, or reaction formation” (19).

As has been said above in the chronological and brief summarization of the present functioning of the category of race, since it was demasked as not a natural phenomenon but a discursive/

artificial construct, race still has the power to affect social interactions between whites and blacks in the United States. As upheld by Mitchell, its function is to provide a rationalization to racism, be it in the form of microaggressions, institutional discrimination, or brutal acts of open violence in present-day America. Still, it also has remained a vital subject matter for American writers, Trethewey among them, who discuss, dissect, and deconstruct race in their works as both a personal experience and a cultural phenomenon that affects the entire population.

*

Natasha Trethewey's writerly method in exploring the phenomenon of race and her capability to explore it profoundly seems to be a striking example of the realization of Jonathan Holden's prediction made in 1991. The critic claimed that American poetry, then trapped in a cul-de-sac of self-referential elitism and experiments in language, must return to its traditional tasks from before the Modernist breakthrough. Holden maintains that

[t]he changes in American poetry will be in the domain of 'subject matter,' of content . . . ; and one could . . . almost predict what the subject matter will be. It will consist of the very material that [contemporary academic criticism] dismisses as the 'verse essay': 'discursiveness,' stories and ideas, many of them explicitly moral . . . – in sum didactic subject matter, together with imaginative rhetorical tactics to give this material dramatic force, without being preachy or pedantic. (59–60)

Holden advocates that in order to "enlarge the estate of [American] poetry," poets should not remain locked in the ivory tower of words and demonstrate contempt for the needs of their potential readers, who, assumingly, "want poetry with a 'message'" (60). Thus, despite the widespread poetic practice and universal opinion in the circles of academic guardians of literary quality that didacticism cancels poetry, there is, in Holden's view, a desire on the side of the readers for poetry that offers them guidance and moral instruction, as well as for poetry that tells humanly wise stories. Meeting both of those expectations leads to a reintegration of the poet with the community.

The author of *Thrall* is a poet who consistently defines herself as a member of her community, both at the local Southern and national levels, catering to the readers' demand for humanly wise poetry with a morally engaging message as its content. As pointed out already, among Trethewey's central subject matter and themes are the issues of race and racism, approached by her from the position of a mixed-race person, well-familiarized with race as a personal experience, a product of discourse, part of the American nation's/human history, and an excuse for racism. Those aspects of race frequently appear separately, each an object of reflection in the Poet Laureate's verse, but sometimes they become tightly interwoven, which points to their quintessential inseparability and interdependence.

For example, a poem entitled "Miracle of the Black Leg," which consists of four ekphrastic sonnets written in blank verse, takes as its subject matter the myth of a miracle transplant,

and provides an analysis of how the motif of the black leg was transformed in Christian art in the period of two hundred years, i.e., from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century. Trethewey refers to several paintings that document the evolution of representation of the black donor and white recipient, who remain in a significant relationship, the evolution that begins with the absence of the black donor in the pictures, and goes on to representing him as dead, to finally making him alive like the white recipient. In the explanatory note that accompanies the poem, Trethewey mentions the titles of two scholarly books that helped her select the images she explores in “Miracle of the Black Leg,” and emphasizes the fact that “[r]epresentations of the myth appear in Greek narratives, in a Scottish poem, and in paintings and altarpieces in Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria, Portugal, Switzerland, France, and Belgium,” pointing out that the survival and circulation of the motif of the black leg over a long period of time was not a local but universally European phenomenon (81). At the same time, she refrains from naming specific artworks and artists. As acutely observed by Daniel Cross Turner, this strategy “deepens the thick intertextuality of the poem, lending it an elusive allusiveness as ‘version after version’ . . . of the myth gets transplanted across cultures as well as historical periods. . .” (110).

Nevertheless, the precision and accuracy of Trethewey’s descriptions of the artworks and her concentration on their details make it possible to identify them with a high degree of certainty. Chronologically, these are: *The Miraculous Transplantation of the Moor’s Leg* by Matteo di Pacino; Fra Angelico’s *The Miracle of the Black Leg*; Fernando del Rincon’s late 15th century *Miracle of the Black Leg*; and the relief of the same title from the Monastery of San Francisco in Valladolid, attributed to Isidro de Villoldo. Not only do these artists’ works on the miracle of the black leg document different stages of development of the myth, but they also have an additional function to play in Trethewey’s four-sonnet poem, as they provoke particular reflections and questions pertaining to race and racism that the poet does not abstain from making/asking. In this category we must place the word “always,” which appears several times in the sonnets, as well as the meta-comments Trethewey makes which emphasize the myth’s provoking character even today, such as: “Even now, it stays with us: when we mean to uncover / the truth, we dig, say *unearth*” (9); “For centuries / this is how the myth repeats: the miracle—in words / or wood or paint—is a record of thought” (10); “what knowledge haunts each body,/ what history, what phantom ache?” (11); as well as the sentences which close the last sonnet in the series and the series itself:

... How not to see it–
 the men bound one to the other, symbiotic–
 one man rendered expendable, the other worthy
 of this sacrifice? In version after version, even
 when the Ethiopian isn’t there, the leg is a stand-in,
 a black modifier against the white body,
a piece cut off– as in the origin of the word *comma*:
 caesura in a story that’s still being written. (12)

The phrases quoted above talk about the survival of the myth until today and its discreet presence in the everyday practice of social interaction between black and white people, even though it is manifested differently, not necessarily through visual artworks. Moreover, at the end of the fourth sonnet there emerges an ironic or even bitterly sarcastic tone, when Trethewey says that the men are “bound one to the other” in “symbiotic” relationship as if parasitism, which we clearly deal with in the myth of the black leg, is qualitatively equal with symbiosis based on the mutual benefits of both organisms involved. In this case, the black man sacrifices his healthy limb (and life), although we do not know whether he does so out of goodwill. More probably, he is not consulted on the matter but falls into the category of an “expendable” supplicant or even a slave, who knows and accepts automatically with no reservations his own inferiority and a duty to help the white man. The assumed self-contempt of the black in the act of convincing himself (or merely taking it for granted) that the white recipient is “worthy of this sacrifice,” may be perceived as an example of a racist attitude which constitutes blackness as race.

But what else can be gleaned about racial attitudes and relations from the black leg myth? In the early paintings, “always / one man is healed, his sick limb replaced, / placed in the other man’s grave.” Two centuries later, however, “[b]oth men are alive in Villoldo’s carving. / In twinned relief, they hold the same posture, / the same pained face . . . ” (12). Nonetheless, despite their striking similarity, the vertical positioning of the white recipient and the black amputee leaves no doubt as to the hierarchy of colors implemented here, which follows suit the established in Europe meaning of colors, through which spoke, as Jean Devisse and Michel Mollat put it, “the Occidental prejudice, which considered blackness itself as being in essence evil, dangerous, and a sign of inferiority” (98). Indeed, the inferiority of the Ethiop and superiority of the white patient are reflected in the vertical encoding of both: “[t]he black man, on the floor, / holds his stump. Above him, the doctor retains / the patient’s arm as if to prevent him touching / the dark amendment of flesh” (12). In the earlier representations, the white man survives even though originally it was his gangrened leg that needed to be severed (and replaced), whereas the black man must die as a result of losing a healthy limb for the purpose of life-saving transplantation.

Still, the message communicated by the vertical symbolism remains the same: as Trethewey says in the third sonnet in the series, “[o]ne man always / low, in a grave or on the ground, the other / up high, closer to heaven” (11). The whole attitude shared by the artists, who produced various versions of the myth, does not escape the poet’s attention, as she registers how the black man’s inferiority is systematically emphasized in the paintings as a consequence of racism inscribed in the white gaze—through a desecration of his dead body; representing him as faceless, “featureless in a coffin” (11); dehumanizing the Ethiop as “merely a body” (11); and pointing out that he is ignored by the saint physicians or “relegated to the background” (Devisse and Mollat 230). It seems that a covert topic of the poem is how the race of a black man is constituted through a series of acts of racism, so carefully listed in Trethewey’s four sonnets.

Furthermore, the stubbornness of racial categories generated by racism is also present in the poem on the formal level. As already mentioned, “Miracle of the Black Leg” consists of four

sonnets, and the number four signifies material reality, its stability, durability, and permanence, like four seasons, four parts of the world, or four phases of the moon. Apparently, this structure of the poem enhances the morose truth that racism and race have always been with humanity, and are here to stay.

Similarly, the four poems written in free and blank verse, which comprise “Taxonomy,” are focused solely on race as it was represented in so-called *casta* paintings, a unique genre that appeared in the eighteenth century in New Spain (Mexico), and contained depiction of racial lineages (the *sistema de castas*). The subject of these paintings is the issue of race in the colonial context, which included racial intermarriage and children born out of such wedlock, or, as Charles Ford et al. put it:

[T]hese works, unlike any other genre of painting in Western art, deal directly and concretely with the visualization of racial categories within the colonial context of a broader racial discourse. As such, *casta* paintings resonate in various ways with modern sensibilities. . . . *Casta* paintings constitute a pivotal part in the formation of racial categories and how they were registered in Mexico. (246)

Yet, to make all racial categories visualized in the paintings, a painter had to produce a series of sixteen paintings to exhaust the list that appeared in the book of *castas*, which designated each of the *castas* in the linguistic terms. Trethewey, who uses the paintings by Juan Rodríguez Juárez, an artist from the beginning of the eighteenth century, reverses this process in “Taxonomy,” and transforms the visual back into the linguistic form again. Still, the poet retains the original Spanish titles of the paintings in three subsequent parts of her poem (“1. DE ESPANOL Y DE INDIA PRODUCE MESTISO”; “2. DE ESPANOL Y NEGRA PRODUCE MULATO”; “3. DE ESPANOL Y MESTIZA PRODUCE CASTIZA”), whereas the fourth part has a title in English (“4. THE BOOK OF CASTAS”). As we can see, Trethewey uses only two of the racial categories, which begin the sequence (i.e, mestiza, and castiza), from the whole system of sixteen, only to signal the direction of the vector of reproduction. Nevertheless, she confronts the reader with the linguistic complexity of racial lineages at the beginning of part 4, when the persona says:

Call it the catalog
of mixed bloods, or

the book of naught:
not Spaniard, not white, but

mulatto-returning-backwards (or
hold-yourself-in-midair) and

the *morisca*, the *lobo*, the *chino*,
sambo, *albino*, and

the *no-te-entiendo* – the
I don't understand you.

Guidebook to the colony,
 record of each crossed birth,

it is the typology of taint,
 of stain: blemish: sullyng spot:

that which can be purified,
 that which cannot . . . (24)

According to Thadious M. Davis, in part four of “Taxonomy,” Trethewey “deploys images from *casta* paintings . . . to raise issues about the consignment of mixed-race bodies to specified racial designations and racial taxonomies” (48). The critic notices the absurdity of the racial categories in the paintings, but, being not an art historian, does not give it full justice. As Ford et al. comment on the relation between the written list contained in the book of *castas* and the visual rendering it received in the form of paintings,

[t]he full written list of sixteen *castas* is essentially meaningless, and the terms become something that is identifiable only through the images themselves, the pictured bodies. The differences and distinctions implied by such names can only be imagined as substantial by a comparison of the figures in one painting with the other figures in the series. The *castas* therefore must be painted in a series, as seriation is crucial to their comprehension and thus is a defining element of the genre. In fact, one cannot think of the genre in terms of individual works. . . . The series begins with recognizable types in terms of both word and image (Spaniard, Indian, mestizo) so that the absurdities of the subsequent paintings become believable through their association with the known and recognizable. (248–249)

Nonetheless, Trethewey does seem to think of Juárez’s paintings “in terms of individual works,” as she chooses to analyze and interpret only three of the series. Apparently, it is not her purpose to trace the intricacies of various, even smallest, manifestations of race as they were depicted by the painters proficient in the patois of Mexico, and in this way recreate the eighteenth century’s obsession with grotesque aspects of the functioning of race in the legal system of New Spain. Condensation of the absurd terms and names in a few lines in part 4 of “Taxonomy” is apparently enough for her assumed purpose, which must be twofold: to cast

a new light on the American system of color, and to rethink her own position in the taxonomy and classification as a mixed-race person. Thus, for Natasha Trethewey looking at the paintings means almost looking in the mirror and reading out of it her own position in the narrative of race, which verges on the (im)purity of lineage.

Yet, the poet's sharp awareness of a personal aspect of the paintings does not mean that Trethewey takes it without reservations, as she combines the personal with the communal, and sees in the paintings "the mind / of the colony" (22) that establishes "the catalog / of mixed bloods" (24), which permits her to decode the castiza child as a fruit of the mother's "womb – / dark cradle / of mixed blood" (22). The title of the four-part poem ("Taxonomy") emphasizes a fundamental feature of any taxonomy, i.e., a need to order, systematize, classify, and name things so that they may be placed in particular groups. In case this purpose escaped a viewer's attention, casta paintings have it written on the canvas in "gold letters inscribing / an equation of blood—*this plus this equals this*" (16). Such a "contract with nature" (16) reads as an introduction to rudiments of eugenics, as the inscription leaves no doubt that two adults (a Spaniard and an Indian woman) can be certain that a sexual intercourse between them, if reproductively successful, will produce a mixed-race child—a mestizo. As a result both parents and the child lose their individuality, or to put it more precisely, their individuality is pushed into the background and becomes of secondary importance or even insignificant since they only represent some larger categories.

Hence, a mulatto boy who "was nothing: blank / canvas – before image or word," after receiving some categorical individualizing traits (i.e., a degree of color) does not become an individual since "a last brush stroke fixed him in his place" (21). As a result, he is merely an example specimen whose existence confirms and illustrates (as he is "fixed in his place") one of the racial categories, which cannot be erased or overcome. The racial divisions expressed by the casta paintings not only help to make the subsequent categories of race less abstract, as the categories become visible, but also set up a fixed hierarchy of racialized lives, the hierarchy that is fundamentally racist from the very beginning, as it excludes by the letter of the law any chance of upward social mobility.

It is interesting that the *casta* paintings refer to the free people rather than slaves, as according to Ford et al., "there is no overt reference to slavery," even though it is "in the condition of slavery that most interracial unions took place, that the first new people of the New World were begotten, and that subsequent intermarriages begot even more 'new people'" (249). Nonetheless, there is no representation of slavery itself in the paintings, since slavery and its social conditions are not the subject of the *castas*, in spite of the fact that "social hierarchy is an underlying part of the series." The subject of these paintings is the offspring of the sexual intercourse of two people of different races. Still, Natasha Trethewey introduces the topic of slavery very briefly, as if through the back door at the very end of part 1 of "Taxonomy":

The servant, still a child, cranes
his neck, turns his face

up toward all of them. He is dark
as history, origin of the word
native: the weight of blood,
a pale mistress on his back,

heavier every year. (18)

Trethewey's implementation of poetry for the purpose of arriving at a more complete concept of race and its relationship with racism which race's role is to validate, is welded with her positioning herself as a biracial person and poet, thrown 'body and discourse' into the complexity of Southern history and the production of race within American culture, a functioning of the one-drop rule included. As Jee Eu Kim acutely observes in her 2011 article:

The one-drop rule defined her as black, but she chose to develop a mixed-race identity that synthesizes blackness and whiteness. Her exploration of racial and regional identities culminates in *Native Guard*, where a self-conscious poet-speaker integrates all aspects of her identity and re-defines southern identity by reading both her personal history and a collective history of southern blacks through the central metaphor of miscegenation. (18)

Such a neatly interwoven combination of the personal, discursive, and historical complexities of race is provided in another ekphrastic poem entitled "Enlightenment," where a brief description of the Thomas Jefferson portrait at Monticello³ serves as the point of departure for deconstructing the issue of race as it has functioned in the United States ever since. Trethewey begins the poem by drawing our attention to a contrast between Jefferson's forehead "white with illumination," and his face "in shadow, / darkened," which contrasts "his bright knowledge" with "its dark subtext" (68) that "[b]y 1805" (i.e., the year when the portrait was painted) Jefferson "was already linked to an affair / with his slave." The verb "linked" suggests that back in 1805 there were already speculations about Jefferson's sexual relationship with his slave Sally Hemings, who gave birth to six children by him. And they have remained speculations since he never admitted to a relationship with her by not making any commentary on the matter, which was widely interpreted by historians as a complete denial of their affair. Thus, a contrast between a bright light of knowledge and the darkness of its subtext has remained maintained,

3 The painting referred to in the poem is the portrait of Thomas Jefferson from 1805, painted by Gilbert Stuart. The portrait is on permanent display at Monticello, and can be seen on the Monticello official website page: <http://www.monticello.org/site/house-and-gardens/jefferson-portrait-gilbert-stuart-painting>

and became a pretext to explore other contradictions readily explained by the poet's white father, who was fascinated with Thomas Jefferson:

The first time I saw the painting, I listened
as my father explained the contradictions:

how Jefferson hated slavery, though – *out*
of necessity, my father said – had to own
slaves; that his moral philosophy meant

he could not have fathered those children:
would have been impossible, my father said. (68–69)

The contradictions around Jefferson were so blatant that the poet's father put all his rhetorical talent into clarifying to his black daughter how come that Jefferson had slaves (despite hating slavery), and why his "moral philosophy" forbade him to have children with a slave. Yet, the oversimplified arguments turn into what I call *racist mansplaining*, as Eric Trethewey not only speaks to his daughter from the position of self-granted authority (as father, an adult, and man), but also as a *white* man talking to a *black* girl, using this privileged position. As a result, Natasha is positioned at the receiving end of his argumentation, which is based on sexism buttressed by unconscious racism. Especially that his eagerness to defend Jefferson's reputation is related to Eric's need to conceal the fact that, as Natasha phrases it, "Jefferson's words made flesh in [her] flesh":

the improvement of the blacks in body
and mind, in the first instance of their mixture
with the whites – or that my father could believe

he's made me *better*. . . (70, emphasis in the original)

The words in italics in the quote above come from Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, where, among other things, he justifies white supremacy, which, translated into a father-daughter relationship, gives Eric a conviction that he "made [her] better". Even though the one-drop rule makes her legally black, in actual fact to him she is a mixed-race child "*in body / and mind*," which means an "*improvement of the black*"; a word "improvement" used willingly and with certainty by one of the intellectual architects of the Enlightenment—a privileged white man holding power, and hence a law maker and definer.

In an interview with Rosemary Magee, Trethewey speaks about a need to revise Jefferson's moral heritage pertaining to his concepts of race and slavery on personal level, which affected

public thinking about both concepts. The poet mentions a “sentence in a letter by [him] that scholars in many ways have intentionally left out,” a sentence which puts in a fundamentally different light “his decision to keep slaves” and preempts the “out of necessity” excuse. As Trethewey points out, it “became quite a money-making venture that made him think, ‘Maybe I should keep them instead.’ That changes the narrative of how we’ve thought about his being troubled about slavery” (Hall 27).

But, as the quotation above from Trethewey’s “Enlightenment” demonstrates, there is also a strong personal, even intimate aspect in her revising of Jefferson’s influence—the possibility that her white father, being so fascinated with Jefferson as a moral hero, might have perceived his mixed-race daughter in racist term. Gaining this awareness becomes equal to the poet’s personal enlightenment. Thus, as she tells Magee, the debates about Jefferson, which she had with her father for years, were both about race in the United States and about the two of them: black daughter and white father, as those things are inseparable.

Still, the question of (im)purity of lineage does not end here in Trethewey’s poem. She introduces her and her father’s second visit to Monticello years later, at a different moment in terms of perception of race in American culture:

Now, we take in how much has changed:
talk of Sally Hemings, someone asking,

How white was she? – parsing the fractions
as if to name what made her worthy
of Jefferson’s attentions: a near-white,

quadroon mistress, not a plain black slave. (70–71)

The intimate relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings turns out to be not a taboo anymore, but becomes part of the official history as the Monticello guide tells it to the visitors. Yet instinctive racism is located-cum-barely-concealed in the language used to address the question of Hemings’s identity, the language which draws on the distinctions that are rooted in the color line thinking and the one-drop rule. The question asked about her by a visitor (i.e., “*How white was she?*” 70) is immediately decoded by the poet, who points out that it may have expressed a hope that Hemings was “a near white, / quadroon mistress, not a plain black slave” (70–71). Clearly, in the eyes of the visitor / an average American, compared to Hemings’s “near white[ness],” “a plain black slave” must always stay inferior; and this very distinction made Hemings “worthy / of Jefferson’s attentions” (70). Thus, even if we take into consideration the fact that the result of these attentions were six children they produced, the astonishment it may cause (as according to Eric Trethewey, “*it would have been impossible,*” 69) is reduced and minimized, like the question of impurity of lineage itself.

Reading Trethewey's ekphrastic poems from her fourth volume, *Thrall*, makes us aware of how complex, multilayered, artificial, and tabooed the issue of race has always been. It also confronts the reader with the question of how it is possible that race, even though it is proven not to exist in the material sense of the word, exercises such a strong influence on social reality, be it in Renaissance Europe, New Spain during the Enlightenment, and the early United States. Trethewey's unique mixed-race perspective equips her with sharp tools with which to revise and deconstruct the category of race and to expose the paradoxes of its functioning in American culture on various levels—personal, discursive, and historical, which turn out to be mutually complementary and inseparable. The insightfulness of Trethewey's observations, especially in her ekphrastic poems from *Thrall*, together with her formal discipline and originality, make her work both aesthetically and morally engaging.

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Hospitality and Exclusion in the Transnational Spa of Saratoga Springs from the Late Nineteenth into the Twentieth Century

Abstract: The spa, understood here as a resort town offering guests a salubrious retreat into an environment simultaneously natural and urbane, operated over much of the nineteenth and into the twentieth as a transnational social space, a heterotopia in which visitors could enjoy a social environment where the rules of society were relaxed and boundaries eased, yet hardly erased. Yet distinctions between groups remained important, while others were excluded entirely. Broad cultural patterns emerged across national boundaries in this period, in Britain, France, German lands or the United States, tempered by local peculiarities of inclusion and exclusion. This paper seeks to explore how hospitality and exclusion were defined and negotiated at Saratoga Springs, New York. Founded around 1800 as an attempt to establish a resort of culture and refinement, Saratoga in its rise to prominence in the nineteenth century sought in some ways to graft class-based European patterns onto a society that saw itself as more open and egalitarian. Instead, in the second half of the nineteenth century it established limits based less in the boundaries of class than in the discourses of race, ethnicity and settler colonialism that endured well into the twentieth. To explore the transnational context, this paper draws comparisons to the German spa of Baden-Baden, a prominent and cosmopolitan destination that, like Saratoga, rose from obscurity to prominence during the same period and served as a site where elites gathered and negotiations of inclusion and exclusion took place outside the English-speaking world. This choice is intentional to highlight the diffuse and truly transnational nature of the culture of spa hospitality in this period.

Keywords: transnational spa, hospitality, heterotopias, Saratoga Springs, Baden-Baden

Over the course of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, inland spas and their seaside counterparts played a significant role as heterotopic spaces, meeting places for encounters between social classes and nationalities where the limits of social boundaries were drawn, tested,

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negotiated, loosened or reinforced, as Lotz-Heumann, Steward and others have shown. While many of these boundaries were rather specific to a given country, work by e.g. Borsay or Ward demonstrate how spa culture was also transnational in nature. Recent scholarship on the spa, likely the result of the boundaries of academic disciplines, tends to focus on either the spa as a transnational European phenomenon² or on North American resorts as part of the process of nation-building, as Mackintosh or Chambers have argued; nevertheless, this transnationality extended across the Atlantic, with a flow of people, ideas and practices that circulated throughout the spa world. These locales, whether Bath, Vichy, Baden-Baden, Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad) or Saratoga Springs, combined local variations with broader patterns recognizable to any spa-goer, be they British, French, German, Austrian, Czech, or from the United States.

Limited in space and scope, the spa can be investigated productively through the lens of hospitality, and not merely because it offered accommodation and services to (mostly paying) guests. Here, one might first think of hospitality as the relationship between host and guest—a social exchange that involves welcoming the outsider. That, of course, is one aspect of the experience. Yet for all their reputation as places where, under more relaxed mores, members of social classes could mingle (while still maintaining decorum), spas were always distant from Derrida's ethics of universal hospitality. Social control remained important, more in accordance with what Derrida understood as the law or politics of hospitality (Germann Molz and Gibson 4–5), adhering to a Kantian concept of hospitality where a guest is “expected to conform to acceptable behaviours with regard to their right to visit” (Lynch et al. 253). This understanding of hospitality, however, when applied to the spa, must be accompanied by the caveat that even such conditional hospitality was extended only to those considered worthy, while others were excluded entirely. To an extent, this judgement over what was deemed ‘acceptable behavior’ can be understood as a reading of cultural capital and habitus, which, according to Bourdieu, “is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classification (*principium divisionis*) of these practices” (Bourdieu 166–67). However, as shall be seen, display of such ‘acceptable behaviors’ were hardly enough, and the boundaries around hospitality and exclusion might also be drawn along racial or ethnic lines, where behavior played little to no role. Thus, where inclusion in the relationship of hospitality can certainly “consolidate structures of relations by symbolically affirming them” (Selwyn 19), similarly, exclusion can also affirm or reinforce those structures.

Resorts in the United States, like their counterparts in Europe, had a role in redrawing and affirming evolving social norms over the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, a period of indisputable social change. The transnational spa seems well-suited to address questions of inclusion in and exclusion from hospitality (in essence, who is allowed in and who is left out,

2 See, for example, the excellent work associated with EU HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area)-funded project, *The European Spa as a Transnational Public Space and Social Metaphor* (2019-2022), presented at <https://www.theeuropeanspa.eu>.

on what grounds and terms). To make this wide topic more approachable, a comparative approach has been chosen, focusing on two relatively similar spas—each regarded as a premier resort in its respective country during the nineteenth century. For the United States, the resort of Saratoga Springs has been selected as the focus of discussion. Located in upstate New York, it was frequently referred to as the “Carlsbad of America” and enjoyed a premier position as a prominent locale for society not just from New York, but from much of the country and even abroad. It serves as a valuable case through which to investigate questions of inclusion and exclusion in the United States. In an attempt to discern which elements and practices might be distinctively American and not simply a local variation of a transnational phenomenon, comparisons will be drawn with the German spa of Baden-Baden. Historically one of what Large calls the ‘Grand Spas of Central Europe’ and, since 2021, one of the eleven UNESCO World Heritage ‘Great Spa Towns of Europe,’ this spa town provides a solid basis for comparison. Selecting an example from outside the English-speaking world highlights the properly transnational nature of spa culture, while also avoiding what might intuitively seem like a more direct connection had the comparison been drawn with a British spa, such as the well-known Bath.

Discussion of the relationships among guests or between hosts and guests can provide valuable insights in more focused studies of spas in a national context; for the purposes of this article, some generalizations are sufficient, as the patterns are broadly similar. One key issue is the creation of a type of spa sociability built upon relative equality. Obviously, the term ‘relative’ is key here—for example, in a German spa like Baden-Baden during this period, as Geisthövel or Fuhs each have argued, it referred to rising middle classes who initially sought to interact with, and in some ways emulate, the upper classes—first tentatively, then more confidently as the century progressed. In a society that thought of itself as more egalitarian, such as the one that the United States aspired to be, as Chambers argues, the boundaries of social class were perhaps less prominent, although hardly invisible. There were complaints as the century progressed that by the last third of the nineteenth century, a certain refinement of old had been lost as the era of railroad-driven mass tourism arrived in Saratoga. These were articulated by none less than Henry James, who lamented in his rather unflattering portrait of Saratoga, first published in *The Nation* in 1870 that “the good old times, [when] it was the chosen resort of none but ‘nice people’” (James 327) had indeed passed. Yet such complaints were hardly unique to Saratoga or the United States; they reflected broader patterns across Europe, where smaller, more exclusive, and generally more refined spa societies gradually gave way—over the course of the nineteenth century—to more socially diverse ones. This transformation was significantly shaped by the expansion of railroads, which made resort travel more accessible to a broader socio-economic spectrum of potential guests, as Walton has demonstrated.

It does not seem out of place to wonder here about Henry James’ remark about “nice people.” While it might be tempting to think that this could be an indication of distress with a new influx of ethnically diverse guests, it is clear from the remainder of James’ essay that what he had in mind here was the general lack of sophistication and refinement, in particular among

the American men (James 330), whom he portrays more like rakish self-made men lacking in the kind of social graces he had found in the British spas of which he was so fond. In a sense, then, James would seem to be bemoaning Saratoga's failure to observe a 'proper' Kantian-type of hospitality, as people exhibiting clearly 'inappropriate' behaviors outside the boundaries of acceptable *habitus* were still welcomed. James seems to have been more distressed by these blurred boundaries of social class than by expressions of ethnic or racial diversity among the guests. Still, he makes two references to Black Americans in his description of Saratoga—specifically, to the presence of 'negro waiters'—in conjunction with terms that reinforce imagery, such as 'lounging' (James 328), 'shuffling,' and 'steamboat-cabin' (James 329) – the latter full of associations with racialized servitude. It is therefore clear that he was not colorblind in his perception of the guests. This does beg the question, though, about the presence of racialized groups within the resort community: were there any Black guests? It is here that the clear distinctiveness of American resorts becomes apparent. This itself is not at all surprising; the contours of inclusion and exclusion, however, are perhaps somewhat less intuitively obvious, and merit a closer look.

Black Americans and other racialized people were important parts of the workforce, both as hotel staff and as independent service providers and owners of small businesses (Salomon Northrop, notably, was a musician in Saratoga), as has been well-documented in studies of American resorts, notably those by Corbett or Armstead. The simplest and most intuitive assumption might be that the guests were, on the whole, white. Yet this was not entirely the case, and the composition of the resort's clientele underwent a process of change beginning in the last third of the nineteenth century. This can be seen as part of the process of racial formation, whereby "[c]oncepts and ideologies of race have shifted over historical time and differ according to the sociohistorical conditions in which race is embedded" (Omi and Winant 13).

As Armstead has shown in her study of Black Americans in Saratoga Springs and Newport, in the antebellum period, racial segregation did not figure prominently in northern resorts. Wealthy northern Black Americans could be found alongside white middle- and upper-class patrons at exclusive resorts, such as prominent Detroit families vacationing on the (still today) quite exclusive Bois Blanc Island, or that "[i]n addition to white patrons, Saratoga Springs, Newport, and Cape May, New Jersey, all drew a black clientele as well" (Armstead 18). This is not to suggest that racial discrimination or animus were absent, far from it, but that the rules of Kantian hospitality applied in some measure to non-white guests. Hospitality could be extended to those with the appropriate cultural capital and the financial means to support a stay.

The turning point came, not surprisingly perhaps, in 1877, the year most often associated with the end of Reconstruction in the South and the opening of the doors to the Jim Crow system of segregation. Yet the effects of this atmosphere that was then more permissive of explicit racism (in spite of the Fourteenth Amendment promising equal protection under the law) were not limited to the South, nor to Black Americans alone. In Saratoga, 1877 is most significant for what was known as the Seligman Affair, which opened the gates to the explicit exclusion

of guests based on their race or ethnicity, regardless of means, cultural habitus or displays of Kantian ‘acceptable behavior.’ More at issue here was the question of racial formation in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Jacobson argues, “it was not altogether clear just where that line ultimately would be drawn” (7) around the boundaries of whiteness, and thus inclusion, as well.

The story of the Seligman Affair, while fairly well-known, bears a brief retelling here. In June 1877, due to a problem with the riverboat he was travelling on with his family, Joseph Seligman needed to make an unplanned stop in Saratoga Springs. Seligman was, in no sense of the word, an ordinary traveler. A prominent financier, he had served as an adviser to several presidential administrations and played a key role in restructuring the Union debt from the Civil War. The details of what specifically transpired on June 14 of that year at the Grand Union Hotel remain somewhat disputed in the literature, but what is clear is that Seligman and his family were denied accommodation at the hotel, and the key factor was the fact that he was Jewish.

According to the report in *The New York Times*, the hotel manager made it quite clear that he was under specific instructions from the new owner of the hotel, Judge Henry Hilton (of no relation to the contemporary hotel chain), to henceforth deny accommodation to Jewish guests, as it was believed that their presence drove away gentile guests, and that was responsible for the recent decline in the popularity of the hotel (“Sensation at Saratoga” 1). That, in fact, was new. Overt discrimination against Jewish guests had not been apparent prior to the Civil War, leading one Southern guest to complain how “half of these people [in Saratoga] are Jews and the other half are snobs” (qtd. in Chambers 219). Hotels in Saratoga generally tended to cater to particular social classes, and for Seligman and many other prominent Jewish guests, the Grand Union Hotel had been appealing precisely because it was not dominated by the established “old money” of the Northeast, but rather was open and welcoming to a breadth of guests with the means to pay for accommodation. Seligman and his family had, in fact, stayed in that very hotel for ten years prior to the incident, meaning they clearly possessed not just the necessary financial but also cultural capital to make them eligible to be welcomed in the spirit of Kantian hospitality. This fact did not escape *The New York Times*, where the second line of the headline read, “New rules of the Grand Union Hotel. No Jews to be admitted. Mr. Seligman the banker and his family turned away” (“Sensation at Saratoga” 1).

A scandal ensued, and until today, there are different interpretations of the actual causes of the incident. To be sure, the backstory was complicated, and there were personal rivalries between Hilton and Seligman. Out of this complex story, some conclude that while antisemitism may have played a role in the incident, it fit more broadly into “a larger battle between old and new money for social control in 1870s America” (Chambers 220). In essence, it was a battle for primacy between the rising new middle classes and the established ‘aristocracy,’ which was not unlike what could be observed in European spas. That certainly was part of the story, and Hilton himself suggested that to be the case in his statement to *The New York Times* on the incident (“Sensation at Saratoga” 1), where he drew a distinction between “Hebrews,” whom he deemed

acceptable, and “Jews,” who were slated for exclusion. In his choice of terms, however, Hilton—and those who followed his reasoning—were assigning different values to these two terms than American Jewish circles did in the nineteenth century. In that usage, “Jew” often connoted an antisemitic caricature of an unworldly European immigrant, while ‘Hebrew’ indicated someone more sophisticated and socially suitable within American society” (Eleff). By this understanding, Seligman would have qualified in the socially acceptable category of ‘Hebrew’, as he had for ten years prior to the incident. Hilton, and subsequent advocates of Jewish exclusion, reduced the definition of ‘acceptable Hebrews’ to families whose ancestry in America traced back to the early colonial period—in effect, “the Jewish equivalent to the Lowells and Cabots, families of noble Puritan stock” (Eleff). All later arrivals into the category of ‘Jews’ were, in his view, those who could—and should—be excluded. In a real sense, Hilton was appropriating for himself, a gentile Anglo-American, the right to decide who a ‘real’ Hebrew or Jew was.

One must wonder to what extent what James had heard in Saratoga in 1870 about the loss of ‘the good old times’ referred not only to nouveau riche Anglo businessmen, but also specifically Jewish ones, regardless of social class or behavior, and whether there was some truth to what hotel manager was reported to have said to Seligman regarding the sentiments of gentile guests. Such questions become less abstract when considered in light of what followed in the years and decades following the Seligman Affair. While there were rather vociferous protests and vehement denunciation of the overt discrimination practiced at the Grand Union Hotel by some, Hilton himself rather accurately predicted what would ensue: his act opened the door to overt discrimination and exclusion of Jewish guests at a much wider range of establishments, so that soon many, if not most “resorts had strict anti-Jewish policies, either explicitly or implicitly enforced” (O’Donovan 271).

This became apparent in the growing struggle against the rise of segregation. It seems important to emphasize here something that should be obvious, namely that the rise of segregation after 1877 in the United States was not a phenomenon limited to the South, but forms of it were practiced in the North and West as well. One area in which Black and Jewish activists grew to become allies was in the fight against exclusion from accommodations in New York, as both were affected by the increasing segregation and exclusion in the state and the region. Outright exclusion of both groups became commonplace by the end of the century, and there were efforts to pass effective legislation that would ban such practices in 1895 against Blacks and in 1913 against Jews (Friss 72). These had become so widespread and overt that in 1907, president of the American Jewish Committee Louis Marshall wrote to New York State Assemblyman Sherman Moreland about widespread advertising practices for resort hotels that boasted of how, as he summarized them, “Hebrew patronage is not solicited or catered to; that Jews are not desired; that there are no Jews, dogs or consumptives” or, most infamously perhaps, how there were “no mosquitos, no malaria, no Jews” (qtd. in Gurock 116).

While civil rights legislation protecting Jewish people did pass in 1913 and was celebrated for a time by optimists as a success, others remained pessimistic about the prospects for

improvement. Both it and the 1895 Civil Rights Act in support of Black Americans fell short of expectations and were circumvented by lawyers refusing to accept civil rights cases, courts that tended to interpret the law quite narrowly, or sometimes simply by proprietors using evasive language—today known as dog whistles—to comply with a narrow interpretation of the law that could stand up in court. The noxious and overt phrases Marshall had described were replaced by “phrases like ‘Gentiles only’ or code words such as ‘Churches nearby,’” so that “the message that Jews were not welcome remained crystal clear” (Friss 90). Similar practices excluded Black Americans. In Saratoga by the early twentieth century, “African-Americans were not welcome in the spa’s hotels, except as employees,” and other facilities remained largely segregated, owing to how, as a 1916 park commission report stated, “many patrons strenuously object[ed]” to integrated facilities (qtd. in Armstead 113). On October 16, 1942, bar owner Edward Sweeney wrote to the organizer of the Yaddo artistic retreat—a letter now preserved in the New York Public Library, though the original is only accessible in person—stating that he would only admit poet Langston Hughes to his bar if Hughes were accompanied by another person, presumably white, from Yaddo (qtd. in Dobrzynski 1). A review of the New York Public Library’s online digital collections reveals that the well-known Green Book contained entries for establishments in Saratoga Springs that welcomed Black patrons from 1937 until its final edition in 1966. While the southern states practiced *de jure* segregation, this is an illustration of how, in northern states, even the existence of appropriate legislation prohibiting discrimination, much like the Fourteenth Amendment itself, was often not sufficient to prevent *de facto* segregation in apparent compliance with the law.

Both the Jewish and the Black communities responded to this discrimination in a similar manner. While civil rights advocacy continued unabated, another response was to simply establish resorts of their own. Consequently, by the turn of the century, predominantly Black resorts such as Idlewild, Michigan, Manhattan Beach in Florida, or Highland Beach in the Chesapeake, developed in part by the family of Frederick Douglass, “emerged as the most trouble-free vacation option for African-Americans” (Armstead 18). Similarly, a variety of Jewish resorts arose as well, ranging from small farmhouses and clusters of bungalows to elaborate resorts, most notably in what became known as the ‘Borscht Belt’ in the Catskill Mountains of New York. Here, within relatively easy travelling distance from the city, Jews were able to “form their own communities where they did not have to feel the sting of Anti-Semitism or anti-immigrant sentiments” (O’Donovan 277). While not giving up the struggle against discrimination, the immediately most effective way to escape widespread hostility and exclusion was to establish their own communities.

It is at this point that a transnational perspective can be brought to bear in order to understand what might be considered ‘particularly American’ within spa culture. When discussing discrimination against racialized others, and in particular against Jewish people, the comparison with the context of Germany might be illuminating (and, potentially, somewhat surprising).

Before entering into that comparison, however, it must be stated at the outset that one cannot— and indeed must not—ever understate or relativize the horrific and genocidal effects

of German antisemitism. Yet, at the same time, the outright evil of the Holocaust should also not be a reason to understate the dangers of forms of antisemitism elsewhere. Richard Frankel cautions in particular about underestimating the virulence and danger of the phenomenon in the United States, arguing after a detailed comparison that “the notion of some kind of exceptionalism in the history of American antisemitism in the first half of the twentieth century no longer holds – that the cases of Germany and the United States are, in fact, comparable” (Frankel 258). The United States, he argues, was not somehow uniquely protected by its liberal tradition, and the degree and character of antisemitism in the two countries prior to the 1930s were similar, with shared ideas and rhetoric. It was, he argues, in the United States that fears of a “Jewish flood” helped usher in immigration restrictions in the 1920s, and that it was there that “everyday social discrimination against Jews achieved a breadth and intensity not seen in Germany until the height of the Third Reich” (Frankel 258)—not to mention its less than ‘liberal’ history of other forms of xenophobia and racialized violence against its own Black and Indigenous peoples. The United States, he concludes, was not exceptional; given different circumstances (the notion of ‘one crisis behind’ in the title of his essay), “a right-wing antisemitic movement gaining power in America and carrying out some kind of violent anti-Jewish campaign” (Frankel 235) was hardly impossible.

It is obviously far beyond the scope of this article to evaluate Frankel’s speculative conclusions. It is possible, however, to follow up on his statement regarding the comparability of everyday antisemitic practices in the spa. These findings might be somewhat surprising. German historian of the Nazi period Frank Bajohr, in his monograph on German spa antisemitism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, found that in the large urbane spas like Baden-Baden and others, resorts comparable in prestige and popularity to Saratoga Springs in the United States, there was, in essence, no systematic exclusion of Jewish guests prior to 1933 (after which, obviously, this rapidly began to change with the arrival of the Nazi regime). Isolated hotels in these spas may have used dog whistles to signal that Jewish guests were not welcome, but these were rather the exception than the rule. The grand spas like Baden-Baden were, in fact, so hospitable to Jewish guests that some smaller resorts, either through conviction or detecting a potential market, came to specialize in an antisemitic, nationalistic clientele and made it explicitly clear that Jewish guests were not welcome at all. Yet the number of such resorts was stable at around some twenty in the 1920s, and despite an increase in the number of establishments that did not accommodate Jews, especially in smaller resorts, the percentage of resort hotels that did so remained low, almost certainly in the single digits (Bajohr 60). By comparison, statistics compiled by the Anti-Defamation League in 1956/57—more than a decade after the end of the Second World War—show that in the Northeast (excluding New York, where the Borscht Belt was thriving), as many as 56% of hotels still excluded Jewish guests, a figure Bajohr suggests is up to fifteen times higher than those that had such prohibitions in Germany prior to 1933 (162–63).

The rather surprising conclusion is that in the United States, discrimination and exclusion were so prevalent that Black and Jewish people found it easiest to establish their own resorts,

a *de facto* segregation regime, sometimes in spite of a law banning such practices. In Germany, prior to the Nazis coming to power in 1933, it seems it was the antisemites who had to move to their own ‘dedicated’ resorts to avoid having to share spaces with people they hated.

So far, the comparison of Saratoga Springs and Baden-Baden has not yielded anything on a larger scale that could not be regarded as distinctively American, and even in its discrimination against racialized others, it was not unique but instead fit into a spectrum in which American resorts can be compared, not necessarily favorably, with spas in other countries. To find something that might be more distinctively characteristic of North American spas, it might be fruitful to examine the role of Indigenous Americans in Saratoga.

Saratoga Springs, like many other resorts in the United States, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, had its own origin story, which can be widely found, but began appearing in print no later than in William Leete Stone’s 1875 *Reminiscences of Saratoga and Ballston*. In the opening pages of this collection of local lore and sketches from “ye Olden Time,” Stone tells of how in 1767, during the French and Indian War, or the North American theater of the Seven Years’ War, Sir William Johnson, a general in British service, was the “first white man” to visit Saratoga Springs (6). Of course, this was not just a visit, but he was in need of healing after suffering a leg wound, and, most importantly, the local Indigenous people chose to share it with him. The phrasing of Stone’s telling of the story should be quoted at greater length. He wrote:

[T]he Mohawks determined, in solemn council, to reveal to their beloved brother, War-ra-ghi-ya-ghy, the particular medicinal properties of the ‘High Rock Spring.’ Nor, perhaps, could there have been any stronger proof of the affection in which he was held by these sons of the forest, than their resolution to give their brother the benefits of that which they had always sacredly guarded as the precious gift to themselves alone from the Great Spirit. (Stone 7)

Later in his reminiscences, Stone tells further stories of how, for example, George Washington visited, how the nearby battleground became a pilgrimage site, the escape of a captive white woman to Saratoga, and other tales leading up to the founding and settlement of the town. The overall course of the progression of the stories is constructed to support the presence of white settlers and their ownership as legitimate, gifted to them (after “solemn council”) with an air of divine providence by the Mohawk people, who conveniently vanish from the story shortly thereafter.

Although Stone’s story of the ‘origins’ of Saratoga might be among the best known, it was hardly an isolated case. In a strategy employed by many spa towns across the United States, imagined origin stories served to create a new identity, separating the colonial settlers from their British origins and replacing it with a ‘transfer’ that made them properly and legitimately “American” (Mackintosh 424–25). The disappearance of the original Indigenous owners was no coincidence; rather, it appears to have been part of what Jean O’Brien (White Earth Ojibwe) has termed “firsting and lasting” in her study of local histories and the erasure of Indigenous peoples in New England. This process entailed creating a narrative of “non-Indian modernity and Indian

extinction” that took shape in communities across the region (O’Brien xiv). Once removed from the historical record and imagined out of existence—despite continuing to be a living presence in the area—Indigenous peoples could then be idealized and instrumentalized in written accounts. For example, an article on the “Sulphur Springs of New York,” published in Harper’s Magazine in 1856, indulged in readings of legends of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) people, whom the author characterized as “the Romans of the Western World” (qtd. in Mackintosh 435). The evocation of Romans both lent a certain gravity to this heritage, even to American republicanism as its heir, and at the same time, it also emphasized that, like the Romans, it belonged to the remote past, a civilization and people that no longer existed.

These represent clear attempts to claim uniquely and distinctively American identity for the resort towns and, by extension, its patrons. This would seem an unlikely area where a transnational approach would bear much fruit other than to confirm the distinctiveness of American spa culture. While the erasure of Indigenous peoples is clearly rooted in the discourses of settler colonialism, the deployment of origin stories reaching into the distant mists of time to lend a spa and its claims to the salubrious power of its waters (Corbett 172) is indeed part of a transnational pattern. Baden-Baden, for example, by the early nineteenth century, tried to make currency of its origin as a Roman town, *Aquae Aureliae*, ‘rediscovering’ the ruins, building new neoclassical facilities, and trying to spin a rather dubious story about the waters being in continuous use, following in a path pioneered by Bath and others in the eighteenth century. Others reached for local legends passed on in the oral tradition, for example, of how the stallion of a king stumbled, opening up the spring with his hoof. Such stories and legends are widespread, but alas, have not (yet) been systematically studied.

That Saratoga and other spa towns reached into the Indigenous past to construct stories supporting their own identities was part of a broader trend in which such towns crafted narratives of ancient origins as a marketing strategy. At the same time, it also represented a distinctly American form of settler-colonial appropriation. Yet beyond questions of appropriation and identity, there is one clear, obvious, and yet, in a way, invisible distinction: there were no Romans in Baden-Baden in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Saratoga Springs, however, throughout much of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth, there was an area known as the Indian encampments on the margins of the resort, something often forgotten today.

These were areas set aside from the main resort areas of Saratoga Springs from ca. 1840–1900, where local Indigenous people were permitted to sell their art and handicrafts to visitors. While an important part of the tourist economy, popular with visitors, they also had their virtues from the perspective of the settler town: “the encampments required no buildings, the workers needed neither a wage nor housing, and thus the attractions were inexpensive to produce” (Corbett 178), although there was sometimes some doubt among visitors as to their authenticity. This sentiment has even made its way into twenty-first-century historical scholarship, where one can read it is “doubtful that more than a handful of nineteenth-century Mohawks were in any sense pure-blooded [*sic*]” (Corbett 179).

Indigenous archaeologist and repatriation specialist Margaret Bruchac (Abenaki), whose great-grandparents sold wares at the encampment (M. M. Bruchac 68), brings a different perspective to the story. It was not that the Abenaki and others participating in the encampments were not genuine, but they seemed inauthentic to visitors owing to their preconceived notions about Indigenous people. One example is a visitor who “described the Native artisans as ‘picturesque’ ... and mistakenly identified the Native people as a ‘gypsy band, part Canadian, part Indian’” (qtd. in M. (Margaret M. Bruchac 29). Others simply had difficulty recognizing the local Indigenous people as “Indians,” as they did not conform to their preconceived expectations. Yet the Indigenous artisans showed considerable resourcefulness and ability to adapt to their clientele. Many dressed in costumes that appeared “real” to non-Indigenous visitors, with a blend of eighteenth-century style clothing combined with Native elements at mid-century, later adopting the stereotypically stylized Western Plains costuming popularized by Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows (an image that remains prevalent to this day). The artwork itself, crafted with great care and pride by Indigenous people, also followed the shifting fashions of the Victorian era (Bruchac, “Native Artisans” 29). For visitors, what was more important here, however, was not the actual encounter with living, working Abenaki, Mohawk or other Indigenous people who had lived in the area for centuries, but the “fantasy images and antiquated tropes” (Bruchac, “Indigenous Journeys” 68) that they had in mind of what a “real” Indian should look like, images that remain persistent, not just in American culture.

While broad conclusions cannot be drawn from such a short examination as this, a few patterns do emerge from examining hospitality in Saratoga Springs in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century within a comparative context with the German spa of Baden-Baden. While it certainly could have been concluded nearly a priori that the approach to hospitality would follow a more Kantian model, and that norms of social class—expressed through cultural habitus and enacted as expectations for behavior in order to receive hospitality—would be operative, this was clearly not the case in an absolute sense. In Saratoga, the social structures reinforced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through exclusion were less class-based, less of an entrenched upper class seeking to defend its territory against incursion from the rising middle classes, but rather a more class-diverse resort society seeking to exclude racialized others. This in itself is not particularly insightful and hardly would have needed any investigation to verify. More interesting are the contours of exclusion that emerge in a comparative context, which can be fairly regarded as more distinctively American. Particularly characteristic is the manner in which members of dominant groups in society assumed the power to define those they excluded. Henry Hilton granting himself the power to discern Jewish identity, in direct contradiction to the way Jewish people in the United States defined themselves at the time, bears a striking resemblance to the visitors to the so-called Indian encampments who felt that they could be the arbiters of what constituted ‘real Indians.’ They did so despite standing face-to-face with people who understood themselves as very real and very much part of the present, indeed, but who did not conform to their imaginations.

Resorts in the United States were certainly not alone in excluding members of their own society who the dominant groups regarded as racialized others; Germany clearly did so as well, as part of a path leading to uniquely horrific consequences. Yet exclusion from American spas—even in New York State, often considered a ‘more enlightened’ part of the country—was more pervasive than in Germany, at least through the 1920s, and these patterns continued in the United States for decades thereafter. Perhaps this can only serve to emphasize Frankel’s admonition about the dangers of an approach to exceptionalist thought that would understate and trivialize the potential harm of such currents in the United States that continue into the present day.

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US *Hostipitality* through the Lens of Chinese American Drama

Abstract: The concept of hospitality at the global level has long been inseparable from the phenomenon of migration as a permanent feature of human history. Academics within different fields of study have used hospitality as a metaphor “to describe the often inhospitable, and even hostile, treatment by the state of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers” (Lynch and al. 15). Jacques Derrida’s portmanteau term ‘hostipitality’ emphasizes that hospitality always entails its opposite (hostility), since acts of hospitality toward some often exclude others. In the dramatic narrative of Chinese experience in the US, both the initial relative hospitality of the 1850s and the swift shift to violent racial politics culminating in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act were rooted in the vicissitudes of global capitalism and America’s expansionist aspirations. This paper explores how these moments of the official (un)welcome are represented in Chinese American drama, aiming to re-memory (and, hence, negotiate) the traumatic past through its stage re-enactment. The discussion focuses on three plays: Genny Lim’s *Paper Angels* (1980), David Henry Hwang’s *FOB* (1980), and Lloyd Suh’s *The Far Country* (2022). Lim’s play relies for its effect upon the unique socio-cultural fact—the poems inscribed by Chinese detainees on the walls of the West Coast immigration center on Angel Island; Hwang scrutinizes the uneasy relational dynamics between second-generation and more recent immigrants; Suh complements the dramatization of the ordeal of passing through strict immigration control with a transcontinental perspective. Each in its own way, the plays seem to bear out Lisa Lowe’s dictum that the emergence of Asian American culture as an alternative cultural site results from the state’s distancing Asian Americans from the terrain of national culture.

Keywords: “hostipitality,” immigration, Angel Island, “paper sons,” Chinese American drama, stage re-enactment

At the global level, the concept of hospitality (commonly understood as the relationship between a host and a guest, wherein the host receives the guest with goodwill and welcome) has long been inseparable from the phenomenon of migration, a permanent feature of human history. In this context, it is “the behaviors of nationstates as political actors towards migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in terms of ethics, human rights and citizenship” (Kunwar and Khanal 1) that come under scholarly scrutiny. Academics within different fields of study have used hospitality

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as a metaphor “to describe the often inhospitable, and even hostile, treatment by the state of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers” (Lynch et al. 15). To stress the fact that hospitality always entails its opposite, hostility, since “acts of hospitality framed as welcoming to some often exclude others” (15), scholars often use Jacques Derrida’s portmanteau term ‘hostipitality’. Derrida draws attention to “the troubling analogy in their common origin between hostis as host and hostis as enemy, between hospitality and hostility” (15), since any act of hospitality requires treating a person as a stranger, distancing them from oneself. So, violence and exclusion characterizing the treatment of unwanted guests “enable us to understand how a discourse of hospitality is often marshalled in support of what are, in reality, failures of hospitality” (Lynch et al. 15).

In the woeful narrative of Chinese experiences in the US, both the relative hospitality of the 1850s and the swift shift to violent racial politics culminating in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act were rooted in the vicissitudes of global capitalism and America’s expansionist aspirations. While the business elites welcomed the arrival of Chinese immigrants as a condition *sine qua non* for their own penetration of Chinese markets, the grass-roots white hostility exacerbated by racial prejudice saw them as dangerous competitors for jobs and a threat to the nation’s ‘moral integrity’. Manifold anxieties of the US nation-state construed “Asian laborers immigrating to the United States from the nineteenth century onward as a ‘yellow peril’ threatening to displace white European immigrants” (Lowe 4). As a result, Lew-Williams argues, through a continuous process of exclusion at the local, national, and international levels, “the Chinese migrant became a quintessential alien in America by the turn of the twentieth century” (8). Constructed as a race of aliens, Orientals represented a danger of pollution based on the concept of the alien as “a polluting body perceived to be out of place” (Lee 2).

This article explores how the acts of the official and public (un)welcome are represented in Chinese American drama, aiming to re-memory (and, hence, negotiate) the traumatic past through its stage re-enactments. Focusing on crucial topoi in early Chinese American history (the Angel Island Immigration Center, “paper sons,” interrogation scenes) this drama speaks eloquently to the present because “the ‘common understanding’ that Asians are an alien presence in the America, no matter how long they may have resided in the United States nor how assimilated they are, is still prevalent in American culture” (Lee 4).

One of the playwrights discussed in the article, Lloyd Suh, defined his aim in writing a play on early Chinese American history as proving how “memory becomes hereditary because of the way it lives in the body” (qtd. in Morgan 3). A character in his play articulates the same idea:

Even if you forget for a moment, you cannot long forget the pain, because the body remembers. Your body remembers, it is in your hands, your calloused hands, it is in your legs, your tired legs, it is in your back, your unbendable back grown uncommonly strong from all it has carried. And it’s in their [her children’s] bodies too. The pain is there, it’s in their blood and in their hearts, it’s in their memory too because it all passes down, if I know anything from motherhood I know this, that everything we are, everything, it passes down. (Suh 80)

The role of physical and/or psychological trauma as a potent memory intensifier has long been discussed in memory studies. As early as 1887, Friedrich Nietzsche observed that “pain is the most powerful aid to mnemonics” because “only something that continues to hurt stays in the memory” (38). Contemporary inquiry in the field of cultural memory studies positions the traumatized body as an immediate surface for encrypting the lived experience (Assmann 252). The anthropologist Valery Podoroga links the emergence of individual and group identity to “numerous mnesic traces left on human bodies” (24). From this perspective, the traumatic experiences of early Chinese immigrants embodied on the present-day stage contribute to stabilizing their group memories.

At the same time, theoreticians of hospitality stress that “(t)he power relations embedded in the hospitality encounter are often negotiated around embodied markers of difference, such as race, class, gender, sexuality and age, which intersect to shape the practice of hospitality (or hostility) in distinct ways” (Lynch et al.15). Racialized (in this case, Orientalized) bodies bear cultural meaning, where “yellowface marks the Oriental as indelibly alien” (Lee 2). Thus, theater, with its emphasis on actors’ and audience’s physical presence, appears the perfect medium for revitalizing embodied memories. As the leading expert on theatre theory Patrice Pavis observes, “the actor is the ultimate spokesman of the dramatist and director since he speaks the text by incarnating it on stage and conveying it through his body” (Pavis 99). Still, “(a)ny symbolization or semiotization [on stage] runs up against the difficult-to-codify presence of the actor’s body and voice” (34). Multiracial bodies bringing long-neglected Chinese American history to life on 21st-century US stages are instrumental in reviving the past so that it might meaningfully speak to the present.

Even though anti-Asian/anti-Chinese sentiments had persisted in the US for a long time, taking many shapes, the article focuses primarily on the initial stage of newcomers’ sojourn in the foreign physical, cultural and mental space. The chronotope² of transition/border-crossing may be described as “pausing on the threshold,” a liminal state, a sort of a limbo, where an individual is subject to transfiguration into a new persona, still retaining many characteristics of the old one. When one first sets foot on the strange territory, the signs of (in)hospitality extended to them as (un)desirable aliens leave the deepest mark on their psyche largely determining the modes for their future interactions with the new environment (social, economic, cultural, and psychological). Due to specific historical circumstances, for Chinese Americans the limbo tended to turn into a purgatory or even an inferno. The discussion focuses on three plays capturing the Chinese immigrants’ first encounters with America: Genny Lim’s *Paper Angels* (1980), David Henry Hwang’s *FOB* (1980), and Lloyd Suh’s *The Far Country* (2022).

The plays, understandably, have many similarities as they all thematize, among other issues, the traumatic arrival of Chinese immigrants in the New World. The dramatists share basic feelings permeating their plays—the indignation with US “hostipitality” towards Asians, sympathy

2 The term introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin to define “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84).

and empathy with the Chinese men and women exposed to degrading immigration practices, pride in the Chinese American community's resilience and vitality, and anxiety about its future in the conflict-torn America of today and tomorrow. By seeing his play "as part of our country's current reckoning with its complex history," Suh may be expressing a view held by all three dramatists. Explaining the relevance of historical plays for our time, he refers to them as "part of our accounting on where we've been as a culture, and where we might go from there" (qtd. in Ellis). For Genny Lim, herself a daughter of former detainees, working with this material became a deeply personal experience providing insights into her family history. Before delving into the story of the Angel Island she did not understand her parents' reluctance to talk about their background that made her feel alienated from them. Getting to understand what they had to go through became a bonding experience for her (12). Hwang, in his turn, is intent on inscribing his play into Asian American literary tradition. In the Playwright's Note preceding *FOB*, he assures his readers that the roots of the play are thoroughly American, it being inspired by two figures of American literature: Fa Mu Lan, the girl who takes her father's place in battle, from Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, and Gwan Gung, the god of fighters and writers (and, he adds, the adopted god of Chinese America), from Frank Chin's *Gee, Pop* (both dating back to 1976). For Hwang, "these books testify to the existence of an Asian-American literary tradition" (6). This statement bears out Lisa Lowe's dictum about the emergence of Asian American culture as an alternative cultural site resulting from the state's distancing Asian Americans from the terrain of national culture (176), while at the same time seems to have been written somewhat tongue-in-cheek since instead of being "thoroughly American" these origins testify to the hybrid nature of Chinese American cultural tradition.

In terms of differences, the three plays differ in their plots, perspectives, dramatic techniques, and idiosyncratic styles. Based on historical evidence and written in the wake of the sensational discovery of Angel Island graffiti poetry, Lim's *Paper Angels* provides broad strokes of the Chinese experience in the immigration center. The author is straightforward in her depiction of the Center's daily routine, reconstructed from period sources and oral histories, in short, naturalistic scenes alternating with more symbolic sequences in which the characters give voice to their thoughts and emotions. The motley array of characters differing in age, gender and life stories are fictional, but as a group they stand for the whole body of Chinese immigrants. For this reason, the playwright is not so much concerned with spelling out peculiarities in individual behaviors and mentality, as with presenting a plausible socio-psychological cross-sectional portrayal of the Chinese migrant contingent in the early 20th century. The collective protagonist of the play includes four male and three female Chinese characters opposed by the white American figures of the inspector, the warden, and the guard embodying the unfriendly receiving end of the immigration process. Unlike Chinese detainees, American civil servants are devoid of names and are treated as impersonal instruments of state power. The *dramatis personae* list is completed by two intermediate characters—a Chinese American Christian convert acting as an interpreter ("sympathetic to the immigrants," but loyal to her job), and a white Methodist female missionary

“fanatically determined to eradicate heathenism and prostitution” among Chinese women (Lim 18–19). The play follows the stories of detainees, some ending in tragedy, others with relatively ‘happy ends’ as their protagonists gain admission to the US.

FOB, David Henry Hwang’s first play, is a more imaginative piece of drama than Lim’s play, featuring only three characters and engaging with Chinese (American) mythology. Its exploration of in-group conflicts within the Chinese American community also encapsulates its unofficial history in a series of brief flashes, corroborating Lisa Lowe’s vision of Asian American culture as “an alternative site where the palimpsest of lost memories is reinvented, histories are fractured and retraced, and the unlike varieties of silence emerge into articulacy” (6). In the play’s contemporary (or rather timeless) scenes, characters’ identities oscillate between down-to-earth, quotidian selves and their mythological counterparts, thereby enhancing the significance of Chinese American elements in the US cultural fabric.

Lloyd Suh supplements the arrival story with spatial and temporal extensions. The action takes place not only in the US but also in China, where the “new” Americans of Chinese descent return home to recruit additional volunteers for the trans-Pacific crossing. To pay their debt for the help in becoming Americans, Chinese peasants brought to the verge of extreme poverty actually agreed to become indentured laborers to their “benefactors”—even with this arrangement in place, the money they could still send their families would be enormous as compared to what could be earned at home. The last of the play’s three acts presents a leap in time, set in San Francisco Chinatown in the 1930s, so that we can trace the fates of the characters forcefully brought together by the prerequisites of the US restrictive legislation.

All the plays engage in language games, playing, in particular, upon the bilingual situation that unfolds during interrogations. Much of the dialogue in *Paper Angels* is in Chinese, and interrogations often include onstage interpretation. This technique serves to expose the audience to a strange language, defamiliarize the scene, and stress the cultural singularity of Chinese immigrants. Lloyd Suh renders the interpretive process without recourse to Chinese by having his characters repeat what is said twice to simulate interpretation. Instead, he uses Chinese characters in writing to denote Chinese names. Hwang relies upon a different strategy: *FOB* contains only a few Chinese words and notions (chong you bing, da dao and mao, Gwan Gung, Mei Guo (“Beautiful country,” a Chinese name for America)). His linguistic prowess, however, is evident in the way his character, Steve, switches between varieties of English (as will be discussed later). The playwrights also demonstrate America’s linguistic “hostipitality” towards Asians through racial slurs (chink, slant, gook), demeaning the Chinese Other out of antipathy, fear, or deeply seated anxiety about white superiority.

Hospitality as a Tool of Social Control

The main feature three plays have in common is that they are all dealing (to various extents) with the point of entry where the American adventure started for many Chinese immigrants – the Angel Island West Coast Immigration Center, densely mythologized in Asian American cultural history.

The action in Lim's play is confined within the walls of the center; in Hwang's *FOB*, it appears in a single scene; and Lloyd Suh uses this setting for two scenes in Act I and an episode in Act 2. The entrance scenes are set in 1915 (*Paper Sons*), 1909/1910 (*Far Country*), and an indeterminate historical moment in *FOB*, with a clear understanding that the Chinese Exclusion Act was already in force. This period saw the transmogrification of the original American hospitality towards Asian immigrants into more or less overt hostility. Stating that "America was originally eager for Chinese immigrants," Michael Luo asks, "What happened to change this positive attitude into violence and bigotry?" (Luo). The complex answers provided by interdisciplinary scholars take into account economic, social, racial, and cultural factors ranging from perceiving "the coolie race" as competitors for jobs with potential upward mobility to objecting against "yellow peril" on the grounds of Chinese ostensible moral degeneracy. As Mae Ngai explains in her book, the "Chinese question" as an epitome of racial politics was whether Chinese were a racial threat to white, Anglo-American countries, and should Chinese be barred from them (Ngai). At the same time, Beth Lew-Williams claims that "(t)he Chinese entered America as migrants and were made into aliens, in law and society" (Lew-Williams 8).

In her pioneering *Paper Angels*, Lim takes pains to lay bare the attitudes towards Chinese immigrants prevalent in the early 20th-century USA by giving the floor to people supposed to administer hospitality to them during their first steps upon the American soil. In striking contrast to 1850, San Francisco authorities extended a hearty welcome to a small group of Chinese immigrants (see Luo). Representatives of state power in the play find their duties as "hosts" increasingly irksome, and their uninvited "guests" less than agreeable. While the Inspector enjoys his sense of power and is ideologically motivated by what he deems his "personal mission to stem the Yellow Peril," the Warden is just "trapped in the system" feeling "frustrated by his dead-end position," and the Guard is "a working-class redneck who hates his job," who takes his prisoners' hostility personally and abuses his power (Lim 18). Their life credos are revealed not solely in their interactions with detainees but also in soliloquies that alternate with multi-person scenes in the play's architectonics. In scene 6, Inspector seems to address the inmates standing in their dorms but they are "suspended in time" and all but "inanimate"—dehumanized and objectified:

The Chinese question. It's my guess that a good 95 percent of the Chinamen coming through here are bogus. That's right. They come thinking they can pull the wool over the white man's eyes, figuring we can't tell 'em one apart from the other. And you know, for the most part you can't! But I give 'em a run for their money. It's like outwitting a fox. (story of a smart boy). But the law is the law. I have my job to do. You've got to have a system! Because if you don't, they'll take advantage and next thing you know, not only will you have droves of illegal aliens swarming into the country, but they'll be bringing about their wives, children, sundry aunts, uncles, and relatives, not to mention the little yellow ones they'll be propagating all over the US. I mean you've got to be systematic about it. If they are coming fraudulently, we've got to do our best to keep them out! (Lim 37)

The Guard Henderson acts as a mouthpiece for the uneducated and prejudiced populace segment whose resentment of “the chinks” is visceral rather than rational (scene 8):

I’ve been on this island ever since it opened in 1910. I’m so sick of Chinamen. I could put a match to this place! Every time I walk into this stinking room I feel a hundred slanted eyes boring into me like skewers. I know they despise me—because I despise them. They’d kill me if they could. One of these days they just might try.

If I had my way, I’d ship the whole lot of ‘em back to China. Goddamit, America is for Americans, they don’t belong here, if they keep coming there will be no jobs left for decent men. We’ve got to protect what’s ours. The Chinamen will take what they can get. Do you think they give a damn about our country? Do you think they’d fight for Uncle Sam? Hell, no. If they want our jobs now, what do you think they’ll want next? Our homes, our land, our money, our women? I got a daughter, you know? She’s the most precious thing I got in this world. If any slimey Chink ever laid a hand on her, I’d cut off his balls! (43)

It was the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 that necessitated establishing an immigration facility on the scale of the Angel Island Center. The Act was the first document in American history to place broad restrictions on immigration, thus running counter to the democratic principles of free trade and free labor. Plus, it was the first to target a specific ethnic and national group. Since only a few categories of Chinese entrants (such as diplomats, clergy, students, and merchants,) were exempt from the Act’s pronouncements excluding Chinese laborers from entering the US for the period of 10 years (later extended *ad infinitum*), the state needed a working system for filtering and curbing the growing contingent of new arrivals so as to let only the “desirable aliens” through the mesh. The internment facility on Angel Island was established in 1910 expressly to enforce the Act. The system’s more or less smooth operation over three decades attested to efficient, though pretty inhumane, solution to this problem. The isolated location virtually excluded escapes; any communication with the outer world was forbidden; new arrivals were sorted out according to nationality; male and female detainees were kept separately; strict health control was implemented; and, last but not least, grueling interrogations were an integral part of the admission process. The detention period might have lasted from several weeks to several months or even years if the evidence the authorities wanted was hard to get and often ended in the applicant’s deportation back to China.

Both Lim and Suh address the abominable physical conditions in the Center, emphasizing its unsuitability for human beings. Lim does so through a fragment from a real-life document (an official report) quoted in her play:

The lavatories and toilet rooms are poorly ventilated. The floors have no drains and the wood-work is soaked with urine and fecal matter. . . . The offensive smell in the rooms is a sufficient

proof that they are failures from a sanitary standpoint. The amount of air space in these rooms is totally inadequate for the number of berths therein The windows are barred and locked and there is only one exit for all the dormitories. Built of most inflammable material, destruction of the building in the case of a fire would be a question of minutes. In a comparatively short time these rooms will be unfit for living by reason of vermin and stench. (Lim 46)

In the text of *Far Country*, the unsavory details surface during the dynamic exchange among several characters—former detainees, most of them unnamed, set somewhere in “liminal space”: The southernmost room on the second floor is for men; it can hold as many as 144 men, but often holds more than that, typically all Chinese, all men” (Suh 37); “in the men’s barracks there are twelve poles, with twelve beds attached to each pole . . . Four beds below, four beds in the middle, four beds on the top . . . The outdoor recreation area is enclosed by barbed wire fencing . . . Armed sentries are posted at guard towers on either side” (38). The intentionally factual descriptions stripped of any emotions evoke an image of a depersonalized prison or, rather, Bentham’s/Foucault’s Panopticon as a vital component of the state’s disciplinary system of surveillance and punishment.

Of still worse nature, though, was psychological damage inflicted upon the detainees that thwarted Chinese Americans’ quest for a wholesome identity—a challenge for all migrants. Any construction of identity, Sheng-Mei Ma remarks concerning Asian Americans, “requires a reconfiguration, sometimes rather violently, of one’s psyche and history” (Ma xi). Due to unique (and tragic) historical circumstances attending the formation of this ethno-national community, the shaping of Chinese American identities was subject to especially grave trials. As is well known, any action is bound to provoke a reaction. It is no wonder, then, that immediately upon the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act, would-be immigrants started to seek ways to bypass its restrictions. This abnormal situation gave rise to the phenomenon of “paper sons,” that is, persons who assumed false identities to pass as blood relatives of legal resident Chinese Americans and thus gain entry into the country. With this end in view, thousands of Chinese peasants and laborers had to leave behind their past, commit to memory new elaborate biographies, and, therefore, ironically, become the genuine “new Adams” in America, thus fulfilling the Pilgrim Fathers’ prophecies in an unforeseen manner. Stephen Sumida observes that in this process, “the relationships of the parties were literary creations,” initiating the genre of autobiography in the nascent Asian American literature (Sumida 401). The 1906 San Francisco earthquake and ensuing fire destroyed the main body of the city records, further contributing to this practice and opening a loophole through which many Chinese entered (Takaki 79–131). For reasons of security, in many cases the deception had to be held on to for the rest of immigrants’ lives. Their former identities had to be buried, and, as a result, “the real family histories of ‘paper sons and fathers’ . . . are often difficult if not impossible for their descendants to tell” (Ibid.) The loss of their true identities pursued Chinese Americans for generations, intensifying their confusion and misfortune caused by socio-economic pressures and discrimination.

The need to create a fictional identity for strategic purposes is an issue for all the three dramatists. Looking back at this crucial moment in the history of Chinese America from the distance of many decades, the playwrights emphasize its devastating impact on the victims. Lim's and Suh's dramatic pieces draw largely upon the "paper relationships" phenomenon, with the title of Lim's play directly alluding to it (*Paper Angels*). She has one of her characters, Lee the poet, directly express his outrage at the necessity to enter the land of his dreams under false pretenses: "I am Lee Sung Fei, not this Moi Fook Sing or whatever his name is! I am from Shekki not Sunning, I am a scholar not a merchant's son!" (Lim 22). Another inmate's bitter comment exposes geopolitical realities underlying this humiliating practice: "If China wasn't so weak, we wouldn't be excluded from coming. We wouldn't have to be paper sons" (21).

In *Far Country*, the trope of a fake identity underlies the plot, enabling the main characters (first Gee, and then Moon Gyet) to turn it into a source of profit by virtually "selling their names" to their poor compatriots desperate for a new chance in America. It is done, though, at a high cost to their own self-respect and dignity. The character of Moon Gyet's mother, Low, a Chinese farmer, acts as a mouthpiece of indignation and protest against this breach of any human being's birthright to ancestry, name, and identity. When approached by Gee with the proposal to take her son to the United States as his "paper son," she responds: "Do not assume that everyone wants to go to America; some of us have pride in where we come from, pride in our names, we do not sell them to strangers or trade them for another, some of us find dignity in knowing we will be buried in the same ground we were born from" (Suh 17). The family's desperate condition compels her to agree, but when Moon Gyet, in his turn, comes back on the same errand, Low declares that she has no future and no son who has sold his name. Her son, however, succeeds in convincing her that he honors and cherishes his name, but has to make this sacrifice for the sake of the future. He finds his dignity in "what he is prepared to sacrifice for a dream of the future." "I know my name," he claims, "even as I keep it unspoken. I am your son. You are my mother. And I do have a future if you will let me finish my work" (60).

Hwang demonstrates the detrimental effect of enforced refusal from one's identity through Dale, a Westernized Chinese American, suffering from an inferiority complex and portrayed with bitter irony verging on grotesque. Referring to his parents (first-generation immigrants) as "yellow ghosts," Dale blames them for trying to cage him up with "Chineseness when all the time we were in America. So I've had to work real hard—real hard—to be myself. To not be a Chinese, a yellow, a slant, a gook. *To be just a human being, like everyone else.* I've paid my dues. And that's why I'm much better now. I'm making it, you know? I'm making it in America" (Hwang 33, emphasis added).

Obviously, Dale accepts the WASP identity as a norm, and being Chinese as a deviation from it. This dichotomy was summarized by the doyenne of Asian American literary studies Elaine Kim as the "nonchoice" offered to Asian Americans by the dominant culture—"between being either different and inferior or the same and invisible, between eternal alien and assimilated mascot" (xi). Until the naturalness of whiteness was called into question over the past decades,

it was the view imposed by Eurocentric America upon its multiracial and multiethnic populations. As Valerie Babb remarks in her 1998 study *Whiteness Visible*, “like other racial categories, whiteness is . . . largely an invented construct blending history, culture, assumptions, and attitudes” (10). However, it did not emerge as a value-neutral concept: as it took shape, it drew heavily on hierarchical binaries (civilized/savage, Christian/pagan, free/enslaved), with “white” characteristics increasingly associated with the first, privileged members of these oppositions. Positioning universal (positive) human qualities as racial traits possessed exclusively by whites through recurrent verbal and visual representations concurrently denied non-whites their basic humanity. Early 20th-century immigration practices that included depriving Chinese entrants of their identities helped perpetuate this damaging fallacy.

Dave’s faulty identity exemplifies the stratification of Chinese Americans, with second generation immigrants looking down upon newcomers. American “hostipitality” here assumes the form of internalization of anti-Oriental and sexist prejudice and vicious stereotypes by “established” Chinese Americans. Hwang’s play starts with Dave’s metatheatrical explication of its title:

F-O-B. Fresh Off the Boat. FOB. What words can you think of that characterize the FOB? Clumsy, ugly, greasy. FOB. Loud, stupid, four-eyed FOB. Big feet. Horny. . . High-water pants. Floods, to be exact. Someone you wouldn’t want your sister to marry. If you are a sister, someone you wouldn’t want to marry. That assumes we’re talking about boy FOBs, of course. But girl FOBs aren’t really as . . . FOBish. Boy FOBs are the worst, the pits. They are the sworn enemies of all ABS—oh, that’s “American Born Chinese”—of all ABC girls. (Hwang 7)

When the new immigrant Steve is trying to find out the meaning of FOB, Dave replies: “It means you. You know how, if you go to a fish store or something, they have the stuff that just came in that day? Well, so have you” (20). To Steve’s inability to understand his metaphor, Dave retorts: “Forget it. That’s part of what makes you one” (29). The last scene of the play mirrors the first one, attesting to the longevity and vitality of internalized white middle-class racial and cultural norms within US minorities.

Concomitantly, contemporary perspective allows for charting the trajectories taken by Chinese American communities to survive and overcome the trauma of lost identity. *Paper Sons*, limited in its temporal and spatial span to ‘now and here’ (the Angel Island Immigration Center in 1915), provides but glimpses of the detainees’ possible futures in the land of promises. Hwang’s play capitalizes upon the trope of performed/enacted identity by presenting the protean nature of one of its protagonists as an advantage in the immigrants’ struggle for survival. Steve is capable of donning different masks, speaking in various voices, and becoming many things – from a fresh-off-the-boat immigrant of the title to all other Chinese American avatars and to the mythic Gwan Gung (the warrior god of Chinese folklore and “the adopted god of Chinese America” [Hwang 6]). He thus becomes an archetypal incarnation of Chinese immigrant experience over decades (from a scene set in China with “white ghosts” promising gold to poor peasants, to

an episode with parents making a young man go to America, to the Angel Island interrogation, and to a scene depicting poverty, starvation and depredations in the US). No wonder that Steve claims “having been here before, many times. This time, I said I will have it easy. I will come as no Chinaman before—on a plane, with money and rank.—And?—And—there is no change. I am still treated like this! This land . . . has no right. I AM GWAN GUNG! (48). Steve’s metaphorphoses are linguistically reinforced by shifts in his speech registers, from poetic and brutal language of mythology, to correct standard American English, and to broken English (stereo)typical of fresh-off-the-boat immigrants. His gaining upper hand at the play’s end symbolizes Chinese Americans’ capability of surviving and prevailing against terrible odds

Suh incorporates a vision of the future into his play’s orbit, with its last act set in 1930 San Francisco Chinatown. It focuses on the “paper” family’s resilience in their commitment to creating a future for their progeny by prioritizing inter-generational ties and determination to pass over to the children not only their fake names, but – which is of much greater consequence – their true notions of themselves. Both Moon Gyet’s and his (at first “paper,” then actual) wife Yuen’s decision to have children who could do what their parents could not, signals the play’s orientation towards the future heralded by Yuen’s fertility. In response to Gee’s repeated pronouncement that “names are important” (Suh 78), she is determined to find the right balance between telling her girls the truth and inventing their future so that they would carry on their collective memories, both familial and ethnic.

Interrogation as the ‘Primal Scene’ in Chinese Immigrants’ American Experience

The authenticity of the immigrants’ fictive life stories was subject to testing during long-lasting and excruciating interrogations at the Angel Island Immigration Center. To cheat the interrogators’ intent on exposing their lies, prospective immigrants had to memorize every minute detail of their new biographies so as not to be found out and deported back to China. As Stephen Sumida specifies, one member of the “family” would be interrogated at the Angel Island, while the other would be summoned out of detention and asked the same questions to verify that his answers match the first one’s (401). In addition to routine inquiries about the extended family’s names, ages, addresses, and trades the officials would ask “about the details of daily life in China” (401, for instance, “On what days of the week and month is the village marketplace open? What direction does the market face?” (401), or, as in Lim’s play, “How many steps are there leading to your doorstep?” (The same question is reiterated in Lloyd Suh’s *Far Country*). The three plays under discussion contain several scenes of interrogation exemplifying this exhausting and humiliating procedure, but treat them by means of varied dramatic techniques.

Genny Lim, the first Chinese American playwright to dramatize the Angel Island story, wrote *Paper Angels* under the immediate impression of the then recent sensational discovery of the unique socio-cultural phenomenon—the hieroglyphic poems written and carved by Chinese detainees on the walls of the West Coast immigration center on Angel Island in San Francisco

Harbor. Regarded today as the earliest samples of Chinese American literature, these poems recorded the hopes and frustrations, disappointment, and anger of the people awaiting the decision of the US immigration service. The story of their discovery in 1970, followed by the efforts of, first and foremost, Asian American communities to bring them to light as part of the national historic and cultural heritage, has since become widely known. Lim, a poet, performer, and civic activist, was involved in achieving this goal as a co-editor of the book *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940* (1980; updated and expanded edition, 2014), widely regarded as the finest and most comprehensive source on the subject. A few of the poems, along with fragments from official records and interviews, were incorporated into her play, written in the wake of these events. The title of the play contains multiple allusions.

To begin with, it implies the concept of “paper sons” discussed above. The word “angel” refers, first of all, to the name of the island; however, it may be also interpreted as a tribute to thousands of Chinese immigrants who have suffered and sometimes died there, with their spirits haunting the premises. It makes even more sense as an opposite to “white ghosts”—a common phrase to denote Euro-Americans in Asian American popular culture. Finally, due to a curious coincidence, there is still another Angel(l) in this story—an American diplomat who gave his name to the 1880 Treaty with China restricting, but not completely prohibiting Chinese immigration to the US, known as the Angell Treaty.

The play’s primarily documentary nature proves Lim’s intention to make it a revelation for the American public regarding the dramatic early period in Chinese American history, which was very little known in the 1980s outside the Chinese American community. Therefore, interrogation scenes in the play keep close to facts, aiming at outlining for the readers/audience members the extent of inhumaneness, cruelty, and absurdity to which Chinese immigrants were subjected as a primary act of “hospitality” in their new (step)motherland.

Lloyd Suh begins his play with special thanks to Genny Lim and her colleagues, who “made it their life’s work to uncover and document and share this history” (Suh n/p). Not only does he, in turn, include excerpts from the Angel Island poetry in his text, but he also acknowledges his broader indebtedness to Lim, thereby ensuring continuity between older and younger generations of Chinese American artists. His treatment of interrogation scenes is more nuanced. In particular, he demonstrates differences between the interrogation of Gee, which took place in 1909, before the Angel Island facility was put into operation, and the interrogation of his “paper son,” Moon Gyet, two years later, within the center. The first scene, though presented as strictly formal and replete with racial stereotypes, adopts a more humane attitude toward the interrogee. The white interrogator has a name (Harriwell) to demonstrate his humanity; he is not devoid of a sense of humor, the (Chinese) interpreter tries to help, and Gee, who is a “paper son” himself, passes the test with relative ease. On the contrary, Moon Gyet’s interrogations demonstrate that the institutionalization of the procedure at the Angel Island center deprived it of any human dimensions. The interrogator is nameless; he is just an Inspector, a cog in the state mechanism. The interpreter is also a Euro-American male (Chinese interpreters were banned

from the center). The questions are not only absurd and repetitive, but sadistically mocking, Jesuitical, and casuistic. They relentlessly bombard the detainee, so that the whole scene acquires a distinctly Kafkaesque quality (or else Ionesco's absurd drama). As becomes clear later, Moon Gyet has to spend seventeen long months on Angel Island before he is admitted into the "promised land." By hyperbolizing the absurdity and lending the scene its surreal atmosphere, the playwright draws attention to the inhumanity of the immigration disciplinary machine, turning its Chinese "raw material" into subaltern subjects.

Though written much earlier, David H. Hwang's play relies on a similar technique, carrying the caricature ad absurdum. In an episode of *FOB*, the dramatist has Steve, his Proteus-like protagonist, present his grotesquely exaggerated evidence before an imaginary panel of interrogators. Claiming that he had been rejected entrance four times already, he pleads with them to listen to him: "I tell you both my parents, I tell you their parents, I tell you their parents' parents and who was adopted great granduncle. I tell you how many beggars in hometown and name of their blind dogs. I tell you number of steps from my front door to temple, to well, to governor house, to fields, to whorehouse, to fifth cousin inn, to eighth neighbor toilet . . ." (Hwang 21).

Remarkably, it was not only the refusal to provide answers or the lack of correspondence in "father's" and "son's" testimony that might have caused the denial of admission. The prospective immigrants' ability to answer glibly also raised suspicion, signaling their possible reliance on so-called coaching books or papers containing the material to be memorized. With demand generating supply, such "cribs" providing helpful information to prospective immigrants appeared in abundance and were widely circulated among detainees. Naturally, they were strictly banned in the Center, and their users, transmitters, or carriers were subject to sanctions up to deportation. Both Lim and Suh acknowledge this practice in their plays. In *Paper Sons*, keeping a coaching book causes a conflict between the warden and a detainee with grave consequences to the latter. Suh's character Moon Gyet implies their existence, enumerating the trials in store for him if he wants to make a new start:

I know I must study and memorize documents. A biography. A map. Exacting details that you will provide of the person I am to be, and that I must internalize them all without error, so they are as familiar to me as my memories, my feelings, and my dreams. I know that I must recount these details perfectly, to men on the other side of the world, who will test me with their utmost power. (Suh 23)

In conclusion, it can be asserted that the early history of Chinese Americans is exceptionally rich in human drama, stemming from its unique circumstances which have a direct impact on the hospitality industry in the United States. When describing the lexicon associated with hospitality, Jacques Derrida cites the most frequently used words as "invite," "welcome," and "receive "at home,"" with the host regarded as "master of one's own home and the threshold" (6). As illustrated by the history of Chinese America, these words have been operative within

relevant discourse; however, their meanings have undergone significant transformations, at times reversing their original connotations. This reversal of positive connotations justifies the adoption of the ambiguous term “hostipitality.” The plays discussed earlier address this phenomenon as it manifested in real life.

The phase of American “invitation,” that is, the recruitment of cheap Chinese labor force without any rights or social guarantees, figures in each of the plays, and is well exemplified in a passage from Hwang’s *FOB*:

Yes, I will go to America. “Mei Guo”. The white ghosts came into the harbor today. They promised that they would bring us to America, and that in America we would never want for anything. One white ghost told us how the streets are paved with diamonds, how the land is so rich that pieces of gold lie on the road, and the worker-devils consider them too insignificant even to bend down for. They told us of a land where there are no storms, no snow, but sunshine and warmth all year round, where a man could live out in the open and feel not even discomfort from the nature around him – a worker’s paradise. A land of gold, a mountain of wealth, a land in which a man can make his fortune and grow without wrinkles into an old age. And the white ghosts are providing free passage both ways. All we need to do is sign a worker’s contract. Yes, I am going to America. (Hwang 37)

Experiences of hard labor, poverty, and deprivation exposed this “narrative of welcoming plenty” as figment of imagination (Lin and Ling 4). “But,” the scholars continue, “as a ‘founding myth’, the trope of the ‘Gold Mountain’—Gum San—is perhaps as powerful as that original founding myth of the new world—a city on a hill—that brought the Puritans across the Atlantic” (4).

As to the crossing of the threshold, as well as the welcome and reception extended to Chinese immigrants in the USA, this article has dealt with these phases at some length, looking at their representations in three plays in the scenes set at the Angel Island Immigration facility. While all of them reimagine these historical episodes as instances of blatant “hostipitality,” dramatists employ various strategies and dramatic techniques to accomplish this task. Genny Lim in *Paper Angels* alternates naturalistic episodes involving, as a rule, a group of the station’s Chinese inmates and white officials with more intimate and, at the same time, metatheatrical sequences where individual immigrants (or staff members) voice their internal anxieties, desires or persuasions. Owing a lot to her play, Suh’s *Far Country* written half a century later imbues similar scenes with stronger symbolism broadening their scope to encompass a whole group’s experience and zero in on transnational/global dimensions of early 20th century Chinese immigration in the US. By interspersing present-time scenes with flashbacks to principal nodes in Chinese American history in his one-acter, Hwang achieves a palimpsest effect of condensing the past, present, and future in the scenic “here and now.” The mythical timelessness of the events is emphasized by the play’s “contemporary” characters’ doubling as folklore personages. All three playwrights stress the relevance of reenacting history for the present and, especially, for

the future, in the hope that America, Mei Guo, the Beautiful Land, will finally, though belatedly, recognize former “undesirable aliens” as her worthy and welcome residents.

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From Instruction to Spectacle: The Seven-Decade Evolution of American Food Television Programming

Abstract: American food television has evolved from educational demonstrations in the 1940s to contemporary digital streaming programming in the twenty-first century. I trace this evolution through four key transformational periods: the foundational era of homemaker didactic instruction (1940s-1960s); Julia Child's groundbreaking *French Chef* (1963), which combined education with entertainment; the cable television boom and the launch of Food Network (1990s), which focused on spectacle more than on instruction; and lastly, the digital streaming era (2000s-present), which is marked by prestige documentaries and inclusive content. By examining landmark programs from *The French Chef* to *Chef's Table* and *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown*, I intend to demonstrate how food television has matured from marginalized daytime programming into a sophisticated, multi-platform entertainment industry worth billions of dollars. In my analysis I discuss American politics of taste as reflected in food television programming through a few overarching concepts such as the obvious education-to-entertainment shift, "vicarious consumption," constructing authenticity versus scripted reality, celebrity phenomenon, hybridization of food television programming, convergence of consumption (from literal/visual to economic/psychological), and democratization versus gatekeeping.

Keywords: food television, culinary media, vicarious consumption, celebrity chefs, digital food culture, streaming services, *The French Chef*, *Chef's Table*, *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown*

Cooking programs on American television date back nearly to the inception of the medium.² They have not only endured but have been thriving until the present day, in contrast to variety

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2 This study focuses on culinary representations in non-fictional television programming—including cooking shows, reality television, and culinary competitions—across both traditional broadcast and digital streaming platforms. It excludes serial television programs in which fictional storytelling constitutes the primary narrative mode. Such analyses are comprehensively addressed in *Food and American TV: Constructing Identity*

shows which have vanished over time. They have successfully adapted to major cultural shifts by creating new television formats such as reality competition, lifestyle, adventure-travel and talk cooking shows (Matwick & Matwick 1). The seven-decade evolution of American culinary television programming can be considered one of the most significant breakthroughs in the history of television genres (Collins 8-9). It was originally conceived as basic educational demonstrations, but it has since transformed into a lucrative entertainment industry which generates billions of dollars in income thanks to substantial audience.³ This shift from didacticism to entertainment reflects a greater interest in conspicuous lifestyle (Collins 5). Consequently, American culinary television has a substantial impact on consumer behavior (Ketchum 217, 218) and eating habits (Folkvord). Additionally, food television programming oriented towards entertainment has created an entirely new category of celebrity—the celebrity chef—whose cultural influence rivals traditional entertainment stars. The shifting of cultural conventions and the growth of technology have transformed the standards of television genres and, more broadly, the American understanding of food, identity, and media consumption.

The Foundational Era: Educational Television and Julia Child (1940s-1960s)

The earliest phase of American food television (1940s-1960s) drew inspiration from radio programming, particularly from *The Betty Crocker School of the Air*, which premiered in 1924 (Oren, *Food TV* 2; Collins 2). Since their inception in the late 1940s, cooking shows have been an essential part of daytime television programming (Spigel 76-77; Collins 60). These programs, which were mostly broadcast on public television stations, focused on practical cooking instruction for home cooks, targeting housewives who constituted the majority of the daytime audience (Oren, *Food TV* 3). *I Love to Eat*, a cooking show hosted by James Beard that was broadcast between 1946 and 1947, was one of the first television programs of its kind. These early cooking shows had clearly defined educational goals, but they were also judged on the basis of their commercial usefulness for public television (Polan, “James Beard’s” 25), which reflected the broader cultural environment of America following World War II. During this time, domestic science and home economics were regarded as essential knowledge for middle class women (Oren, *Food TV* 16).

in Bite-Sized Narratives, co-edited by Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis and Carrie Helms Tippen (Routledge, forthcoming Spring 2026).

3 Documents such as SEC financial filings and detailed 10-K annual reports indicate that food television programming generates billions in income (see to “Scripps Networks Interactive SEC Filings” and “Warner Bros. Discovery”). Even if extensive decade-by-decade comparisons are somewhat limited, the specific figures for Food Network indicate that it alone generated around \$900 million yearly in income from 2015 to 2017 (“Food Network Financial Statements”). Scripps Networks Interactive, which includes leading lifestyle brands such as Food Network, Cooking Channel, and Travel Channel, exceeded \$3 billion in annual revenue by 2015. In 2017, Discovery Communications evaluated Scripps’ acquisition value at \$14.6 billion (Littleton).

During this time both public television programs and cookbooks reflected society conceptions of gender roles (Neuhaus). For instance, Americans still held the view that a woman's identity was significantly linked to her natural capacity to manage the house and nurture her children.⁴ Such television programming used educational and scientific approaches to demonstrate that women were responsible for cooking and managing the household (Fraterrigo). The instructional approach of these shows, which emphasized measurements and orderly steps, echoed the modern notion of "scientific homemaking", which aimed to modernize the American kitchen while keeping women within the domestic sphere (Shapiro 4-5, 7-8).

When Julia Child entered the scene with *The French Chef* in November 1963, her program became a watershed moment in the history of cooking shows in the United States (Polan, *Julia Child's* 42). Child demonstrated a stark departure from earlier programs which prioritized perfection and formal presentation. Child embraced spontaneity and openly acknowledged her mistakes in the kitchen (Polan, *Julia Child's* 4, 32). This informal, unscripted approach made her program more accessible and relatable to viewers who were new to the genre. In addition, it expanded the appeal of the genre to a wider audience beyond the traditional homemaker demographic (Collins 88-89, 191). The approach also successfully combined education and entertainment (Polan, *Julia Child's* 34).

Beyond her groundbreaking culinary methods, Julia Child had other far-reaching revolutionary effects. She radically altered the relationship between television personalities and their viewers. Child was willing to make mistakes in front of the camera, whether it meant dropping food, spilling ingredients, or getting results that were less than desirable. This was a calculated pedagogical approach: producers did not edit out the mistakes that were made on air, but instead thought of these blunders as teaching moments (Branch). Her willingness to make mistakes on camera, and own them, challenged rigid perfectionism of earlier culinary education (Polan, *Julia Child's* 3, 5). She understood that her kitchen mishaps would empower viewers, hence her approachable and relatable style made French cooking feel more accessible and less intimidating to masses of Americans (82, 88). This genuineness resonated with viewers who were able to relate to Child's struggles and triumphs (190-91), in so doing Child transformed the act of cooking from a stressful, perfectionist task into an enjoyable and imaginative activity (242).

Child's "impression of authenticity" and energetic presence made "a dandified European" cuisine attainable for ordinary Americans (Polan, *Julia Child's* 32, 82, 107, 136). Many scholars note that *The French Chef* defined and popularized the genre, which made food television a respected part of American culture (Polan, *Julia Child's* 42). Her success on public television proved the value of food-related programming, which in turn led to increased investment and innovation in the genre. Child's style broke with previous conventions of cooking shows, which aimed exclusively at women. She created a new model where personality and genuine engagement were

4 See: Shapiro 12-13; Spigel 33-34; Leer 13-14.

central to the television cooking genre (Matwick & Matwick 24). Her style of cooking paved the way for future celebrity chefs and food programming.

The Commercial Network Era (1970s-1980s)

The Commercial Network Era is characterized by the widespread appearance of kitchen demonstrations on both commercial and educational television. This trend began immediately following the conclusion of the Second World War and continued until the 1960s, when Julia Child “made her mark” (Polan, *Julia Child’s* 41). Because of Julia Child’s success, commercial television networks started to consider investing in novel culinary programming formats (229). Consequently, alongside traditional culinary demonstrations, food television programming branched out to include restaurant reviews (*The Unknown Eater*, CBS 1979-2001), profiles of celebrity chefs (*The Galloping Gourmet*, 1968–1971), and cook-off segments featured on such daytime variety programs such as *Good Morning America*.⁵

Nevertheless, the entire evolution of the genre was slowed down during this era because of the limits resulting from scheduling and the financial imperatives that were placed upon commercial network television (Collins 99-100). The majority of food-related programming was limited to daytime and weekend time slots. Such scheduling suggests that broadcasters were making assumptions about audience preferences and demographic groups they should be targeting. Network executives often neglected to adequately analyze and comprehend the genre’s potential for attaining popularity during prime time. Consequently, television shows often depicted food in a simplistic way, associating it with the domestic sphere. For example, iconic series such as *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974) maintained stereotypical ideas of home life and family dinner by showcasing frequent sequences focused on perfect familial happiness.

The fact that food programming was relegated to off-peak hours showed the industry’s gendered biases in relation to both the material that was being presented and the viewers that were being targeted. Food television has long been shaped by gendered assumptions, evidenced by early cooking shows which were scheduled during daytime hours to target women at home, reflecting the belief that homemakers were the primary audience for such content (Collins 60; Leer 16). This scheduling confirmed the assumption that cooking was a feminine activity (Leer 14) and that women’s interests were less valuable to advertisers and network executives. Conversely, lucrative prime-time programming slots were offered to young male audience. Due to this scheduling, a self-fulfilling prophecy was set in motion. The marginalization of food programming to daytime slots, which was a direct result of these gendered industry logics, positioned women’s programming as less commercially marketable. As a result, many cooking shows were

5 These cook-off segments of the 1970s and 1980s would eventually evolve into fully-fledged competitive cooking formats in the 1990s and 2000s, transforming food preparation from a domestic skill into televised sport. Shows like *Iron Chef America* demonstrated the genre’s potential for prime-time success and broad audience appeal beyond the traditional cooking show demographic.

“cheap airtime fillers,” which received smaller production budgets and were unable to fully show their creative potential (Collins 33). Because of low-cost production and focus on basic culinary instruction there was not much room for innovation. However, there were few exceptions like Graham Kerr’s flamboyant performance as *The Galloping Gourmet* which confirmed the rule. Kerr’s eccentric personality and a witty sense of humor were a key to his success, rather than strict culinary education offered in his show (Leer 19).

The Cable Television Revolution and the Birth of Food Network (1990s-2000s)

Julia Child’s *The French Chef*, despite its technological simplicity, achieved remarkable popularity in the 1960s, which marked a turning point in the evolution of American food television. This initial success paved the way for the launch of the Food Network, which gained substantial popularity in the 1990s and the 2000s. The advent of cable television in the 1970s revolutionized the industry by not only providing extra channels but more importantly by facilitating the growth of niche and diverse programming – what Oren called “narrowcasting” (*Food TV* 18). Cooking was already being recast as more than just “wifely drudgery” (Oren, *Food TV* 5), and Child’s celebrity status helped cable producers achieve notable progress in the food-related television genre at this period. In 1993, the Food Network was founded, and in 2002, the Cooking Channel was launched. Both channels were made possible thanks to technological advancements and significant shifts in programming philosophy, particularly the emergence of specialized cable channels.

The Food Network, which was the first-ever television station that was exclusively devoted to food and cooking, revolutionized culinary programming by shifting the focus from random material to an in-depth examination of every aspect of food culture (Oren, *Food TV* 8). Among the many elements that were included into this were basic culinary instruction, the evaluation of restaurants, and competitive cooking formats. Under the guidance of prominent figures such as Emeril Lagasse, the Food Network pioneered programming with a high production value – they elevated the genre with dynamic camera work, live audiences, and an emphasis on spectacle (Oren, “On the Line” 24). In so doing the Food Network produced food shows that were visually captivating, amusing, as well as instructional (Oren, *Food TV* 37).

Another important feature of *Emeril Live* was the way that Lagasse redefined audience engagement and participation (Oren, *Food TV* 37). The presence of the studio audience converted the culinary session from a private cooking lesson into a public, interactive spectacle. The Food Network’s programming strategy was producing theatrical culinary content that went beyond any traditional instructional formats. Lagasse’s signature exclamations of “Bam!”, “Kick it up a notch!”, “Up, up, and away with the intensity!” enhanced the theatricality of his performance. Interestingly, such exclamations were designed also to elicit shared excitement. Celebrity chefs on Food Network, including Lagasse, employed evocative language to portray themselves as entertainers and to engage audiences, even those at home, as active participants rather than mere passive observers/learners (Adema 115).

While amusing, Julia Child's culinary presentations were characterized by instructional style, yet they foreshadowed the genre's transformation into the performative, participatory nature of modern culinary programming. Emeril Lagasse skillfully navigated this transformation by engaging audiences with his performance, shifting cooking show's focus from education to entertainment (Miller 11). This transition from a purely instructional genre into a performative one resulted in significant changes in the genre's dynamics. In this new scenario, the chef/host is regarded not just as an instructor but also, and maybe more importantly, as an entertainer/performer, while the audience is metamorphosed from passive observers to active participants in a culinary performance (Oren, *Food TV* 37–39).

The remarkable surge in popularity of the Food Network's programming can be ascribed to what Paulette Adema characterizes as “the vicarious pleasures of watching someone else cook and eat; the emulsion of entertainment and cooking; the jumbling of traditional gender roles; and ambivalence toward cultural standards of body, consumption, and health” (113). Viewers undoubtedly enjoy the fantasy and spectacle of food shows as escape from quotidian routines. However, the researcher emphasizes that “vicarious consumption” of food television provides audiences with more than mere escapism. According to the scholar, food television shows mirror broader societal tensions, as a result, viewing these shows turns them into a complex spectacle that echoes anxieties, hopes and desires of the contemporary audience.⁶ Adema asserts that the Food Network “epitomizes the culture of visual and psychological consumption: consumption of cooking, of tasting, of hunger, of passion, of the familiar and the exotic, and of the television viewer's willingness to be entertained by someone performing in the kitchen” (114). Thus, food television functions as a platform where various forms of consumption converge— not only the literal, tangible act of eating but also the symbolic consumption of meanings tied to desire, cultural expression, and identity formation.

The concept of “vicarious consumption” reveals a paradox within modern food television: while many American households now rely on convenience foods and spend less time cooking (Smith), the number of Americans watching cooking shows has increased significantly.⁷ In a consumer culture amusement and entertainment are more important than cooking competence (Ketchum 219; Kirkwood). Audiences engage with culinary shows not to replicate recipes, but to experience cooking as a source of pleasure, aspiration, and fantasy. Watching programs such as

6 Similarly, Kirkwood perceives food programs as more than mere instructional manuals for cooking; he regards them as a “window into a wider social and cultural world.”

7 See: de Solier, “TV Dinners”; Adema; Miller; O'Connell.

According to Nielsen Media Research, the leading global authority on media audience analytics, median primetime viewership of Food Network increased approximately fourfold between 2000 and 2014. The median audience for the network's top 20 primetime programs increased from about 255,000 per episode for shows like *Emeril Live* and *East Meets West* to approximately 1.1 million viewers per episode of *Food Network Star*, *Worst Cooks in America* and other competition-oriented food series (qtd. in Myers). This dramatic growth reflects the rising popularity of culinary programming during this period.

MasterChef and *Emeril Live* allows viewers to experience the thrill of gourmet food without the necessity of recreating it themselves (Kirkwood; Adema 116). Culinary television aestheticizes food, converting it into an enticing image meant to be consumed with the eyes (de Solier, “TV Dinners”). These programs offer what is referred to as “food-porn” (Lupton 71) or “gastro-porn”, which de Solier identifies as aesthetically pleasing close-ups of ingredients, dramatic reveals of completed dishes, and evocative descriptions that stimulate viewers’ appetites (“Tasting the Digital” 57). This experience does not involve the actual preparation and/or consumption of food, which is the core idea behind vicarious consumption.

When digital media and social platforms emerged, they instantly intersected with an insatiable desire for “visual and psychological consumption” (Adema 114). As a result, this has created new opportunities and challenges for food television programming in post-millennial America. These digital platforms serve to enhance and diversify “vicarious consumption” through the means of interactive engagement, content generated by users, and segmented niche audiences.

The Digital Era (2000s-Present)

The advent of the internet and the rise of on-demand streaming services in the 2000s mark another major paradigm shift in the representation of food on television (Phillipov 152). Streaming economics differ fundamentally from advertiser-dependent model of traditional television. Rather than delivering large audiences to advertisers, they implement a subscription-based model that prioritizes attracting and retaining subscribers (Lotz 33-34). Consequently, streaming services are not limited by adhering to rigid timetables or accommodating a diverse range of viewers (Lotz 6, 15-16). Instead, they rely on algorithmic suggestions to connect viewers with content that matches their individual tastes.⁸ Instead of producing content for a large, general audience, platforms may now allocate resources into original, niche programming that caters to smaller, more loyal audiences (Lotz 52-53). If it manages to attract and maintain a committed audience, even material that is somewhat specialized may still achieve success.

On-demand streaming platforms like Netflix and Hulu have created unique culinary content that questions and builds upon conventional food narratives (Phillipov 152). They offer diverse content, including culinary documentaries, culturally enriching travel series, and worldwide explorations of food heritage. This business model allows for the production of food programming that focuses on highly specialized topics—such as single ingredients, unique cooking techniques, or cuisines that have been historically underrepresented. These types of shows would not be able to survive in the world of conventional television (both network or cable), which depends on advertisers and sponsors (Lotz 23). Unlike traditional television, streaming platforms are more open to highly specialized, niche programming that is customized to different interests and tastes. Internet-distributed television caters to passionate, dedicated viewers who are likely to keep their subscriptions to watch this exclusive programming.

8 See: Chalaby 8; Phillipov 162; Lotz 13

World-renowned chef David Chang observes that, a few years ago, there was a saturation of food programming on television, as many shows had become too similar in content and format (qtd. in O’Connell). However, Chang notes, the current streaming era has revitalized the genre by offering substantial variety—ranging from prestige documentary (*Chef’s Table* 2015–, *Street Food* 2019–2023), competition (Fox’s mainstay *Hell’s Kitchen* 2005–), hybrids of travel and tutorial (PBS’s *No Passport Required* 2018–2020), classic cooking shows—or, as they are somewhat snidely referred to within the industry, “dump-and-stirs” (Food Network’s *Trisha’s Southern Kitchen* with country star Trisha Yearwood, 2012–2022) (O’Connell). Isabelle De Solier complements this list with an addition of British and Australian programs like docu-soaps (*Jamie’s Kitchen* 2002–), reality TV shows (*My Restaurant Rules* 2004–2005), renovation programs (*Ramsay’s Kitchen Nightmares* 2004–), game shows (*Ready Steady Cook* 1994–2010, revived in 2021), and even melodramas (*The Cooks*, 1999–2000) (“TV Dinners” 465).

Chef’s Table on Netflix (2015–), which has been nominated for eight Emmys, is a noteworthy example of this transformation. It is a spiritual successor to David Gelb’s critically acclaimed documentary *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2012). Both employ cinematic and production techniques, slow pacing, and an emphasis on emotional storytelling. These are more commonly associated with art-house documentary filmmaking than television culinary shows or reality programming (Binns 62–63). *Chef’s Table* follows a different chef from episode to episode, looking at their cultural background, personal struggles, and innovative culinary approaches (Binns 64). In lieu of the traditional cooking instruction or competitive formats, the show offers insights into the lives and personal philosophies of renowned chefs, which are supplemented by commentary from food critics and other celebrity chefs. Through these close-up portraits, the program elevates them to near-mythic status as artists whose chosen medium is food. Consequently, *Chef’s Table* illustrates how food television has matured into prestige programming capable of receiving critical recognition and attracting sophisticated viewers who were previously indifferent to culinary shows (Binns). Its high production values and focus on food’s artistry have set a new standard for food media (Binns). The model is flexible and has enduring appeal, as seen by its numerous spin-offs, such as *Chef’s Table: France* (2016), *Chef’s Table: BBQ* (2020), *Chef’s Table: Pizza* (2022), *Chef’s Table: Noodles* (2024) and most recently *Chef’s Table: Legends* (2025), which premiered on the series’ 10th anniversary.

Food television has shifted toward “factual entertainment” (De Solier, “TV Dinners” 466), blending cooking with personal stories, travel, and competition such as *Diners*, *Drive-Ins Dives* (2006–), *Man vs. Food* (2008–2012), *Sugar Rush* (2018–2019) or *Somebody Feed Phil* (2018–). This hybridization results in programs such as *Barefoot Contessa* (2002–2021), *The Pioneer Woman* or *Giada at Home* (2011–) that foreground chef personality and lifestyle and use food as a lens for exploring culture, identity, health, and entertainment (De Solier, “TV Dinners” 465). The genre now encompasses a wide array of hybrid formats—competitive cooking reality shows – eg. the already mentioned *Chef’s Table* and *MasterChef*, food travel/adventure series – eg. *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown*, restaurant makeover programs – eg. *Kitchen Nightmares*, and cooking-as-lifestyle shows that

emphasize the sensory and communal pleasures of food – eg. *Dinner Time Live with David Chang* or *Pamela's Cooking with Love*, demonstrating the maturation and ability to address complex themes while simultaneously offering what Phillipov calls “easy-going viewing pleasures” (155).

Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown (2013–2018), hosted by the late Anthony Bourdain, revolutionized food travel shows by weaving narratives of a nation's culture, politics, and social issues via its cuisine, instead of focusing just on gastronomy (McKinnon 75). Bourdain's food travel shows prioritized authenticity and cultural connection through the exploration of historical and social contexts, in contrast to previous programs that often exoticized foreign foods or sanitized local cultures (Tilton 90-91; McKinnon 68). The hosts approached the locations and people they met with respect, curiosity, and empathy (Tilton 89, 101). A fundamental aspect of his technique was his genuine concern for the people he met (Tilton 89). In his programs Bourdain visited locations ranging from street food stalls to conflict zones, looked at street food culture alongside fine dining, and talked about the experiences of ordinary people as much as those of celebrity chefs (McKinnon 70; Tilton). He used shared meals as opportunities to talk about challenging subjects like war, poverty, immigration, and cultural identity. Bourdain was able to strike a good balance between his own views, impartial reporting, and reflective commentary in his approach, which combined entertainment with journalism (McKinnon 67, 74). Out of thirty-one nominations, *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown* won twelve Primetime Emmys, which is clearly a testament to the widespread acclaim for Bourdain's innovative premise. The continuing impact of this program on culinary travel television is shown by programs like *Salt Fat Acid Heat* (Netflix, 2018) by Samin Nosrat, *Searching for Italy* (CNN, 2021-) by Stanley Tucci, and *High on the Hog* (Netflix, 2021) by Stephen Satterfield. These shows are characteristic of Bourdain's signature approach in that they emphasize cultural context, historical detail, and genuine engagement with local communities.

Modern culinary competition programs, such as *Top Chef* and *MasterChef*, exemplify the continual progression of food-related programming. Aside from serving as entertainment, character-driven drama, and instructional cooking content, these programs construct compelling tales about creativity, culinary skills, and personal development (Oren, “On the Line” 27-28). These programs shift focus from female-oriented, home-cooking instructions to restaurant-based shows that showcase professional, high-stakes performance in a stressful environment (30, 31). The competition format departs from conventional “how-to” cooking shows by adopting reality television conventions, such as dramatic music, and carefully structured story arcs (27, 32), and confessional approach that originates from observational documentary techniques. These narrative arcs illustrate the growth of “durable participants,” a concept introduced by Curnutt, from basic skills to a degree of culinary proficiency (145). Consequently, reality TV producers “make/fabricate” their own celebrities and regulate the marketing of these “durable participants” before, during, and after production.

The competition formats of *MasterChef* and *Top Chef*, which include mystery box challenges (*MasterChef*) or Restaurant Wars (*Top Chef*), elimination rounds, and time limits, make things more

dramatic, but more importantly they test not only technical culinary skills but also contestants' creativity, composure under pressure, and adaptability. In a way cooking competition shows evaluate participants' talents, skills and reputations similarly to talent shows like *American Idol* or high-stakes elimination contests such as *Survivor*. The programs also emphasize the emotional and psychological strain of competition, comparing the experience to a "fight-or-flight" scenario that is both physically and emotionally demanding (Oskis). The outcome is a story that transforms cooking challenges into tales of "displacement, confusion and discomfort ... [and] stress, discord and reproach" (Oren, "On the Line" 30).

Modern cooking competition programs resemble scripted television, providing meticulously crafted entertainment rather than documentary records of cooking competitions. Viewers watch culinary reality television with a degree of cognitive dissonance as they have to actively suspend their disbelief if they want to participate in "vicarious consumption." Media-literate viewers recognize production artifice—scripted drama, edited timelines, pre-prepped ingredients, and contrived conflicts—and understand that these shows promote a lifestyle characterized by "unattainable and unrealistic images of consumer bliss" (Ketchum 220). Nonetheless, awareness of this fabrication is outweighed by the shows' entertainment value and aspirational escapism. Instead, viewers participate in what Rose and Wood describe as "self-referential hyperauthenticity," blending fantastic/incredible elements with their lived experiences to create meaning (294). This explains why audiences prioritize the performative and social aspects of reality programming over strict adherence to reality, seeking "moments of authenticity" within constructed environments (Hill 176). Thus, it seems that viewers are willing to temporarily accept the contrived nature of culinary reality television in exchange for entertainment value and the vicarious excitement of culinary achievement.

Streaming services, social media, and traditional broadcasting are just a few of the venues that food TV producers use to distribute their content. This has increased both the visibility of food television and the engagement of its viewers. In addition to reaching a far wider audience than traditional television, these platforms also make it easy to share short-form content like quick recipes, food diaries, and visually appealing culinary videos, which together attract billions of views. The exact statistics provided by de Solier suggest that by operating outside of the established structures of the television industry, platforms such as YouTube culinary channels, Instagram food influencers, Pinterest, X, and TikTok have supplemented and challenged the function of traditional television as a content curator ("Tasting the Digital" 56). Anyone with a passion for cooking, regardless of their professional status or connection with the food industry, may find a voice and an audience in digital food culture and thus be part of "conspicuous pro-sumption" (Lewis 214). Professional chefs and high production standards used to be the gatekeepers of culinary expertise on television. Now, thanks to democratizing digital platforms, everyone from home cooks to food bloggers and those simply interested in cooking may reach sizable audiences.

These platforms have popularized innovative content formats such as the viral "recipe hack" videos, ASMR cooking videos, and ultra-short recipe tutorials, which would not be possible

within conventional television formats. This change has made food media more participatory, relatable and interactive (Lewis 215). Currently, digital channels promote amateur enthusiasm, greater accessibility and diversity in food-related storytelling. Audiences often regard amateur creators as more trustworthy and approachable, which creates a sense of virtual food community and shared discovery/exploration (Jacobsen, et al.; Lupton 68).

However, the democratization and inclusivity of digital media (Feldman and Goodman) come with their own problems. The responsibilities of platforms and content creators, not just “food influencers,” in shaping public knowledge may be a contentious matter. Insufficient editorial oversight can cause the dissemination of nutrition misinformation (Diyab & Roy). Potential problems with assessing credibility and expertise of amateur creators in nutrition and health communication may arise (Jenkins, et al.). Viral trends prioritize virality and entertainment over credibility, with algorithmic bias facilitating the spread of misinformation about nutrition. Educational interventions to improve digital and media literacy may be necessary.

In the digital era, visual appeal and social media integration have become more important in culinary programming (Lewis 214). The productions are made with the intention of being shared on social media. That is why they create visually appealing material that is readily adaptable for platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. This tendency is exemplified by *Chef’s Table* where short clips and behind-the-scenes footage are extensively shared, drawing in viewers and increasing the show’s cultural influence. According to research conducted by Gajdzik et al., these strategies not only broaden the audience’s exposure but also foster more audience engagement, brand knowledge and loyalty. A recent study examining the impact of food television on consumer behavior uncovers intricate consequences that extend beyond simple recipe imitation. Research indicates that watching culinary programs may affect attitudes toward food waste (Elhoushy), dietary preferences (Folkvord; Raithatha), and even confidence in one’s cooking abilities (Lavelle). Nonetheless, these effects vary significantly depending on the genre of the food programming, the viewer’s age and gender, and the environment of watching. According to the studies conducted by Camargo et al. and Martini et al., young people, who make up a significant portion of the food media audience, interact with food content in two ways: actively, when looking for recipes or ideas for meals, and passively, when accidentally coming across food media when browsing social media. Results for food literacy and culinary practices vary among the emerging adults due to their differing culinary practices.

Conclusions

Significant changes in American television, food culture, and media consumption are mirrored in the evolution of American food television programming, which has progressed from basic educational demonstrations to its current multifaceted entertainment. With a global rise of streaming services, the Food Network’s mix of entertainment and education—the dynamic that Julia Child’s groundbreaking work unintentionally predicted—became a golden standard. When seen through this prism, food media does more than just portray consumption; it also

influences social connections and American identities by mirroring larger cultural and historical realities. Americans will certainly continue to use food television as a tool to navigate and/or negotiate their connections with food, culture, politics of taste, and cultural differences as the medium adapts to a more fractured and globalized society. Over the last seventy years, food programming has progressed from educational television to a worldwide multimedia phenomenon. Food has the power to teach us about ourselves, our communities, and the world at large, and this demonstrates how versatile television can be as a medium.

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When Nonhuman Sidekicks Take Over: The Bakhtinian Carnavalesque and the Upturned Hierarchy in *Sir Gadabout* by Martyn Beardsley (1992)

Abstract: In her *The Middle Ages in Children's Literature* (2015), Clare Bradford observes that “[c]hildren’s texts . . . are far more likely to make fun of the Middle Ages than of classical antiquity, the early modern period or the Victorian age” (155). It is also true for *Sir Gadabout* (1992), the first book of Martyn Beardsley’s series for children, whose title character is the worst knight in the world. In this context, Sidney Smith, a cat and a sidekick, proves to be the most powerful character. One source of humour in the book is the Bakhtinian carnivalesque inversion of anthropocentric hierarchy, which results in the cat being granted human-like agency—even if it is rarely explicitly acknowledged by the narrator. The objective of this paper is to analyse the carnivalesque power reversals that elevate the character who, as a nonhuman, does not belong to the historical feudal system. The use of the figure of Sidney Smith is crucial, as it allows for a subtle rebellion and inverts the book’s power structure. At the same time, such inversion is perceived as comical rather than threatening precisely because the character is an anthropomorphized cat and thus cannot permanently distort the real-world social order.

Keywords: children’s literature, knight, cat, anthropomorphism, carnivalesque

Introduction

Sir Gadabout (1992) by British author Martyn Beardsley is a popular book series for children aged nine to twelve years old. However, as is often the case with children’s literature, the books can be equally enjoyable for older readers due to their absurd and carnivalesque humour. The series proved so successful that it was subsequently adapted into a television programme, *Sir Gadabout: The Worst Knight in the Land*, which aired between 2002 and 2003 on CITV and

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was awarded a BAFTA for best writing. The book series consists of eleven books featuring the adventures of the worst knight in the world, the titular Sir Gadabout, who, due to King Arthur's soft heart, is nonetheless included as one of the Knights of the Round Table in Camelot. Gadabout's mediocrity in terms of his knightly skills does not stem from his being rotten or morally inferior, but rather from his naivety, clumsiness, and lack of intelligence. Yet, what makes him a highly likeable character and what earns him the spot at the Round Table are his kindness and hard work, which do not go unnoticed by the king. *Sir Gadabout*, the first book of the series, is a typical quest story, even though its titular hero is an unlikely one whose only remarkable trait is his status as the very antithesis of an exemplary knight. Nonetheless, he is unwaveringly devoted to the ideals of chivalry and, despite being a laughingstock, refuses to abandon his dream. After losing his ear in a joust with Sir Lancelot, Sir Gadabout sets off in search of the wizard Merlin, hoping the magician can reattach it. Soon, Merlin, Sir Gadabout, and his loyal squire Herbert learn that Queen Guinevere has been abducted. With no other knights available, King Arthur dispatches two search parties: Sir Lancelot, the finest knight in the kingdom, and Sir Gadabout, accompanied by Herbert and Merlin's talking cat, Sidney Smith. After a long and eventful journey, the quest is completed: the two evil witches who kidnapped Queen Guinevere are defeated by Sir Gadabout, while Sir Lancelot proves unsuccessful. Although his victory is largely a matter of luck, Sir Gadabout, for the moment at least, becomes the celebrated hero of Camelot.

Stories of knights and their quests—both heroic and, like *Sir Gadabout*, mock-heroic—constitute an important subcategory of children's literature. As Clare Bradford observes in *The Middle Ages in Children's Literature*, “children's texts, especially those for younger audiences, are far more likely to make fun of the Middle Ages than of classical antiquity, the early modern period or the Victorian age” (155). Moreover, despite the usefulness of certain theories, “medievalist humour for children blends and combines modes and practices, so that it is rarely possible to confine discussion of text to one or other of the theories of humour” (155–6). Today, the Middle Ages are an inspiring source for humour due to the stereotypically clear-cut rules, hierarchical society, and characteristic modes of behaviour that define the period. As such, children's medieval-inspired literature is an intriguing field of research: it makes, bends, and breaks the rules, readily answering to social changes and participating in shaping future generations—both seriously, in terms of its use as educational material, and humorously.

Noticing this rebellious tendency in literature for young audiences, John Stephens links children's stories and nonconformity by stressing that “carnival in children's literature is grounded in playfulness which situates itself in positions of nonconformity” (121). Humour based on such nonconformity may, in fact, find a natural home within children's literature. For instance, a visible overturning of an established hierarchy for humorous effect can often meet stern opposition and, thus, may be safer to perform discreetly within marginal (and so less threatening) media and genre forms. In her book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam argues that certain controversial topics appear in children's films “so that the politics of rebellion can be cast as

immature, pre-Oedipal, childish, foolish, fantastical, and rooted in a commitment to failure” (52). This observation can also be applied to children’s literature and, more specifically, to the discreet overturning of the hierarchy in *Sir Gadabout*, exemplified by the unexpected leadership of a cat—Merlin’s talking companion, Sidney Smith.

In the field of animal studies, the satirical potential of interspecies entanglements has been discussed by Robert McKay and Susan McHugh, who propose three categories of animal satire: human animality, zoontological difference, and species-political satire (15). While the first category is not relevant to this paper, the remaining two categories will prove useful in the subsequent analysis. As McKay and McHugh explain, the category of zoontological difference is “more interested in the ‘specifics’ of species difference, those more detailed aspects of animals’ identity and behaviour which can be turned to satirical significance” (18). When it comes to species-political satire, however, *Sir Gadabout* is rather ambiguous due to its carnivalesque nature. Yet McKay and McHugh’s take on species-political satire still proves telling:

There is a rich history of texts appealing to the inherent ridiculousness of taking animals seriously, a tactic which can be used by satire simultaneously as a ticklish feather with which to tease out animal-centred attitudes and as a stout stick with which to beat progressive thought in the realm of human social values. (22–23)

This observation bears a striking resemblance to Halberstam’s argument regarding the hidden revolt in animated movies for young audiences. In sum, neither children’s films nor animals are taken seriously—and precisely for this reason, they may constitute a space for overturning the hierarchy.

Though I am drawn to the issue of *Sir Gadabout* being a subversive fool and the potential of analysing this character within Halberstam’s framework proposed in *The Queer Art of Failure*, this article will focus on the less prominent character of Sidney Smith. The aim of this paper is to argue that, in a subtle yet undeniable way, it is Sidney Smith, a cat and a sidekick, who is the most powerful character of the first book of Beardsley’s series, also titled *Sir Gadabout*. One of the sources of humour in the book is its Bakhtinian-carnavalesque upturning of hierarchy, which results in the cat being the most influential character (even if his agency is hardly ever acknowledged explicitly by the narrator). It is not my objective to address every carnivalesque aspect of *Sir Gadabout* but rather to focus on the carnivalesque power shifts that elevate the character, who, as a nonhuman, does not belong to the historical feudal system. Notably, the use of the figure of Sidney Smith is crucial as it allows for a discreetly rebellious subversion of anthropocentric hierarchy within the book. Yet, at the same time, such an inversion is perceived as comical rather than threatening precisely because the character is an anthropomorphized cat and thus cannot permanently distort the real-world social order.

The Great Chain of Being, the Feudal System, and the Carnavalesque

To make a case for *Sir Gadabout* as a subversive text—one that flips medieval hierarchies through a Bakhtinian-carnavalesque overturning of their social orders—it first seems necessary to provide a brief explanation of what I mean by the term *hierarchy*. In fact, in *Sir Gadabout*, two hierarchies overlap, creating a curious structure that becomes even more curious when reversed: these are the Great Chain of Being and the general feudal system characteristic of the Middle Ages in Europe. Since the latter does not include nonhumans, the intersectionality of the two systems proves not only helpful but also necessary for a discussion of *Sir Gadabout*'s twentieth-century medievalism, where, as we shall see, knights are ridiculous, squires are the brawn, and cats are the brains.

The Great Chain of Being is a concept dating back to the works of Plato and Aristotle that remained in constant use throughout the centuries until the eighteenth century. However, it seems to have never completely disappeared from the European consciousness (Brandt and Reyna 428). In the original Aristotelian take, *scala naturae* (the chain of being) included “all things, whether they were living and breathing animals, photosynthesizing plants, or lifeless rocks and minerals” (428). However, over time, the Great Chain of Being shifted from its philosophical meaning to its usefulness as a tool for ascribing moral value to every creature, including supernatural beings. In this new interpretation, humans were placed in the middle of the chain, below “saints, angels, and supernatural deities,” but above animals, who, in turn, were higher in the hierarchy than demons (depending on their viciousness), with Satan at the very bottom (428). What is important for this discussion is the place of nonhumans within this structure—undoubtedly below humans.

It should come as no surprise that the medieval feudal system did not take nonhumans into consideration. First, its purpose was to introduce and maintain social order exclusively among humans. Second, both the Great Chain of Being and the Bible made it very clear that animals were inferior to humans. The only prominent figure who made an attempt to undermine this belief was St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226), whom Lynn White, Jr. calls “possibly . . . the greatest radical in Christian history since Christ” who “tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God’s creatures” (1206). Yet, it should be stressed that St. Francis was an exception in his views, for the general belief was deeply anthropocentric, promoting and enforcing the concept of human stewardship over animals as depicted in the Book of Isaiah (the peaceful coexistence of predator and prey led by a little child) or in the Book of Genesis (the blissful and harmonious life of Adam and Eve among the animals that Adam names) (Włodarczyk 11–14).

In short, the feudal system was concerned solely with interhuman relationships, with kings at the top of the hierarchy, followed by nobles, knights, and serfs (peasants).² What should

2 Placing the clergy in this structure may occasionally pose a problem, as their influences and relationships varied across their own social group, depending on the position and lands they owned, yet it does not seem necessary to elaborate on this matter.

be noted, however, is the clarity of the structure and that the feudal system was intended to maintain order, with pledging loyalty to the lord resulting in the vassal obtaining lands and protection in exchange for their service.

What Mikhail Bakhtin noticed, however, was the temporary overturning and suspension of this stable and fixed order in the carnival. He made a distinction between the official and the unofficial, the high and the low, stressing the carnival's temporary nature and observing that "the unofficial folk culture of the Middle Ages and even of the Renaissance had its own territory and its own particular time, the time of fairs and feasts" (154). Bakhtin shrewdly diagnosed the relationship between the solemnity of official culture and the need to suspend it to relieve social tensions. As he put it:

A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. In rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody—all these forms have one style in common: they belong to one culture of folk carnival humor. (4)

Even though Bakhtin ascribed the culture of carnival mainly to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Michael Gardiner claims that some aspects of the carnival have been preserved since that time, although the social changes seem to have toned down its intensity:

Carnival was severed from its folk basis and from its communal performance in the carnival square, and its characteristic symbols, gestures and speech-genres became merely decorative or narrowly farcical. Yet despite the emasculation of carnival since the Renaissance, Bakhtin argues that popular-festive culture remains 'indestructible,' and it continues to celebrate invention, human creativity, and the liberation of human consciousness from the dictates of official truth in a manner which encourages a 'completely new order of things.' (58)

Temporarily unlimited fun, humour, chaos, and disorder remain, therefore, at the heart of "the spirit of carnival" (Danow 4). This seems especially true and visible in the case of children's literature, which often favours the temporarily reversed order over clichés and fixed power structures. In a sense, the carnival has found its safe haven in children's literature when popular culture started to dismiss it as low and inappropriate in its traditional form.

In her discussion of the carnivalesque and nonhuman in children's literature, which draws on the examples of *The Magician's Nephew* by C. S. Lewis and *Mary Poppins* by P. L. Travers, Catherine Elick notes that both authors in question "bring together heterogeneous collections of characters from all orders of being—humanity, mythology . . . , the animal world (both talking and non-talking beasts), and other fictional sources . . .—and have them mingle in festival-like gatherings reminiscent of medieval carnival celebrations" (454–55). She also notes how the way these characters come into contact leads to "suspension of hierarchical barriers" and the

Bakhtinian “carnivalistic mésalliances” (455). It needs to be stressed that the novels discussed by Elick differ substantially from *Sir Gadabout* due to their occasionally grotesque elements interwoven with more serious content. The latter is absent from *Sir Gadabout*, which is an exclusively humorous book without the aspiration to match the complexity of Lewis’s works. Nonetheless, Elick’s point that it is the interactions between characters from “all orders of being” (455) that turn it into a carnivalesque story seems quite apt; indeed, it is the talking cat, Sidney Smith, who discreetly overturns the established hierarchy, introducing a less explicit element of the carnival into the typical fairy-tale quest of the knight-protagonist and his damsel in distress.

The Concept of the Triple Hierarchy Reversal

For our purpose, it is sufficient to focus on the worldly component of the chain and, more specifically, on its bottom part, which includes humans and nonhumans. If one were to follow the standard pattern of medieval relations of power, it would come as no surprise that, in the case of *Sir Gadabout*, it would look like this:

1. King Arthur
2. Sir Lancelot (the champion)
3. Sir Gadabout
4. Herbert the Squire
5. Sidney Smith (the cat)

It could be argued that this simplistic structure does not take into consideration the role of Queen Guinevere or Merlin the Wizard, but they do not seem to belong to this axis, being placed on the margins, though undoubtedly powerful and important for the narrative: she, as a reason for undertaking the quest after two witches abduct her; he, as the one who equips the party with necessary gifts and clues.³ Nonetheless, they do not remain at the centre of events, becoming secondary characters with little influence on the quest once Sir Gadabout and his companions decide to undertake it. In fact, even King Arthur himself does not appear vital to the plot development, acting as a standard fairy-tale ruler who merely sends the hero on the quest and remains a static character. Thus, it does not seem unjustified to limit the list of protagonists involved in the triple hierarchy reversal to just four: Sir Lancelot, Sir Gadabout, Herbert, and Sidney Smith.

Before delving into a more meticulous analysis of the power dynamics in *Sir Gadabout*, let us refer directly to what Bakhtin himself says about carnivalesque power shifts and their overturning of hierarchy, which, as he mentions, follow “the peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’ (à l’envers), of the ‘turnabout,’ of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear”

³ Guinevere, despite her clichéd role of a damsel in distress, is portrayed as much smarter and fit for ruling than her husband, while Merlin, apart from his occasional problems with short-term memory, remains a powerful wizard. However, both of them are delegated to the margins of the story; Merlin disappears from the narration once he sends the search party on a quest, while Queen Guinevere passively waits for her saviour.

(11). This constant and temporary movement proves essential for the book in question. The first comical overturn of the hierarchy is the worst knight defeating the champion, not in combat but by successfully rescuing the damsel in distress, Queen Guinevere. Although both knights search for the queen, it is Gadabout who manages to defeat the witches and reveal the true royal identity of their maid. Sir Lancelot is not willing to accept Gadabout's superiority in this respect, but there is nothing he can do to diminish his rival's temporary victory and glory. (Temporary is a key word here and will be discussed further in the following sections.) After all, in theory, it is the king's champion who should find himself at the top of the pack and prove victorious in his search for Queen Guinevere (an outcome intertextually supported by the traditional story of love between the two). However, the character is presented as a smug, overconfident bully—unparalleled when it comes to knightly activities as such but definitely unlikeable. Not only does he humiliate Sir Gadabout during the tournament at the beginning of the book but also, after his favourite victim bests him and saves the queen, the champion proves to be an ungracious loser, unable to accept his failure. For instance, he cannot refrain from bending the truth to save face: "You see," he says, "I allowed Morag [the witch who kidnapped the queen] to turn me into a tree—a mighty oak, I think it was—so that she'd think she'd got the better of me. Then Gads came along throwing his bent spears all over the place and nearly messed it up..." (Beardsley 91). Here, skills and ruthlessness do not add up to much: even though Gadabout is the world's worst knight in terms of his skills, it is he and not Sir Lancelot who (accidentally) succeeds in rescuing the queen and, thus, it is the former rather than the latter on whom status and power is bestowed by the book's fictional universe—however fleeting and illusory this may prove to be.

The second reversal of the power structure is exemplified by the character of Herbert the Squire, who, although not particularly bright or sophisticated, has "a mighty punch" and often proves more reasonable than his master (Beardsley 18). As Lucy Andrew and Samuel Saunders note, "the sidekick is not simply always intellectually inferior to the hero-protagonist, but instead often exists to manifest qualities which the protagonist does not possess" (5). In the case of the Gadabout-Herbert relation, it is the squire who, although not skilful at swordplay, is still more athletic and physically strong. He is also more decisive, definitely less fearful and, truth be told, would most likely make a much better knight than Gadabout. Herbert is always ready to protect Gadabout with the strength of his muscles rather than with any weapon, and he often serves as an unofficial bodyguard who makes sure that others do not mock his helpless, weak, and naïve master. As Beardsley puts it: "Herbert had been with Sir Gadabout for many years and was absolutely devoted to his master... He wasn't very clever, but he had a mighty punch. Few people dared laugh at Sir Gadabout when Herbert was nearby" (18). Nonetheless, he is not the one who wields the true power or independently propels the unfolding of events.

Here comes the third overturn of hierarchy, which crosses the boundaries of species. The third comical overturn of hierarchy, however subtle, is the one that constitutes the central point of this paper, as it clearly goes beyond the frames of the feudal system by including a cat. In fact, it is the cat who wields the actual power, who makes decisions and propels the plot by

pushing the less bright and decisive human characters forward. Sidney Smith's sharp tongue not only serves as a source of humour but also as a force that enables Gadabout and Herbert to complete their quest. Importantly, the story employs zoontological difference (McKay and McHugh 18) that constitutes a crucial element of Sidney's personality. As a species, cats maintain a level of independence from humans, which in turn grants them a more easily imagined parallel intelligence to humans. At the same time, they are still domesticated animals and, as such, remain, to an extent, in the service of their owners. It is also true for Sidney Smith who, despite his intellect and independence, is obedient to his master—Merlin. Moreover, Sidney's humorous quick-wittedness at the expense of his companions is synonymous with his feline-ness—'catty' is a very apt word to describe his attitude.

The matter of Sidney Smith's anthropomorphism could be easily dismissed, as it is not unusual in children's literature. However, in this case, it does deserve a brief commentary. In Sir Gadabout's world, nonhuman animals do not normally talk⁴, but Sidney Smith is a magical exception due to the fact that he is Merlin's cat. Admittedly, he is accompanied by yet another talking creature—a turtle called Dr. McPherson (who, however, is more interested in protecting Merlin's house by throwing himself from a nearby tree to attack any passer-by he considers a threat). Even though Dr. McPherson is able to speak, he does not seem to be fully interested in his gift. In fact, if there is something unique about him—something unnatural for his species—that he truly enjoys, it is his ability to climb trees, which he seems to overuse. There is no doubt that it is Sidney Smith who is in charge and who takes advantage of his magical ability to speak. To sum up, it is the cat who is the smartest, the wittiest, and the most capable of solving problems or using speech both in order to talk himself out of trouble and to prove his superiority over humans.

Granting Agency to a Feline Sidekick

The above section outlined the character and order of the hierarchical reversals in *Sir Gadabout*: these include the champion being bested by the incompetent knight, the incompetent knight being less powerful than his loyal squire, and the loyal squire being (relatively) obedient to a cat. In this section, I would like to discuss in more detail how Sidney Smith exerts his superiority over humans and how it contributes to the overall humour of the book.

What Elick says about granting subjectivity to nonhumans by ascribing language to them (19) could not be truer in the case of Sidney Smith. Not only is he the only speaking animal (except for the aforementioned turtle, Dr. McPherson) but, in fact, he also has more agency and subjectivity than any of the remaining quest members. If Sir Gadabout stands for kindness and heart (and, potentially, also courage if understood as overcoming your fears in the name of

4 There are at least two instances of non-humans who clearly cannot speak human language—a dog at the tournament and, more importantly, Sir Gadabout's own mount, ironically called Pegasus, who was "knock-kneed and about ninety years-old" (Beardsley 13).

the greater good), Herbert stands for physical strength; however, it is the ginger cat who takes over—makes decisions, instructs the party, and makes sure that the quest does not turn out to be an utter failure. By no means is Sidney Smith a heroic or even particularly likeable figure, mocking the less bright characters, bossing them around, and excelling at sarcastic and often offensive comments. His humour stems from his sharp tongue and, more importantly, from the very trait highlighted in the title of this paper—his role as a nonhuman sidekick who completely takes over in a distinctly carnivalesque manner. Notably, Elick’s comment on the conflation of granting language and subjectivity to nonhumans could be developed even further in the particular case of Sidney Smith (19). Not only does he delight in using his ability to speak (he gladly gets involved in discussions or makes snarky comments), but he also proves exceptionally skilful, casting simple spells and even making up one to outsmart the witch. Thus, he proves more efficient and successful in language use than the humans who take this ability for granted.

If we were to take into consideration Paul Wells’s categorization of anthropomorphised animal representations, Sidney Smith would place somewhere between the “aspirational human” (an animal’s characteristics are meant to “demonstrate favourable human qualities”) and the “critical human” (the nonhuman character’s role is to critique humans) (51–52), although the latter seems closer to the cat’s nature; indeed, Sidney Smith simultaneously reveals the weaknesses of the humans to whom he is bound (“critical human”) and demonstrates the power of human-like intelligence and human language (“aspirational human”). As a sidekick, Sidney Smith therefore ambiguously serves the humans to whom he is bound, proving important to their success as knight and squire through his leadership in the story and, yet, also wielding a power to diminish these human characters in the eyes of the reader.

Naming Sidney Smith as a sidekick to Sir Gadabout is, perhaps, too simple a label for the characters’ relationship. Anke Marie Bock defines the classic sidekick as a character who “dedicates his life to serving a superhero”, adding that most of the time, he (as the sidekick is usually male and a very young one, for that matter) has just one mission—to be of help to the superhero he treats “as a parental figure” (153). None of these characteristics is true for Sidney Smith, except for his gender and, to a certain extent, his task to assist Sir Gadabout (otherwise, we could not consider him a sidekick), but certainly not due to his admiration for the knight. Naturally, one should bear in mind that the book in question is meant to make children (and also adults) laugh, and thus, it cannot be considered a typical superhero story. On the other hand, Sidney Smith does not seem to play any of the conventional roles ascribed to nonhuman sidekicks in children’s literature either. Despite Sir Gadabout being a classical stand-in for a child protagonist (and certainly not a superhero), Sidney Smith could not be further from the “boy-and-his-dog” convention that became so popular in the twentieth century. Not only is he, obviously, a cat, and an anthropomorphised one, but more importantly, it is he who is in charge and who stands by Sir Gadabout’s side for various reasons, the last of them being his personal attachment to the knight. One could argue that the mere fact of Sidney Smith’s anthropomorphism cuts all ties with the “boy-and-his-dog/other pet” convention, but it would be a simplification. For instance, the

complex relationship between the little prince and the anthropomorphized fox from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's novella *The Little Prince* bears a certain resemblance to the "boy-and-his-dog" convention in the way that they gradually build their relationship and become attached to each other. In the case of Sidney Smith, however, there is no trace of affection for Sir Gadabout—at least not in the book in question, which is the first of the series.

This conclusion leads us to the question of whether Sidney Smith can be ascribed to any of the typical sidekick roles theorized by Stephen M. Zimmerly, who categorizes the sidekick as either a narrative getaway, devil's advocate, comic relief, or foil (15–40). We can quite easily rule out the cat's role as a narrative getaway since he does not prove particularly helpful to the reader in learning any new information about Sir Gadabout, who, admittedly, is not a mysterious or complex character. Notably, the comic relief sidekick is also missing: in *Sir Gadabout*, it is not the responsibility of one character to act as a pressure valve for potential overseriousness—rather, here, humour emerges from the relationships between the central band of characters set against the anthropocentric and feudal hierarchies that would otherwise be expected to organise them, thereby producing the carnivalesque effect. Thus, Sidney Smith does not fall into this category, either. He is also too unapologetically vibrant and outspoken to be considered a foil sidekick—even when he is hidden in a saddlebag, he cannot refrain from making his presence known. These particular character traits lead us to the most promising type of sidekick—the devil's advocate. Zimmerly briefly summarizes the role of this category:

Just as the narrative gateway role allows a sidekick to reveal a hero's nature, the devil's advocate role also reveals elements of the hero; in this case, the role shows (in part) how a sidekick can challenge, hone, and improve a hero's decision-making. This role seems partially nestled within the narrative gateway role, but they do exist independently. "Devil's advocate" could be alternatively titled "the voice of reason," a distinction that helps introduce how the role works. Penny from the Inspector Gadget cartoon series . . . is a good beginning example, as her uncle Gadget is clearly oblivious to what needs to happen to get the job done. (21)

The reference to Penny seems especially useful in this case, as Inspector Gadget is as clumsy and clueless as Sir Gadabout. However, Zimmerly does not mention the nonhuman sidekick, a dog named Brain, whom we could call a secondary sidekick or even a meta-sidekick, as he mostly helps Penny to help Gadget. There seems to be a common tendency amongst such texts that if an incompetent protagonist has a human and a nonhuman sidekick, it is usually the former who takes the lead, allowing the animal sidekick to assist them. This tendency could also be ascribed to anthropocentrism—the more human or human-like the sidekick, the more power they tend to wield. And yet, Sidney Smith seems to escape this trap and command the quest party despite the presence of two humans: Sir Gadabout and his squire.

Influential nonhuman sidekicks who play the role of devil's advocate or the voice of reason are not as rare as one would expect. Quite often, they serve as a moral authority (for instance,

Jiminy Cricket from *Pinocchio*) or as a protector who attempts to prevent the protagonist from irresponsible decisions and/or maintain the *status quo*, if possible (in the world of children's films, this could be the hermit crab Sebastian from Disney's *The Little Mermaid*). Usually, their reasons seem selfless, and all their efforts are meant to save the protagonist and/or show them the path of righteousness, maturity, or some other virtue. Even if they prove to be wrong, they tend to have the protagonist's best interest at heart, and their intentions are inherently good. Yet, it is not the case with Sidney Smith as devil's advocate. Not only does he refrain from any moral judgement (Sir Gadabout's intellect may be deficient but surely not his moral compass) and from any attempt to maintain the *status quo* (impossible due to the nature of the quest), but he also takes control of situations in which the characters find themselves, using his sense and reason to put things right. Typically, he does not advise, warn, or protest (or if he does, it cannot be ignored)—instead, he commands, acts, and gets things done, while the human protagonists prove both helpless and hopeless and surprisingly willing to follow the cat's lead.

One of the most telling examples of Sidney Smith's true position in the temporary quest-hierarchy comes in chapter 6 of the book, where after a long and futile search for Guinevere, Sir Gadabout and his companions, equipped with a vague clue concerning the queen's whereabouts, make a breakthrough:

One day they rode to the top of a steep hill to get a good view of the countryside around them.

"Nothing," sighed Sir Gadabout. "Just another castle on top of that hill ahead of us."

"It's on the side of the hill, actually," said Herbert.

"No," said Sidney Smith, "it's at the bottom."

"It's moving!" they all said together.

"After it!" cried Sidney Smith.

He seemed to know what he was doing, so they charged down the hill and galloped across the valley towards the castle, which was now moving quickly. On the way Sidney Smith made them stop and talk to a farmer ploughing his field.

"What's the name of that castle?" he asked the farmer.

"That? Why, that's Springheel Castle."

"That's it!" said Sidney Smith. "The old woman said 'walls that run for hundreds of miles!'"

"Er," pondered Sir Gadabout as he watched Springheel Castle trotting along a river bank.

"And," added Herbert, "she said it would show us a clean pair of heels!"

The penny dropped. "Spring Heel Castle!" gasped Sir Gadabout. "I just knew it. Follow me!"
(Beardsley 67–9)

What this fragment illustrates is a power shift and the true hierarchy within the search party. It is Sidney Smith who not only is the first to understand the actual meaning of the hint but also

commands the chase—and the humans obey him without hesitation as he “seemed to know what he was doing” (66).

Interestingly, the reader can also notice subtler manifestations of the upturned hierarchy, as it is Herbert the Squire who makes a connection between the hint and the situation right after the cat. Sir Gadabout, who, in theory, should be the one to grasp it first (as the one on the top of the conventional medieval hierarchy), proves to be the last. He still makes an attempt to hide his shame by commanding his small group (“I just knew it! Follow me!” Beardsley 69), but it is yet another source of humour, as the decision has already been made by the cat and the squire.

The motif of a servant being more intelligent—or at least more realistic about the world—than his master has a long tradition. In the case of Sir Gadabout and Herbert, this dynamic clearly plays on the relationship between the squire Sancho Panza and the titular protagonist in Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. While Zimmerly rightly observes that “Sancho acts as the voice of reason (pathetic as it may be) to the unrealistic actions of Quixote” (21), Herbert could hardly be associated with reason (although, at times, he still proves brighter than Gadabout). Undoubtedly, he is more down-to-earth than his master, and some of his suggestions and actions prove decisive for the unravelling of the plot. This can be observed, for instance, in the following climactic scene, when the band returns to the hut where Guinevere is being kept prisoner and see a walking tree:

“It must be Morag in disguise,” whispered Sir Gadabout. “She’s trying to make a getaway – and my sword’s broken.”

“What about your spear, sir?” suggested Herbert.

“The bent one?”

“Yes. You could throw it round the corner whilst we’re still hiding behind the bush!”

(Beardsley 86)

Sir Gadabout follows his advice and, although nothing goes according to plan, by an unexpected turn of events, he does prevent the witch from escaping (even though the walking tree proves to be Sir Lancelot in disguise rather than the witch, who was hidden in another tree). Indeed, Herbert not only comes up with a plan (albeit one that requires luck to succeed) when his master is helpless, but also, more importantly, he believes in Sir Gadabout, which gives the knight courage and allows him to take risks.

The belief in their masters is yet another trait that Sancho Panza and Herbert have in common. Zimmerly notes the absurdity of Panza’s decision to leave his house and family and to follow Quixote when he promises to make him a governor of an island (22). At times, both squires see clearly how naïve and unreasonable their masters are, and yet they decide to remain loyal and follow them on their quests.

Notably, the humorous potential of some sidekicks seems to be overlooked and not fulfilled, by which I mean Sir Gadabout’s horse, Pegasus. Since the whole story plays with various literary

tropes and Don Quixote is the most obvious one, by extension, Gadabout's Pegasus shares certain traits with Rocinante, the horse of Don Quixote. Both horses are given lofty names that do not match their ripe age and modest appearance. However, Pegasus proves to be nearly completely devoid of personality, and his role as a sidekick is less than marginal. Except for one pre-quest event, the tournament where Pegasus fails Gadabout by first bumping him into the air (while the knight's too-spacious armour remains in the saddle) and then refusing to move, the horse seems passive, silent, and disengaged from the adventure, even though Gadabout rides him throughout the quest.

In her chapter on *Travels with Charley* by John Steinbeck, another narrative in which an animal sidekick plays a significant and titular role, Justyna Włodarczyk makes a connection between the narrator/Steinbeck and Don Quixote and observes that despite the camper's name being Rocinante, the vehicle is in fact absent from the plot and Charley (the dog) plays the role of both Rocinante and Sancho Pansa ("Błądny rycerz..." 223). If, in Steinbeck's case, we can observe a synthesis of sidekicks, in *Sir Gadabout*, we can talk about extension, as the party consists of four members instead of just three. Sidney Smith, meanwhile, appears to be the only character who fully understands the situation and attempts to coordinate his uncoordinated companions on the quest.

Tensions on the Side: Sidekick Rivalry

What should also be noted is the initial animosity between Herbert and Sidney Smith, which can quite often be observed between other sidekick pairings. It is a convention that bickering sidekicks will finally come to an agreement, usually due to an emotional attachment to the main protagonist or due to the simple fact of being on a quest together and being dependent on each other—in fact, it is not uncommon that the two reasons intertwine. The first exchange between Sidney Smith and Herbert sets the tone for their future interactions, although with time, the two sidekicks learn to work together. After Sir Gadabout gets his ear chopped off by Sir Lancelot during the joust, he goes to Merlin to ask for help. The wizard turns out to be as wise as he is forgetful and does not remember what he has been asked for:

Sir Gadabout began to grow impatient, and tried coughing a few times to remind the wizard that he was still there.

"I thought you'd come about your ear, not your cough," remarked Sidney Smith.

"Mind your own business," warned Herbert, who thought nobody, least of all a cat, should talk to his master like that.

"My master could turn you into a sweaty sock with a swish of his wand," hissed the ginger cat.

"My master could turn you into a dead cat with a swish of his sword," Herbert retorted.

"My master could make your master's *other* ear drop off. *And* his nose, *and* his eyebrows—" and Sidney Smith continued a long list of things which might be made to drop off Sir Gadabout – it all sounded very unpleasant. (Beardsley 36–7)

As this exchange shows, both characters are proud of their masters, and even though Sidney Smith wins this childish contest, Herbert does not think any less of Sir Gadabout; he merely accepts the fact that a wizard is more powerful than any knight. Sidney Smith also proves to be a prankster as he swaps the right spell in the book for a nonsensical one, which requires accomplishing a number of dangerous deeds in order to stick the ear back on. Despite this relatively innocent practical joke, Sidney Smith respects Merlin and agrees, albeit reluctantly, to join Gadabout and Herbert on their quest to save Queen Guinevere. As a matter of fact, nobody seems enthusiastic about Merlin's decision for Sidney Smith to join the band, but at the same time, nobody dares to oppose, given Merlin's status as an advisor to King Arthur:

"This is no ordinary kidnap. Someone has been working wicked spells here. You must send out your remaining knights to look for her."

"Surely you don't mean *him*?" Sidney Smith exclaimed in disbelief, pointing at Sir Gadabout.

"I can manage quite well on my own," said Sir Lancelot rather snootily.

"You must both go," said Merlin. "She could be anywhere. Sir Lancelot can go one way, Sir Gadabout and Herbert another. And I'm sending Sidney Smith to help them."

The cat groaned and put his paws to his head.

"Why the cat?" asked Herbert indignantly.

"Because..." began Merlin hesitantly. He didn't have the heart to say it was because Sir Gadabout was the Worst Knight in the World.

Sidney Smith, however, did have the heart. "It's because he's useless!"

"Be quiet, Smith," commanded Merlin.

"Well, it's true – he's rubbish!"

"I know I'm not the best of knights..." began Sir Gadabout, not being put off by Sidney Smith scoffing, "The *worst*!" (Beardsley 47-8)

Interestingly, Sidney Smith, though far from being happy about his master's order, does not attempt to change his mind. It is not easy to answer the question about his suspicious obedience, but at least two reasons seem plausible. First, despite his arrogance and tendency toward practical jokes, Sidney Smith respects Merlin and is less willing to disobey him than one might expect. Second, the cat is too smug and/or curious to miss the opportunity to join a (mock) heroic quest in search of the queen. Most probably, it is a combination of the two that results in Sidney Smith joining the search party and introducing the element of carnivalesque—the humorous, yet subtle, upturning of the hierarchy.

What is of importance for my argument is the fact that Merlin equips Sir Gadabout and his companions with one more trick by making Herbert invisible. However marginal it may seem, not only does it play a crucial role in the unfolding of the story and their ultimate victory, but it also proves meaningful for the relationship between Sidney Smith and Herbert as they start to work together rather than compete against each other. As Bronwyn T. Williams observes, in

popular action movies, the role of sidekicks is often to support the action hero with the qualities he needs during his mission but lacks himself (683). This seems to be the case in *Sir Gadabout* since, in order to rescue the queen, the protagonist needs both Herbert and Sidney Smith: the former due to his physical strength and the latter due to his intelligence. The knight himself seems to embody both kindness and persistence in overcoming one's weaknesses, which makes him a highly likeable character, despite his clumsiness. Only when strength and intellect start to work together are they able to learn where to search for Queen Guinevere. Specifically, Sidney Smith pretends to wield a spell, while invisible Herbert, understanding his intentions, lifts one of the witches in the air and swings her around. As a result, Demelza believes that the cat indeed knows magic and can hurt her (Beardsley 81–2). It proves to be a pivotal point of the story, leading directly to the final episode where Guinevere is found and saved.

Even though it may not be visible at first glance, *Sir Gadabout* and Sidney Smith's story can be read as species-political satire (McKay and McHugh 22–23) due to its carnivalesque nature. The overturning of the hierarchy that rebelliously satirizes servant-master relations (i.e., Sir Gadabout being so helpless and clueless that he needs to rely on the knowledge of a cat to complete his quest) is only temporary and thus not particularly threatening to a class-based society. Moreover, the carnivalesque revolt is additionally invalidated by the fact that an anthropomorphized cat is involved, rendering the humour of the story merely light-hearted and trivial rather than political. One important reason for the book's appearance of maintaining an apolitical stance is the apparent innocence and triviality associated both with animals and children's literature.⁵ With this in mind, let us examine how the species-political satire blends with the carnivalesque in the text in question.

By the end of the narrative, it becomes clear how the subtle revolt against the hierarchy proves to be merely temporary and how the social order is restored in a truly Bakhtinian manner. Sidney Smith is never declared the true hero—not by himself, the narrator, or any other character—despite the fact that the cat's conscious actions truly propel the plot while the knights and the squire wander around cluelessly. Indeed, the cat prefers to remain in the shadows even in the final scene:

Sir Gadabout was saying, "It was a lucky shot but I knew that if I aimed at an angle of 47 degrees with a head wind of 3.5 knots, I could just get the hem of Morag's dress."

And Sidney Smith was simply saying, "It was a lucky shot." (Beardsley 92)

5 In fact, the non-threatening violation of norms resulting in humour may also be explained by Peter McGraw's benign violation theory, according to which "humor only occurs when something seems wrong, unsettling or threatening (i.e., a violation), but simultaneously seems okay, acceptable, or safe (i.e., benign)" (McGraw and Warner 13). In *Sir Gadabout*, the possibly unsettling idea of a cat taking over is acceptable due to its temporariness and the benevolent purpose it serves, i.e., rescuing Queen Guinevere.

While Sir Gadabout describes, not quite faithfully, how he was able to capture the evil witch by pinning her dress to a tree with his spear, Sidney Smith questions the knight's abilities, but, very unlike him, he does not try to merit himself with the witch's apprehension. In a sense, the conventional hierarchy is restored in accordance with Bakhtin's principle of carnival, stressing the temporariness of the inversion. In fact, the very last sentence of the book captures this concept perfectly: "If everyone knew deep down that Sir Gadabout was still the Worst Knight in the World, it was quite a while before they mentioned it again" (Beardsley 92). Despite Gadabout's success and the passing glory of the one who saved Queen Guinevere, the official hierarchy remains intact—he is still the Worst Knight in the World, even though for a time being he enjoys some admiration and gratitude at court. Thus, the cat needs to retreat to his conventional place in our extended feudal system (i.e., one that includes nonhumans) below the squire, who brags about his strength, and the knight, who is somewhat humbler but still pretends to be a more skilful warrior than he actually is. After the carnivalesque suspension of the rules is over, Sidney Smith does not try to compete with them or claim any rights to the victory. He merely undermines Gadabout's claims without his usual stinging sarcasm and spirit—after all, he is just a cat.

Conclusion

As Simon Critchley puts it: "Humour is human. But what makes us laugh is the inversion of the animal-human coupling, whether it is Horatian urbanity or Juvenalian disgust" (34). This is especially true in the case of *Sir Gadabout*. Even if the joke about cats secretly running our world is indeed just a joke, it proves to be (temporarily) true in the world created by Beardsley. The comical inversion turns a cat into the most powerful figure: it is Sidney Smith who must take control over the quest when humans fail to make sensible decisions or to recognize the true nature of their circumstances. What makes this Bakhtinian power shift even more interesting and uncharacteristic for most children's books is its subtlety; Sidney Smith is never explicitly called the true hero or even the true brains of the quest, despite the fact that it is he who seems to propel the plot, being the most decisive and intelligent among the characters searching for Queen Guinevere. Moreover, even though he cannot be considered humble or discreet, Sidney Smith does not try to stress his own merit but rather retreats into the standard position of a nonhuman, which can be read as a Bakhtinian restoration of the social order after the carnival/quest has come to an end.

Representations of animals have always been tied to the human sense of humour, as McKay and McHugh's *Animal Satire* illustrates. It may not seem obvious, but *Sir Gadabout* certainly contains elements of animal satire, as understood by McKay and McHugh. One of the key elements contributing to the humour of the story is Sidney Smith's cattiness and independence, which constitute zoontological difference—defined as "animals' identity and behaviour, which can be turned to satirical significance" (18). At the same time, the category of species-political satire also proves useful, although, as I contend above, it is ambiguous due to satirical humour's conflation with Bakhtinian's carnivalesque and its rules in the book. Sidney Smith's overturning

of the hierarchy cannot be taken seriously because of his species, but also because the social order is eventually restored. This subtle revolt, though satirical, remains unthreatening and non-political due to its carnivalesque structure, the cattiness of Sidney Smith and his anthropomorphization, and the mere fact that the book belongs to the realm of children's literature, which tends to be dismissed as trivial.

Due to his association with Merlin, Sidney Smith is granted a special status and special skills since, unlike other nonhumans in the book, he can talk and makes good use of this ability. Undoubtedly, his agency is linked to his capacity to speak and express a variety of thoughts, emotions, and opinions, alongside casting magic spells⁶ (and, if necessary, pretending to be doing so). In fact, being the most outspoken and skilful user of human language, he is granted the most agency and the power during the carnivalesque, mock-heroic quest to rescue a damsel in distress.

The triple hierarchy reversal is both undisputable and discreet, temporarily turning the Worst Knight in the World into a champion and allowing the cat to take over the quest as the humans prove helpless and incompetent. In this upturned hierarchy, the nonhuman sidekick temporarily wields power, the human sidekick turns into his right hand, while the clumsy knight attempts to maintain appearances but ultimately follows the orders and suggestions of his sidekicks. Moreover, the king's champion, landing at the very bottom of the quest hierarchy, is ultimately ridiculed and rendered utterly useless.

It is the cooperation of the two initially conflicted sidekicks that allows the party to succeed. This success stems from the combination of their very different qualities: Sidney Smith is exceptionally intelligent, while Herbert is strong and relatively skilful in combat. However redundant Sir Gadabout may seem in this equation, it is his spirit and heart that lead to the victory over the wicked witches. Thus, even though the nonhuman is the brains of the operation and the one in charge, it is the Worst Knight in the World who gets the credit for the successful rescuing of the queen—and, according to the convention of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, order is restored when Sir Gadabout returns to the top of the hierarchy.

In light of the analysis presented in this article, one might argue that Sidney Smith does not fit into any of the sidekick categories proposed by Zimmerly and that a new category should therefore be introduced—one that accounts for his peculiar status as a sidekick who temporarily takes control only to return to his initial subordinate role. One of the possible terms could be 'sidekick protagonist' as it stresses the duality of such a character. However, further research is required to determine with certainty whether this type of character appears in other works of children's literature and whether the proposed term would have broader applicability.

6 In fact, Sidney Smith is able to lift a spell cast by one of the wicked witches on Sir Bartholomew the Mistaken and, as a result, obtain the clues needed to find Queen Guinevere. He moves his tail in a particular manner and says: "Unravel the deeds of one uncouth / Open your mouth and speak the truth" (Beardsley 71). From this, it follows that Sidney Smith is not only capable of making up spells in order to trick his enemies, but he can also cast actual spells—or at least undo those cast by other magicians.

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Review of *Black Feminist Mothering in 21st Century Literature: I Am Not Your Mammy* by Nicole Carr, Routledge, 2025, 166 pp. ISBN: 9781032719993

As Mikki Kendall posits, “It’s not silencing, or bullying, or toxic to refuse to make anyone else’s comfort more important than our lives or the lives of our children. We’re not here to be Mammy” (10). Kendall’s sentiment is strongly emphasized in Nicole Carr’s book *Black Feminist Mothering in 21st Century Literature: I Am Not Your Mammy*. Carr’s book sheds light on an inspiring aspect of female actions and relationships: how women, specifically Black women, resist the dehumanizing stereotypes and foster nurturing spaces for themselves and their communities.

The volume, available in open access, is part of the “Routledge Studies in African American Literature” series, which is dedicated to the critical exploration of African American literary works and cultural narratives. The book comprises an introduction and six chapters, in which the author portrays how Black women challenge the historically reductive stereotypes of them as mere caregivers or submissive figures. The Mammy stereotype present in the book’s title “was a means of neutralizing [B]lack women, presenting them as lacking agency, obedient, and grateful” (Hamad 49). Carr not only shows how the Mammy stereotype remains a persistent ideological tool for the exploitation of Black women’s labor but also dismantles the stereotype about both historical and contemporary figures by depicting multifaceted representations of Black females that reveal the complexities of Black women’s experiences and identities.

The author opens the introduction with references to the life of Butterfly McQueen (an actress known for her role as Prissy in *Gone with the Wind*) and uses her as an example of unacknowledged community mothering. The concept of *Black feminist mothering* is defined in the book as “the work required for ‘birthing new’ worlds” (1). The author clarifies how theoretical foundations from

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Patricia Hill Collins, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Joy James, and other scholars provide a framework for Black feminist mothering and explains which terms will be used interchangeably and why.

Chapter 1, “Riding with Death: Assata Shakur, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Revolutionary Black Matrilineal Consciousness,” derives its title from Jean-Michel Basquiat’s painting and uses “riding with death” as a metaphor for describing how Black women face reproductive violence. In this chapter, Carr presents Fannie Lou Hamer’s daughter dying due to healthcare discrimination as well as Hamer’s activism against forced sterilization. The author draws a connection between Hamer’s fight for reproductive justice under Jim Crow and the mistreatment of Black women by the healthcare system today. Assata Shakur’s story focuses on her prison experiences and “mothering” through poetry, community programs, and ancestral knowledge. The author argues that Shakur, in *Assata: An Autobiography* (a Black maternal manifesto and prison narrative), portrays Black female ancestors as oracles relaying information to new generations. The concepts of *Black matrilineal consciousness*, *politics of refusal*, and *high-risk anger* are explored. This chapter, like the subsequent ones, weaves in Carr’s own story—she discloses stories of her pregnancies to illustrate obstetric racism.

Chapter 2, “The Motherwork Continues: Merciful Mothering in the Black Lives Matter Era,” discusses *deathscapes/geographies of domination* and builds on Collins’ definition of *motherwork* to examine caregiving during the Black Lives Matter movement. Toya Graham’s pulling her son from protests after Freddie Gray’s killing and her “whupping” him, which went viral, is considered within a tradition of protective, sometimes controversial, mothering. Carr employs literary examples of Edward P. Jones’ *The Known World*, N. K. Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth* trilogy, and Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* to examine how fiction grapples with the legacy of slavery, parenting, and survival amid racial violence. The author draws comparisons between Frederick Douglass’ story of his mother’s absence and scarce visits and Henry’s perspective in *The Known World* as well as portrays difficulties in parenting during slavery, mainly lack of governance over one’s children as they are someone’s property and the detrimental impact of the owner’s violence on the parenting style, linking the problems from the novel with problems of present-day parents. Carr argues that the adverse circumstances in which Black people live are mirrored in the dystopian environmental problems depicted in *The Broken Earth* trilogy. She also asserts that “*The Broken Earth* may be categorized as an extended meditation on the negotiations, calculations, and miscalculations Black parents make under an exploitative system rivaling that of an American slaveholding society” (41). The brief commentary on *A Mercy* supports the chapter’s main points, and reproductive violence witnessed in real time is discussed.

Chapter 3, “Sisters in Bloom: Tending to the Garden of Sisterhood,” begins with references to Alice Walker and her *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, talks about *sisterwork* (mutual care between Black women), and defines *mother tongue* after Johnnie M. Stover, stating it will be applied to literary dimensions of letters of Black women writers. Chapter frames Phillis Wheatley-Peters’ friendship with Obour Tanner-Collins as an example of sisterwork and connects their 18th-century letters with Pat Parker and Audre Lorde’s correspondence, showing the continuity

of the mother tongue. The author draws parallels between Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Lorde's epistolary writing as spaces for healing and self-definition.

Chapter 4, "We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: Sisterwork in the Time of Betty, Coretta, and Myrlie," portrays the friendship of Betty Shabazz, Coretta Scott King, and Myrlie Evers-Williams after the assassinations of their husbands, as well as examines how the women navigated public grief, political pressure, and societal expectations. Carr argues, borrowing Lorde's phrase, that "learning how to 'mother ourselves'" (96) is vital for sustaining activist women. The chapter references concepts such as *mother wound*, *blackpain*, and *artificial distances*. The literary aspect of this chapter is largely limited to Lorde and Parker's letters and poetry and the commentary is rather brief.

In Chapter 5, "I Am Not My Brother's Keeper: Black Women M(o)thering Themselves," Carr explores contemporary cases such as Korryn Gaines and Megan Thee Stallion to explore the mother wound (lack of protection within one's community). The idea of *gendered ideologies of victimhood* and *Black patriarchal stealth* are presented as well. Carr explores intraracial politics and explores how sometimes Black women have to prioritize self-care over taking care of men. The author presents, in this chapter, "Black feminist mothering as the process by which we memorialize Black female lives beyond the headlines" (101). Elaine Brown's autobiography *A Taste of Power*, Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as well as Carr's own experiences, are the focal elements that contextualize examined issues.

The final part of the book, Chapter 6: "I Am Not Your Mammy: Kamala Harris and the Politics of Refusal," whose title links with the book's subtitle, is mainly an examination of Shirley Chisholm, Condoleezza Rice, and Kamala Harris' political careers, showing how it is possible to both resist and adopt harmful power structures. Carr illustrates the notion that in politics, Black women are often presented as saviors, yet at the same time, they are often denied leadership or autonomy. The limited literary analysis in this chapter focuses on using Morrison's *Sula* as a framework for understanding ambition, identity, and community accountability. This chapter ends with a commentary on the 2024 presidential election, bringing the book to a close, as there is no separate conclusion or coda that recapitulates the provided examinations and links all the separate chapters into one whole by showing connections, reflecting on implications, or pointing to future research. Instead, the closing argument seems to be embedded in the ending of the last chapter.

The book draws heavily on Black feminist theorists, incorporates cultural criticism, and applies a Black feminist lens to literature, historical figures, and both past and present events, showing how Black women's experiences and labor are often marginalized. By interweaving literary analysis with broader social and political issues, Carr provides a critical exploration of the selected texts. While rooted in literary criticism, the book is an interdisciplinary study; the author's approach extends beyond traditional literary criticism into areas of activism and social theory. The literary works examined serve to explore real-world issues but often merely provide a backdrop for the main analysis.

The title of the book suggests that its primary focus will be literary analysis of 21st-century literature, but the content leans more toward cultural theory, historical case studies, and Carr's personal narrative than to sustained textual literary analysis. The provided analysis frequently uses the selected texts as illustrative examples rather than conducting close readings. This lack of formal literary criticism stands in stark contrast with the book's title, which is often overshadowed by discussions of political figures, historical movements, and personal experiences of the author. Moreover, although the author does engage with literature, most of these are 20th-century texts, which means that the book does not exclusively—or even predominantly—analyze 21st-century literature, as the title suggests.

The style of writing is clear and engaging, but sometimes the frequent shifting between literary analysis and examination of historical or contemporary events can be experienced as slightly chaotic. Although most sources are cited correctly, there are numerous instances throughout the book (for example, pages 2, 5, 8, 19, 21) where a direct quote lacks a citation. One source, "Reproductive Justice" (page 8), has a citation in a different style than the style of other referenced sources. Moreover, this source is not in the bibliography provided at the end of the chapter (even though in the text we have a title and reference to the supposed authors), and it is not the only source referenced in the text but not included in the bibliographies, which are separate for each chapter. Sometimes, for example on page 19, there is a quote without a source reference, but a person is mentioned as a way of attributing the quote. However, no work ascribed to that person is provided in the bibliography; thus, the reader has no way of finding the origin of the quotation in question. There are quotes that are provided multiple times, and the citation is not always provided, as with the quote defining motherwork, which appears in the introduction (page 2), chapter 1 (page 22), and chapter 2 (page 33), but the proper citation is provided only on page 33; thus, the reader is in the dark as to the source of the quote throughout most of its use.

Overall, Nicole Carr's book is a vital source of information that provides important observations on the lives and struggles of Black women in the United States. The book's main aim seems to be to reclaim and redefine Black mothering as a force for survival as well as liberation, rejecting stereotypes and making visible the breadth of care work done by Black women in literature, politics, and everyday life. Autoethnographic storytelling is not a typical component of academic monographs. The author's firsthand experiences with the examined concepts and their incorporation into the academic text can be seen as both beneficial (providing validation for made observations and allowing readers to see perspectives not always available to them) and detrimental (one could argue a lack of scientific objectivity) to an academic text. The issues with quoting could be easily resolved by more detailed editorial work, but the fact that the title's literary emphasis and temporal scope may give a misleading impression of the proportion of actual literary criticism devoted to recent literature is not easily solved. The work itself is important, informative, and approachable, but the title-content misalignment may lead to intended readers missing the book and those expecting an in-depth literary examination (as the book is part of "Routledge Studies in African American Literature") being disenchanted with the content.

Works Cited

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