Szeged Series in American Studies #5

Topics in American Studies: History, Literature, and Culture 2

Edited by
Réka M. Cristian, Zoltán Dragon and Ágnes Zsófia Kovács

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REPRESENTATIONS OF REGENERATION AND HEALING IN A SELECTION OF AMERICAN LITERARY PRODUCTIONS

Réka M. Cristian, Zoltán Dragon, and Ágnes Zsófia Kovács

This new volume of AMERICANA eBooks, part of the Szeged Series in American Studies (SZESAS), addresses the issue of US society and culture at the threshold of crisis and healing in a selection of American literary representations. American society and culture has mostly been fragmented along many fracture lines, and the volume offers a collection of essays that focus on literary representations of these. The papers explore a diverse range of texts from highly canonized to almost marginal by interrogating the possibilities of transformation, agency, and the limits to healing. The discussions target the potential agency literary characters have in the articulation, planning, and eventual transformation of their life trajectories, inviting diverse theoretical frameworks for analyzing these scenarios.

In the opening essay of the collection, András Tarnóc investigates the role of aggression in Hemingway's short story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." The story describes the culmination of several crises leading to aggression on various levels, eventually ending up in a tragic incident. The triangular relationship of Macomber, his wife Margot, and Wilson unfolds against the background of colonial Africa in the context of a hunting safari. The plot depicts several crises: marital, geopolitical, and colonial that unfold in the triangular relationship of Macomber, Margot, and their hunting guide Wilson. The essay investigates and evaluates the way members of the triangle respond to the respective crises. The analysis draws on Benson's hero development theory. The essay concludes that the responses given to the given crises are all futile. Macomber "paid the death he owes to God," Margot lost her dominant position in her marriage, and Wilson continues to be limited to the role of being a servant to wealthy clients.

Following Tarnóc's text, Sára Káldy Buschné's paper compares psalms by Anne Sexton and John Berryman. Sexton and Berryman wrote almost an identical number of psalms in their respective religious poetry sequences: Anne Sexton's sequence *O Ye Tongues* related to Christopher Smart contains

ten poems and John Berryman's cycle *Eleven Addresses to the Lord* contains eleven poems. Both poets are considered to be confessional poets by criticism. The paper argues that in this special case, the term "confessional" has an extra dimension that comes from the confessional nature of the psalms. The paper also claims that Sexton's and Berryman's poems present individual ways to process the "form" provided by psalm culture. On the one hand, Sexton's cycle employs intense imagery together with reminiscences of Biblical language and is mixed with voices of a mature woman and a child. On the other hand, Berryman's poems are closer to the text of psalms, the apostrophes invoke Biblical pretexts and retain the intimate nature of Biblical psalms.

Cristina Chevereşan's "The Great American Satire: Philip Roth's *Twilight of the Idols* "aims to investigate the creative ways in which satire combats nostalgia in *The Great American Novel* (1973). Roth dedicated the novel to baseball and its downfall as an axis of American mythology and (self)-representation. Since readings of this particular work have been rather scarce as compared to other parts of Roth's creation, the aim of the paper is to contribute to filling that gap. After the mockery of the Nixon Era from within, undertaken in *Our Gang* (1971) as an expression of frustration and discontent with the political climate, Roth returns to farce as an effective tool to warn about the pitfalls of America's post Second World War evolution, up to the 1970s. This humorous response to the fall of idols and ideals as part of the nation's transformation formulates an ingenious critique of the perpetuation and absolutization of myths and prefigures the dramatic tension of Roth's award-winning *American Pastoral* (1997). Preposterous as its discourses may sound at times, they can be viewed as coping mechanisms in an enlarged context of civic quandaries. By outlining some of its major elements, Chevereşan aims to supplement the already existing Roth scholarship with a fresh revisitation of a rather forgotten novel.

The next text of the volume is Rachele Puddu's "Bursting under the Pressure of Unspeakable Pain: Mickey Sabbath between Degeneration and Regeneration," which examines how Philip Roth portrayed human crises and wrote about illnesses and death from an autobiographical perspective in his *Sabbath's Theater* (1995). In the novel, Roth narrativized illnesses and human mortality by choosing an unusual character, Mickey Sabbath. The former puppeteer is torn apart by the pain caused by the death of his mistress and brother, by the failure of his career, and by the haunting of his mother's ghost. Despite the many attempts to cope with this unbearable pain, Roth seems to leave no room for his character's redemption. The paper discusses Sabbath's grotesque attempts to move beyond his crisis and pain. Puddu considers Roth's personal and artistic journey of healing and coping with his own troubles, which eventually culminates in the publication of the novel. This moment coincided with an astonishing turning point in Roth's career, a

regeneration that can be better understood through the study of one of his more outrageous characters.

Pál Hegyi "Blanks into Text and Visuality: Heterotopic Coping Mechanisms in Paul Auster's *Bloodbath Nation"* discusses Auster's 2021 book, which was created in cooperation with photographer Spenser Ostrander. Regarded as an intermedial piece, characterized by a constant dialogue between text and photos, this book negotiates intersecting domains of social, political, historical contexts aligned with sensationalist media representations of fear and violence fueled by the vicious cycle of mass massacres in the United States. Despite attempting to unravel conflicting stances between pro-gun versus anti-gun policies, or trying to accumulate arguments for and against different types of gun-control directives, Auster suggests that we "remove ourselves from the present" and "conduct an honest, gut-wrenching examination of who we are" (Auster 2021, 44). In Hegyi's view, self-inspection and reflection is made possible within the blank spaces delimited by the interplay of text and visual representations.

Focusing on the same author, Fanni Orsolya Kovács addresses the issue of trauma in Auster's last novel *Baumgartner* in the paper "Analyzing Trauma, Causality, and Healing in Paul Auster's *Baumgartner*." In the novel, Seymour Baumgartner, an aging professor of philosophy, is informed that his housekeeper's husband lost two fingers during carpenter work. This incident leads him to perform his own "phantom limb syndrome." The present paper aims to explore Baumgartner's trauma, arguing that the amputation of the fingers serves as the traumatic stimulus, indicating the belated nature of his trauma (Freud). The "phantom limb" not only functions as a trope in analogue with the loss of his loved one, a missing part of his—the trauma is seen as a hole (Lacan)—but as an attempt to verbalize the trauma as a catachrestic signifier of this void.

The chapter on "Unsentimental Historicizing in Barbara Neely's Crime Novel *Blanche Passes Go* (2000)" by Ágnes Zsófia Kovács and Réka Szarvas investigates ways of historicizing in African American hard-boiled crime fiction by exploring the representation of trauma processing in Barbara Neely's novel. The black female detective, Blanche White, confronts the traumatic memory of her own rape by a white man; a recurring trope in contemporary narratives of slavery called neo-slave narratives. The discussion is based on Gabriella Friedman's approach, who distinguishes a sentimental tradition of historicizing slavery and an unsentimental way of historicizing it in fictional neo-slave narratives. Friedman identifies three key features the uses of which define the difference between sentimental and unsentimental ways of historicizing: the examination of unsentimental language use, the interiority of characters, and evocations of the sympathy and empathy of readers. The article discusses the role of Friedman's

sentimental historicizing and unsentimental historicizing narrative traditions that are at work in Neely's crime novel.

Chapter eight of the book is Abdin Rahmeh's "Colonial Abjection in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*: Expelling Self and Other using the Master's Tools" explores themes of isolation and resistance against patriarchal oppression in Jackson's novel, as embodied by the protagonist and narrator, Mary Katherine. She attempts to subvert these oppressive forces through a performance of witchcraft. Although this defiant witchcraft symbolizes her dissent, her profound hatred for the townspeople is rooted in class-based *colonial abjection* laying claim to bodies and spaces. Utilizing a framework combining Abjection Studies, Spatial Studies, and Whiteness Studies, this analysis examines Mary Katherine's affinity for isolated spaces, revealing how it perpetuates a legacy of classist, racist, and colonial ideologies. Rather than achieving true inherently intersectional liberation, Mary Katherine becomes an agent of what Françoise Vergès terms a *civilizational feminism* that, as Alexandra Hauke notes, reinforces "American foundational beliefs about the frontier as well as its ongoing manifestations and usefulness in maintaining current orders of supremacy over the environment and subordinated groups, primarily women." The novel's title reflects the castle's role as a symbol of fortitude, both against outsiders and the passage of time, as Mary Katherine's rituals, as Shelley Ingram maintains, remain personal and inaccessible to others, as they are not transmitted through folklore and are rather a form of make-belief play.

The next chapter, "A Comparison of Radványi's Translation of *Looking Backward* with the Original Text(s)" by Aliz Smitnya analyzes Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and compares its 1888 and 1889 editions with Dániel Radványi's 1892 Hungarian translation. Through a detailed line-by-line comparison, the research uncovers textual differences and explores the historical and cultural contexts of these versions. The study highlights intriguing nuances in Radványi's translation, showing the balance between fidelity to the original and the demands of cultural adaptation. Notably, Radványi's work appears to draw from both English editions, blending elements from each. This insight enriches our understanding of the translation process, emphasizing its fluid and dynamic nature, and contributes to discussions on translation as a complex, culturally embedded practice.

Éva Urbán's "'She's Not Technically Their Grandma. Indian Way She Is:' Spaces of Identity Formation in the Urban Indian Context" traces how three narrators—Blue, Edwin Black, and Orvil Red Feather—try to find their place in Oakland's indigenous community as they construct their Native American identity in Tommy Orange's *There There* (2018). They are all disconnected from their cultural roots due to the long-term effects of relocation policies and the consequences of their direct or indirect connection to adoption and

the three main places where they can embrace their indigeneity is the Indian Center, the Big Oakland Powwow, and also different online spaces. The narrators become members of the urban Indian community that serves as an extended family for them by preparing for and participating at the powwow. This event is not only a reunion for Native Americans from all over the country, but it is also the place where Blue, Edwin, and Orvil meet some of their biological relatives for the first time in their lives. The chapter analyzes spaces and voices of Native American identity construction in the novel.

Hend Ayari's "Auto(bio)graphy(story): The Necessary Act?" explores the potentiality of the life writing genre for healing from trauma caused by settler colonial cultural erasure. The paper considers how women employ life writing as an act of resistance. By embracing the subversive creativity of the twenty-first century life writing and actively engaging in the movement for Indigenous resurgence, Native American women writers not only control self-representation but also rewrite the generic rules that have held their voices and stories captive within the staid conventions of the American autobiographical tradition. When read as biostories in Joshua Whitehead's interpretation of the term instead of memoirs, the texts I study affirm "survivance in the face of trauma" rather than "survival of trauma" (Madsen) through choices regarding self-representation, literary aesthetics (Indigenous storytelling techniques), and contemporary topics (activism and healing). The texts by Linda Le Garde Grover, Joy Harjo, Toni Jensen, Alicia Elliott, and Elissa Washuta advance an "active sense of presence" and "repudiate victimry" (Vizenor) in their re-story-ing of personal and collective traumatic experiences into stories of healing through self-representative and personal stories that upset the burden of ethnographic mis-recognitions.

In "Survival in a Post-Pandemic World: Reconstructing Society in Stephen King's *The Stand*" Korinna Csetényi discusses King's novel originally published in 1978, followed by the uncut edition in 1990, which has experienced an unexpected, unfortunate topicality precipitated by the Covid crisis in 2020, becoming a common cultural reference point due to its prophetic nature and uncanny resonance with contemporary reality. The book details the accidental release of a superflu from a secret military research facility, which kills off 99.4 % of the world's population. With the rest of humanity immune to the disease, the text focuses upon the struggles of the survivors and their gradual coming together to reorganize social structures and found a new society. A romantic at heart, King believes in human beings' freedom to make moral choices: he paints a huge canvas peopled with various characters who are either driven to search out a prophet-like old woman (representing the forces of good), or a demonic entity, summoning them from afar. Csetényi argues that this journey motif connects the work to the tradition of epic quests, where a clash between the forces of good and evil constitutes the narrative climax.

Aya Chelloul's essay explores the evolution of Arab American literature by focusing on key historical moments and authors who have shaped the genre. By charting Orientalist texts that have emerged early in the nineteenth century in the United States, to the contemporary twentieth century Arab American voices such as that of Joseph Geha, it aims to juxtapose the rich tapestry of experiences to undo persistent stereotypes. The essay also examines the impact of Orientalism, the progression of Arab American literary production across immigration waves, and the thematic concerns that define the genre. Through this analysis, the essay underscores the critical role Arab American literature plays in fostering cultural understanding and challenging monolithic narratives, especially through a focus on Joseph Geha's short stories representing hybrid Arab American identities.

The thirteen essays of the collection map diverse forms of crises and crisis management in twentieth century US literary representations, in which the road to healing is more often blocked than not. The management of fear, insecurity, rape, illness, marginalization, disaster takes diverse turns and oftentimes goes awry but this does not dampen the characters' quest for meaning making, interaction, and self-expression.

CRISIS ON A SAFARI: MANIFESTATIONS OF AGGRESSION IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S "THE SHORT HAPPY LIFE OF FRANCIS MACOMBER" (1936)

András Tarnóc

Introduction

Hemingway's first trip to Africa in 1933 lasted three months and his experiences provided inspiration to write a novel and two short stories, namely *The Green Hills of Africa* (1935), "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," (1936) and "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" (1936) respectively. The "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" describes the culmination of several crises leading to aggression on various levels, eventually ending up in an incident which can be interpreted either as manslaughter or murder. The triangular relationship of Macomber, Margot, and Wilson unfolds against the background of colonial Africa in the context of a hunting safari. The plot depicts several crises among them Macomber desperately trying to compensate for his besieged manhood with hunting prowess, his wife Margot healing her sterile marriage with sexual escapades, and Wilson assuming the role of the taciturn, yet physically and morally superior philandering hunting guide. Hemingway's work also depicts a crisis on the geopolitical level and the biosphere via references to the colonial dynamic and the senseless, equally futile hunting expedition. Apart from the very personal and psychological context of the respective exploits, I aim to explore the various manifestations of crises and the mostly aggressive responses provided by the given characters. In order to achieve my research objective I rely on a theoretical apparatus informed by Sigmund Freud's pleasure principle model, G. Moser's taxonomy and Jackson J. Benson's hero development theory.

The theoretical aspects of aggression

As Freud argues in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), there are two basic instincts, the life instinct and the death instinct named Eros and Thanatos giving rise to love (affection) and hate (aggression) respectively (53). Baron

and Richardson forwarded a rather broad-sweeping definition of aggression, namely a "form of anti-social behaviour showing a lack of emotional concern for the welfare of others" (Haidu and Vlaicu 62). Moser classified aggression into four categories. The instinctual model suggests that aggression is innate to human nature. Reactive theories argue that aggression results from a response to various frustrating situations, while it can also be connected to learned behavior via imitation or observation. Likewise, the cognitive approach views aggression in the context of a stimulus and response (Haidu and Vlaicu 62).

Aggression can be distinguished according to the nature of intent. Accordingly, there are two types, emotional and impulsive aggression entailing no or limited intent, while cognitive or instrumental aggression implies intention or premeditation (Stangor 527). Aggression can be physical or non-physical, the latter can take the form of verbal and relational (social) aggression with the aim of harming one's social standing, or relationships. Research tends to agree that "aggression is not so much about the goal of harming others, as it is about the protection of the self" (Stangor 525). Aggressive behavior can result from the comparison of one's social status or situation to others. While downward comparison confirming the superior status of the person doing the comparison does not usually lead to aggression, upward comparison, compelling one to recognize their inferiority to their counterpart results in frustration and eventually aggression (Stangor 544). As for direction, displaced aggression occurs when negative emotions caused by one person trigger aggression toward a different individual (Stangor 548). Aggression is also determined by the presence of the culture of honor, an attitude or mindset encouraging a vehement response in defense of one's reputation, family, and property (Stangor 571).

Hemingway's literary world is permeated with aggression. The prototype of the classic Hemingway hero, Nick Adams of *In Our Times* (1925), provides a blueprint to be followed in several of the writer's major novels. Thus the respective code hero stands in confrontation with the mostly impersonal forces of the world, and being compelled to fight for his honor, love, or the integrity of the self, he cannot hope for more than moral victory in the particular conflict. The "man against the world" scenario implies loss, but not defeat, as the reader can be consoled by the famous maxim: "but man is not made for defeat […] a man can be destroyed, but not defeated" (Hemingway 1952, 38). The world as a victimizer and the individual as a victim appears in many familiar forms in Hemingway's *oeuvre*. Suffice it to mention Jake Barnes mourning the loss of his masculinity due to the cataclysm of the war in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Frederick Henry paying the ultimate price for the declaration of his private truce or desertion in *Farewell to Arms* (1929), or Santiago's heroic yet futile struggle with the marlin in *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952).

My research primarily utilizes Benson's model, which establishes a connection between aggression theories and character development in Hemingway's fiction. Accordingly, the first stage of the given continuum is the assertion of the self, in the second phase the hero has to contend with a fear related to the failure of self-assertion, while the third stage entails the attack on or attempted domination of the person who prevents the desired self-affirmation (Bender 19). The model on the one hand utilizes the instinctual approach as the third phase implies a pre-existing response pattern, along with reacting to a frustrating situation on the other.

In "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" the central originator and at the same time the main sufferer of the given crises is the title character himself. In all the cases to be discussed Francis provides an aggressive response to the particular predicament or setback. He is passively aggressive toward his wife Margot, openly and physically aggressive toward the environment, and displays aggressiveness toward himself. The marital crisis implies a strained spousal relationship. Francis' individual crisis refers to his threatened masculinity and his inability to live up to his self-imposed image of manhood. The political aspect of the crisis is manifest in the colonial setting, while the crisis in the biosphere is represented by the senseless attack on game in Africa.

Following the recognition that aggression is motivated by the need for self-protection, I argue that the respective characters' seemingly threatening behavior does not originate from strength, but stems from a weakness the given individual aims to hide. Wilson's wry quip: "we all take a beating everyday, you know, one way or another" (12) is instrumental. Macomber, Margot, and Wilson all experienced heavy blows against their self-esteem and attempts to protect their fragile ego.

Aggressive behavior

Francis is locked into a loveless and emotionally and physically sterile marriage in which he is forced to compensate for the given difficulties. One way of remedying the respective deficiency is hunting, along with various other forms of escape. He lives in his own private world, sheltered by money, yet paralyzed by fear. The fear is multidirectional involving the loss of social and financial status, and the established marital structure. Throughout the story, he experiences a full crisis of his manhood and enjoys a short lived recovery. His failed marriage is covered up by increased social activity and a hedonistic pursuit of adventure. The lion hunt implies continual tribulations as he is tortured by fear before and anguished by shame after. The demonstration of cowardice pushes him into a full crisis as a man, a husband, and a hunter. Additionally, just like Margot in the context of the hunting expedition, Macomber is limited to the role of an outsider during his wife's

tryst with Wilson. Both Macomber and his wife are entrapped in an estranged relationship. The marriage reached a stalemate as neither spouse can leave the other. Margot's beauty and grace buttresses Francis' social presence, while her husband's money allows her to lead a lavish lifestyle. "Margot was too beautiful for Macomber to divorce her and Macomber had too much money for Margot ever to leave him" (28).

Francis, just like several other Hemingway heroes, among them Jake Barnes or Mr. Elliot, is frustrated by his inability to live up to the image of masculinity maintained by himself. His reaction to the failed lion hunt reveals traces of self-hate and self-directed aggression. He responds to spousal infidelity with verbal aggression calling his wife a "bitch" (28) and displays an increasingly hostile attitude to Wilson who became his rival for his wife's affection. He explodes at his wife, almost yelling at her and can hardly suppress his anger toward Wilson. In fact, the dialog between him and Margot subsequent to her "nocturnal adventure" confirms the marital stalemate. Although Macomber invokes a tacit spousal agreement assuring "there wasn't going to be any of that," (29) Margot easily sweeps aside his protest by reminding him how his cowardice "spoiled the trip" (29).

The application of Benson's model suggests that Macomber's whole life is dominated by the desire for self-assertion. As Hemingway's text indicates, he gained his knowledge of life including sex from "books, many books, too many books" (27). Margot's "governing" (16) and psychological control keeps him in the status of a boy-man. It is noteworthy that despite being married for a long time the couple has no children, as Margot joins the list of Hemingway's barren heroines including Brett Ashley and Mrs. Elliot. The fact that Macomber has not experienced fatherhood and in fact spends his life with recreational activities including driving expensive motor cars, duck shooting, and big sea fishing implies an eternal childhood. Going on a safari with an intent to gain a trophy, especially that of a lion, can be interpreted as his attempt to make his stand in a struggle, pitting a human and the ruler of the animal world against each other. In other words, it can be surmised that the lion represents all his frustrations and this assertion is justified by the fear he experiences after the animal's howl awakes him during the night. His cowardly reaction to the charge of the wounded lion symbolizes all the difficulty he has encountered so far and driven by instinct and reacting to his desperate predicament, he seeks revenge on nature.

Macomber's quarrel with Wilson originates from rivalry. Macomber is upset over his wounded masculine pride and his words to Wilson are full of hidden aggression even though he speaks in the general sense. "I'm not talking rot. I'm disgusted" (30). In this case the instinctual model is applicable as the competition for Margot's body is not driven by emotional attachment, but by a desire for physical possession. Macomber displays relational aggression toward Margot and primarily non-physical aggression to Wilson.

His conduct clearly demonstrates that aggression is motivated by the protection of the self. He is threatened as a man, a husband, and as a hunter. His recreational activities: car racing or hunting offer compensation for marital failure. He responds to marital estrangement by increasingly distancing himself from his wife both in a physical and metaphysical sense. It is telling how the couple maintains a physical distance throughout the story except when seeking emotional reassurance after the failed lion hunt Macomber reaches out to hold his wife's hand, who nevertheless refuses to grant solace.

His angry response to Wilson for accepting Margot's advances is not powered by jilted emotions, but by a wrath caused by Wilson's misappropriation of his property. The reference to "all the many men that he had hated" (29) indicates the continual violation of his self-assumed property rights. Such an attitude is discernible in the description of the marital stalemate. Macomber's "sinister tolerance" (28) of Margot's extramarital affairs represents emotional detachment. The lion hunt, an aggressive act in itself, amounts to displaced aggression as it can be considered Macomber's attempt at gaining self-assurance on the one hand and taking revenge on nature on the other. Similarly to Herman Melville's Captain Ahab, he is compelled by an insatiable urge to retaliate for being humiliated, regardless of the cost. It must also be noted that among the three characters only Macomber is motivated by the culture of honor as the disloyal wife casts doubts on his reputation and taints his self-perceived manly image.

Margot is also caught in a loveless marriage. She had been Francis's wife for eleven years. Her response to the botched lion hunt reinforces the "bitch" label hung on her by her husband as he sarcastically yet imploringly adds: "Why not let up on the bitchery just a little, Margot" (15). It must be noted, however, that under her "damn terrorism" (16) she is a sensitive woman. Although she "had been through with him" (27) repeatedly, she would never leave him. She has aged and she "was not a great enough beauty anymore at home" (27). The expression, "she had missed the chance to leave him and he knew it" (27) refers to the emotional impasse within the marriage. Also, her crying at the sight of her husband's cowardice and the failed hunt is indicative of suffering an emotional trauma. At the same time she is threatened by the "great," yet "sinister tolerance" (28) of Macomber. She also suffers from sexual hunger forcing her to behave "so very long" (31).

The application of Benson's model reveals that Margot asserts herself once by cheating on her husband and the second time by killing him. She was prevented from asserting herself socially, because she couldn't leave her husband and sexually by Francis's limited manhood. Fear of failure concerning the assertion of the self becomes applicable upon her realization that Macomber changed from a scared boy to a self-confident man during the buffalo hunt. Yet by the "accident" she became once again exposed to

the mercy of a man, in this case Wilson, who dominates her verbally at the end of the story.

Nevertheless, she is a victim and a victimizer at the same time. She engages in verbal and physical aggression. The emotional and physical withdrawal from her husband is a futile response to her self-perceived entrapment. As Harris points out, she is the only female character in the story and relegated to being a voyeur she is prevented from participation in the hunting adventure. In the heat of the moment she responds to aggression with aggression as she becomes a willing participant in shedding the blood of animals and of Francis.

While Margot views her sexual attractiveness as a tool for self-assertion (a goal she has realized at the cost of living in a loveless marriage), in a harmonious relationship self-assertion cannot be achieved by both parties. In this vein, Macomber's fulfilment of this objective during the buffalo hunt triggers Margot's fear of failure, eventually leading to the subsequent crime. Ironically, for Macomber self-assertion means death as well, and his "short happy life" is ended by Margot's shot. Margot, aiming to dull the pain over her husband's cowardice, stifles her emotions: as a true Hemingway character she wants to drown her sorrow into alcohol. When asking for a gimlet, she adds, "I need something," (9) – the sentence conveys her effort to cope with the respective trauma and the unsuccessful marriage at the same time. Having seen the crisis of her husband, she does not help him, in fact turns against him: not only does she remove her hand from his when he reaches out to her, but she also flirts with Wilson openly, and thus humiliates Macomber.

In fact, Margot is engaged in the gravest forms of aggression. The withdrawal of her hand and flirting count as impulsive aggression, but the liaison is premeditated and relational. During this act she objectifies Wilson and she also engages in comparison, asserting her superiority over her husband when he is the most vulnerable. In the course of the buffalo hunt when Francis regains his self-pride and masculine self-esteem, she feels threatened and the resulting comparison leads to physical aggression and murder. Unlike in case of the lion hunt, Macomber "standing solid and shooting for the nose" (42) maintained his control over himself and his last target to boot. The circumstances of his death do not indicate that Mrs. Macomber wanted to help her husband, rather they corroborate a homicidal intent. Relegated to the role of an outsider or voyeur at best throughout the story, she expressed repulsion at the violence of hunting and Hemingway offers no indication that she actively participated in the safari by using a gun. Arguably, Margot's aggression is not displaced, it is directed at Macomber.

Wilson especially feels exposed and vulnerable to Margot, after she learns about how he violated company policy by chasing a buffalo with a car. Macomber, thirsty for revenge for being cuckolded, acerbically remarks: "now she has something on you" (36). Wilson regains his control over his

precarious situation after Margot shoots Macomber. While Wilson acts as a purveyor of aggression and becomes a conduit to Macomber's anger, inherent and unwitting male solidarity makes him side with Macomber. He rebuffs Margot's condescending remark concerning the potentially negative outcome of the buffalo hunt with a terse statement: "It's not going to be a damned bit like the lion" (37). His comments to Margot subsequent to the incident: "Why didn't you poison him? That's what they do in England" (43) alludes to his previous experiences with "bitchery."

Wilson, just like the other two components of the triangle, engages in passive aggression. He expresses his indignation over Macomber's idea of leaving the dying lion to its fate with a reprimand in a general sense: "it isn't done" (24). In order to avoid confrontations with his clients he refrains from the active voice and aims to maintain a distance from the "emotional trash" via "distinctive consideration" (13). He is also a cog in the wheel of colonization. His urge to administer corporal punishment for native intransigence suggests frustration over limitations of colonial control. Wilson is also hindered in his self-assertion, despite appearing as a self-confident philandering adventurer. His emotional insecurity is suggested by the extremely negative view of women and the concern over the potential consequences of violating safari rules. Yet, in an ironic conclusion, he is the one who is able to gain full self-assertion, because by covering up the tracks of Margot's fateful act he can keep the perpetrator at bay.

Manifestations of colonialism and the attack on nature

The plot takes place in Kenya in a colonial setting. The locals are in a secondary social and political position. The Anglos or whites exploit the people and the natural resources and wildlife of the country. The natives are also muted, they cannot express their opinion about the botched lion hunt, yet as the buffalo expedition shows they risk their lives. They are threatened by Wilson raising the specter of corporal punishment: "Told him to look alive or I'd see he got about fifteen of the best" (12). Relegated to transporting hunting equipment by themselves, the locals are forced into passivity. They are limited to carrying weapons instead of using them as being true to their job description they bear the brunt of this aggression against nature.

The safari raises the issue of man's relation to nature. Partially driven by the Thoravian idea, Macomber wants "to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner" (Thoreau 93), but he has yet to realize that the very safari park implying nature or life being placed into a submissive or secondary position is hardly suitable for the achievement of this goal. The story also describes the impact of aggression against the animal world. In itself the safari amounts to a planned assault on the African fauna and Hemingway does not spare the naturalistic details depicting the suffering of

the animals. Such a human invasion into the animal world, and the death of the respective game: lion, eland, impala, and buffalo represent multiple dimensions of the given crisis. The eland and impala are herbivorous and pose no danger to humans. The lion's roar, however, causes almost otherworldly fear and intimidation before and during the hunt, and tremendous shame after. The "deep-chested moaning, suddenly guttural, ascending vibration that seemed to shake the air" (19) horrifies Macomber.

In a unique way Hemingway describes the safari not only from the hunter's point of view, but from the angle of the hunted as well. The reader is afforded a glimpse into the animals' tribulation as the lion "feeling a solid bullet ripping in his flank and lower ribs" (21) is ready to take revenge by making a last rush against the hunter. In a traditional Hemingway story this is the exact point for the appearance of the code hero. The safari has turned into a life and death struggle and in a unique turn of events the moral victory is earned by the lion as the latter's final rush triggered by "pain, sickness, hatred and all of his remaining strength" (25) pushes Macomber to panic eventually running away from the scene.

The hunting expedition or safari involves both herbivores and carnivores and virtually covers the entire food chain. It starts with the failed lion hunt then continues with the killing of antelopes and leads to the buffalo, eventually culminating in Macomber's death. The hunter does not achieve unity with nature as in case of colonial adventures to the frontier commemorated by Benjamin Church's *Entertaining Passages* (1716) or Daniel Boone's solitary exploits in the outlying regions of Kentucky commemorated by John Filson. As Richard Slotkin asserts, Church's hunter narrative can be considered "the first literary vaulting over the hedge," in other words crossing into the frontier, (Slotkin 1973, 177) while Boone's elation over the landscape is clearly felt in the following passage:

> One day I undertook a tour through the country, and the diversity and beauties of nature I met with in this charming season, expelled every gloomy and vexatious thought […] I had gained the summit of a commanding ridge, and, looking round with astonishing delight, beheld the ample plains, the beauteous tracts below. On the other hand, I surveyed the famous river Ohio that rolled in silent dignity, marking the western boundary of Kentucke with inconceivable grandeur. At a vast distance I beheld the mountains lift their venerable brows, and penetrate the clouds. (Filson, 1989, 493)

In the case of the safari, humans invade an artificially controlled environment that creates the illusion of freedom for the animals under the disguise of their protection. Somewhat farcical rules protect the animals, such as the banning of shooting them from moving cars. Participation at the safari is not driven by the survival instinct as it is a mere selfish entertainment or futile proving

of one's manhood. Thus Wilson's cynical statement, "we all take a beating" becomes applicable to the animal world as well. Macomber's aggression to nature is indicated by the gory details of the hunt. It is noteworthy however, that the animals fight back, the lion's roar causes deadly fear and the buffalo makes a desperate last charge.

Conclusion

The safari participants repress tremendous internal tension and frustration. The stifling of anger eventually erupts in a fatal encounter. Macomber wrestles with the burden of an estranged marriage, sexual failure, and compulsion to constantly prove his manhood in light of being cheated on. Margot's emotional balance is shaken by losing her youth and sex appeal and just like Francis, she is compelled to prove to herself that she is still attractive. This lack of self-acceptance drives her to several liaisons. Macomber's pain over being cuckolded is illustrated by his reluctance to name the very act of adultery and reveals an effort to distance himself from his personal and sexual failure.

The role of the code hero, the classic Hemingway protagonist in confrontation with the world or larger forces than him, is usurped both by the lion and the buffalo facing deadly opponents while alone and wounded. At this juncture of the story Macomber is no Nick Adams, he is not faced with the evil of the world as he himself is responsible for creating the challenge. In this vein, Macomber's intended rite of passage becomes a two-way street and results in a curious role reversal, during which the prey assumes the status of the classic Hemingway hero, who "can be destroyed, but not defeated."

As a result of the majestic final rush the lion ends up being down but undefeated. In fact Macomber violates the Hemingway code and he has to pay the price for this transgression. In a figurative sense the bullets hit Macomber and after being cuckolded and ridiculed and pushed to the nadir of his self-esteem he has to make a "final rush" to regain at least a fraction of his lost self-worth. He would recover his lost manhood by killing the buffalo, a "huge black animal, looking almost cylindrical in long heaviness, like big black tank cars" (33). It is one of the cruel ironies of the short story that Macomber eventually regains the status of the code hero only at the point of his death, which was an indirect result of the violence in the surrounding world.

The question of living life to the full is a returning quandary for a Hemingway hero. Macomber is prevented from reaching this goal by the fear of life he is plagued with. As a boy-man or man-child reflecting stunted self-growth he resorts to aggression. He envisions himself in the position of a patriarchal husband and in fact exercises financial control over his wife. His

self-assertion process is endangered by sexual withdrawal on the part of Margot, by the latter's affair with Wilson and by the animal world, which refuses to surrender to his will. Macomber loses self-respect and manhood by violence, and he also regains it by violence. The buffalo hunt helps in recovering the face lost in the failed attempt to kill the lion. While the latter represented everything he was afraid of in life, shooting the buffalo offered him redemption as he felt a "drunken elation" (35) upon becoming a "ruddy fire-eater" (37).

However, it is Margot's shooting of her husband, even if in an inadvertent way, that qualifies as the ultimate aggression in the story. The answers provided to the crises in fact are all ineffectual. Macomber died, Margot lost her domineering role in the marriage, and Wilson, despite gaining a temporary dominance over Margot, cannot break out of his role of being a personal guide during futile and selfish adventures of wealthy clients.

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CONFESSIONAL PSALMS: *O YE TONGUES* BY ANNE SEXTON AND *ELEVEN ADDRESSES TO THE LORD* BY JOHN BERRYMAN

Sára Káldy Buschné

Introduction

When modern poetry shook the foundations of previous poetic traditions, it also questioned the role of the apostrophe as a basic poetic trope. "The question," we read in Gottfried Benn's 1951 *Problems of the Lyric*, "'to whom is the poem addressed?' is indeed a critical one, and the answer of a certain Richard Wilbur is quite remarkable: the poem, he says, is addressed to the muse, which serves, among other things, to conceal the fact that the poem is addressed to no one. This also shows that the monological character of lyric poetry is recognised there: Lyric poetry is indeed an anachoretic art" (Benn 1987, 23, author's translation). Jonathan Culler emphasises that "Indeed, one might be justified in taking apostrophe as the figure of all that is most radical, embarrassing, pretentious, and mystificatory in the lyric, even seeking to identify apostrophe with lyric itself" (Culler 1977, 60). We sense that such an addressee-oriented genre as the psalm is deeply connected to the essential questions of poetry. We also sense that the literature of modernity also undermines the relationship to this fundamental figure of poetry. I argue that the psalm is, in a sense, a loophole for the modern poet to speak in a non-ironic, apostrophic way.

Two poets from America in the 50s-60s wrote their touching, vivid psalms. Anne Sexton and John Berryman both wrote an almost identical number of psalms in their religious poetry series. Anne Sexton's sequence "O Ye Tongues," which refers to Christopher Smart, counts ten poems and John Berryman's cycle "Eleven Addresses to the Lord" counts eleven. They belonged to a group that is referred to by the critical reception as confessional poets (some of the most notable works: Rosenthal 1967, Phillips 1973, Helen, 1995). In this particular case, the term confessional has a further aspect that arises from the confessional nature of the psalms. However, while psalms

function like a "form" that anyone can fill in with their life situation, Sexton and Berryman's poems process psalm culture in individual ways. Sexton's cycle implies intense imagery, reminiscences of biblical language mixed with the voice of a mature woman and child. Berryman's poems are closer to the text of the Psalms, his apostrophes invoke their biblical pretext and retain their intimate character. Both cycles use intertextuality as a means of actualization, but in different ways.

Although their texts are quite different, their critical reputations are hardly comparable. Both have received less critical attention than some of their contemporaries, including Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath. As Tom Rogers, who provides revelative readings of the Christian aspects of Berryman oeuvre in his monograph and studies, interprets Christopher Beach's words about this tendency: Berryman's poetry "does not always sit well with contemporary theoretical models, trends and paradigms" (Rogers 2011, 3). He assumes that:

> one aspect of this disconformity is undoubtedly the religious preoccupation of much of the poetry. In a secular environment increasingly hostile to Christianity, one might find it unsurprising that such a poet would struggle to find critical popularity, whose life's work not only incorporates Christianity as a frequent reference point, but also culminates in an enthusiastic return to the Catholic Church and the depiction of a re-established personal relationship with a living God. (Rogers 2011, 435)

Anne Sexton's poems have in common that they invoke Christianity, but more than that, they invoke the living God. (For a brief outlook: Paul Celan wrote his "Psalm" to the "Niemand," the "No one," in Central Europe at this time. He addressed the question not only of God's responsiveness, but also of God being alive.) As we can see, Christianity and faith as the immediate identical basis of poetry fell out of focus in the cultural era in which Berryman and Sexton lived. Post-1945 American poetry is characterized by its heterogeneity and multi-centredness.

In her brief overview, Enikő Bollobás dates the first period of post-1945 American poetry to the 1970s and the second to the present day. It should be noted that the literary movements of both periods define themselves in one way or another in relation to modernism (Bollobás 2005, 503). However, it should be noted that religious poetry constitutes merely a fraction of the overall diversity exhibited by these texts. Bollobás identifies the legacy of both Puritanism, Catholicism, and confession as one of the origins of confessional lyricism. It is worth mentioning that several confessional poets underwent a process of Catholicization (Bollobás 2005, 511). This perspective is particularly salient in the context of the significant cataclysms that transpired during the 20th century, including the Second World War, Auschwitz, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, and the Vietnam War, etc.

(Bollobás 2005, 501-503). These tragedies had a profound impact on the literature of the era. In this milieu, Anne Sexton and John Berryman, whose personal lives were similarly characterized by tragedy and trauma, produced their literary works. Like many of their peers, they were treated for depression and other mental illnesses. All of this favours "critical biographies," which entail the examination of authors' works in relation to the events of their lives. In the case of authors who have been described as confessional, this tendency is only slowly being overtaken by the emergence of critical readings of their works as products in their own right.

The term "confessional" was first used in M.L. Rosenthal's influential article in response to the groundbreaking anthology *Life Studies* by the confessional poet Robert Lowell (Rosenthal 1959, 154). Originally, it referred to the raw, intimate, spontaneous language and themes of the poet's private life, e.g. drugs, alcohol, anger problems, mental illness, depression. Furthermore, the reception defines this school in opposition to classical modernism in literature, although it embraces the autonomic self-comprehension of the modern ethos (Bollobás 2005, 511). Free verse poetry and the composition of cycles are also common practices among confessional poets (Bollobás 2005, 511). From the outset, the reception noted the problems with the term confessional, and the poets also rejected it (Szlukovényi 2021, 128-129). Although the term was problematic, the group became known as confessionalists.

More recently, the term is being redefined. Glaser advanced the notion of reevaluating confessional poetry as a form of men's autobiographical expression, challenging the prevailing critical tendency to feminize such writing (Glaser 2009, 26). Mandolfo addresses the individual and communal character of the psalms in Berryman (Mandolfo 2014, 120), and the insights offered by Anna Branczeiz show that Berryman's individuality is more complex than the term "confessionalist" originally suggests (Branczeiz 2020, 81). Moreover, Blake adds that "Berryman was keenly interested in the public aspects of the confessional poem, dwelling extensively on the poet's reputation in a media-centered world" (Blake 2001, 717).

When we consider the confessional features in the poetry of Berryman and Sexton in the context of the Psalms, we can see that both exhibit a complexity of individual-confessional and communal-socially motivated speech. In Anne Sexton's work, the paratextual reference is a "Psalm" designation woven into the verse titles, whereas in John Berryman's work it is the intertextual signs of the biblical invocations of the Lord included in the text of the poems that guarantee the status of the psalm. Whereas in Anne Sexton's work the title of each poem functions as a genre designation, the poems in the Berryman cycle are presented as addresses. The diction of the poems develops accordingly. While the speaker of Sexton's poems refers more to the phenomenon of the Psalms, to the biblical tradition as a cultural

sign, Berryman's texts, which also reflect on Christianity as a lyrical and broader cultural tradition, approach the Psalms primarily from the point of view of communication with the Lord, the question of the Lord's responsiveness. Sexton is primarily interested in the world-creating character of the Psalms, while Berryman is primarily interested in the ability of the Psalms to communicate with the Lord. In the remainder of this presentation, I will show how the two cycles address issues of creation on the one hand and the responsiveness of transcendence on the other.

Anne Sexton: O Ye Tongues

Let us first examine the claim that Anne Sexton makes the world-making mechanism of the Psalms the subject of the cycle, an act that is inseparable from the constitution of the self, for the self cannot be conceived in itself, but only in its environment, with which it is born, in which it lives and functions, gives signs of life, with which it is formed, multiplied and reproduced in the ten poems of the cycle.

The title of the Anne Sexton cycle perhaps gives us some preliminary information. The text is related to the eighteenth-century English poet Christopher Smart's "Jubilate Agno," whose title "O Ye Tongues" Sexton adopted for her own cycle. Christopher Smart was a marginalized poet in trouble who, despite his exile, created in a revolutionary spirit, setting an example for many of his successors who shared his fate. The theme of mental illness, with all its implications for the reception of the lives of poets in search of a reflexivity, is part of the label of confession. This tendency is also reinforced by the link with the work of Christopher Smart, an English poet who was treated in a psychiatric hospital and incorporated this experience into his poetry. Christopher, who is thus invited into the world of the poem through referentiality and intertextuality, becomes a shaper of that world. If there is nothing, the title suggests the appearance of Christopher.

Creation begins in the first verse of the first psalm:

> "Let there be a God as large as a sunlamp to laugh his heat at you."

The lines of the cycle of ten psalms in free verse typically begin alternately with the introductory "Let it" and "For." Their connotations are reminiscent of the creation story of the Old Testament, while the specific world of the poems is formed line by line. The performative essence of creation serves as a representation of the created world. In a manner reminiscent of the biblical creation narrative, Sexton's work is first observed in action. The world of the text is imagined, and in the process, it thematizes this imagination.

> "Let there be an earth with a form like a jigsaw and let it fit for all of ye." (First Psalm)

The psalms that begin with "Let there be" are characterized by their praise of creation. In this respect, they correspond to the creation psalms of the Old Testament, in which the praise of the created world culminates in the exuberant joy of praising God. The verses beginning with 'For' introduce, as the cycle's Hungarian translator notes, an explanation (Szlukovényi 2022, 62). In many cases, these explanations are just as powerful world-builders as the sentences beginning with "For":

> "For I lay as pale as flour and drank moon juice from a rubber tip." (Fourth Psalm)

As the cycle develops, the two strands — odd-numbered psalms associated with "Let" and even-numbered psalms connected to "For"— become more distinct. The actual process of self-construction occurs in the even-numbered verses, a concept that will be made explicit in the Fourth Psalm. However, the earlier psalms lay the groundwork for this development, particularly through the structure of the cycle built on the two strands. A brief analysis of the cycle reveals:

> Like Smart, she alternates between 'let' and 'for' clauses that swing between a playful, Genesis-inflected celebration of the Creator—'Let there be a God as large as a sunlamp to laugh his heat at you'— and a veiled narrative of her struggle to break free of her mental prison ('Anne is locked in'), not only to survive but to write: 'For I am placing fist over fist on rock and plunging into the / altitude of words. The silence of words.' Similarly, the poems move between whimsical appreciations of God's creatures—'[Let Anne and Christopher] present a bee, cupped in their palms, zinging the / electricity of the Lord out into little yellow Z's'—to obscure laments over the ""death hole' that threatens to swallow her up along with her 'brother': 'For Anne sat down with the blood of a hammer and built a / tombstone for herself and Christopher sat beside her and was / well pleased with their red shadow.' (Brown, 2014, 107-108)

As the cycle progresses, the figures of Anne, Christopher and Anne's daughter, these closely intertwined figures with interlocking outlines, appear more and more frequently and emphatically in the cycle. "For birth was a disease and Christopher and I invented the cure. / For we swallow magic and we deliver Anne." (Fourth Psalm). In the Fourth Psalm, the genealogy of Anne and Christopher is conveyed through the phrase "For."

Sandra M. Gilbert places Christopher's character within a broader context by examining the self-definition of women poets from the Sexton era and its surroundings, particularly focusing on the concept of selfhood (Gilbert 1977). "O Ye Tongues" is part of a series of Sexton poems that explore the themes of "otherness" or "the other," alongside works like "The Other" and

"Again and Again and Again" (Gilbert 1977, 452). Sexton creates an imaginary Christopher to complement Anne's reality, situating both names within her cycle of psalms, which outlines a personal myth of origin: "For Anne and Christopher were born in my head as I howled at the grave of the roses, the ninety-four rose crèches of my bedroom." (Fourth Psalm) Christopher acts as Anne's double, her alter ego. Like Sexton, her female contemporaries often become fixated on a second, supernatural self. Gilbert interprets this phenomenon through the lens of female authorship in a predominantly masculine literary landscape. Gilbert notes that in the poem "The Other," Sexton characterizes this supernatural "self-her," the "Other," as masculine, suggesting a potential early foreshadowing of Christopher, the imaginary twin featured in "Death Notebooks" (Gilbert 1977, 452).

Katalin Szlukovényi writes about the couple Anne and Christopher as siblings. "The two figures together as a fictitious brother and sister thus become a metaphor for the artist, who is in many ways the victim of false or hypocritical social norms" (Szlukovényi 2022, 63). Taking Katalin Szlukovényi's interpretation further, it seems important to note that the voice that creates the pair of Anne and Christopher in the cycle is the same voice that articulates "Let there be one God" at the beginning of the cycle, and which is not itself unified, sometimes articulated in singular, sometimes in plural. This voice, which is multifaceted in its complexity, functions as a commentator on various subjects, interprets, reflects, and conveys confidential information. In the psalms that are assigned an even numerical value, the figure of Anne undergoes a progression from youth to adulthood, procreation, and the subsequent process of aging.

The parallel composition of the even and odd numbered psalms is characterized by a predominant emphasis on two primary subjects. On the world on the one hand, and on the personality on the other. The speaker's immersion in the world is mapped by Anne's immersion in the world as a *mise en abyme*. The transference, that is, the creation of Anne, is necessary for the speaker to gain her freedom. The process of attaining autonomy entails the act of inscription, that is, the act of writing itself. Writing that both ventures relentlessly close to its subject and at the same time distances itself from that subject, and all this takes place on the stage of the struggle against confinement. In this construction, the speaker's relationship with God is described by Anne's relationship with the God created by the speaker. Although Katalin Szlukovényi may not have intended to incorporate an infinitely prolonged image-in-image construction when she described the cycle as being characterized by "both the biblical allusions and the psalm form associate eternity," (Szlukovényi 2022, 63) it is evident that the psalm motif in Sexton's work is associated with the concept of eternity. The speaker's conception of God does not align with the notion of a personal

deity or a figure that can be addressed. For her, God belongs to the unintelligible and incomprehensible context, as an extension of it.

To summarise, Anne Sexton uses the Psalms of Creation as a context for her questions about language as a force for creating the world. Alongside the mature, damaged female voice that has lost its innocence, a childlike, innocent and vulnerable child's voice is constantly present. In this child's voice, the phrases "Let there be" and "For" are part of the menace of putting the creation of the world in the hands of a child. Just as children play. In her cycle, Sexton utilizes the reality-making power of religious language to create a space for the personality to articulate its traumas in the infantile voice of the child consciousness that engenders myths and subsists in myths. "For I pray that there may be an Almighty to bless the mire that surrounds me." (Second Psalm) As a pivotal character in Anne Sexton's extensive yet personal psalm tableau, condensing her existential uncertainties and her endeavors at self-comprehension and self-restoration, Christopher's figure, the masculine Other, also facilitates this act of articulation in its entirety.

John Berryman: Eleven Addresses to The Lord

John Berryman chose a different way to connect with the culture of the Psalms. He was obsessed with the addresses of the Psalms. As Tom Rogers notes in the introduction in his monograph, *God of Rescue: John Berryman and Christianity*:

> He believed that God, through the actions of one of his counsellors, had helped him out of a hopeless situation which had brought him close to despair. This very tangible experience of a 'God of Rescue' affirmed for him what for many years had been one of his 'favourite conceptions' – one which he had got from his readings of 'Augustine and Pascal'. He had found the experience to be so compelling a demonstration of God's goodness and mercy that he could not help but choose for God and shortly afterwards began attending Mass again for the first time in forty-four years. The God of Rescue encounter had also inspired in Berryman's poetry a new direction: the 'Eleven Addresses to the Lord' sequence which closed Love & Fame (1970). (Rogers, 2011, 1)

Berryman has a "dramatic conversion experience" (Rogers, 2011, 357) and this transcendental intervention defines the language of the entire cycle. Linebarger's brief summary also includes a reference to the religious character of the cycle: "Part Four, 'Eleven Addresses toThe Lord' is a calm, moving hymn of faith, a coda to the whole volume" (Linebarger, 1974, 127.)

Tom Rogers claims that the reception of Berryman's poetry is divided by the poet's relationship with religion, the Catholic Church, and its influence on his work. This may explain the under-representation of Berryman's poems

in dialogue with the Christian tradition in comparison to his other works and in comparison to the works of other confessional authors. In the course of his argument, Rogers makes reference to the contributions made by Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan in the introduction to "After Thirty Falls" (Coleman and McGowan 2007). "[Berryman] 'has not received the same degree of critical attention that has been given to the work of some of his contemporaries, including Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath', and that 'the diminishment of his reputation in the time since his death needs to be acknowledged'" (Coleman and McGowan in Rogers 2011, 3).

From a poetic perspective, interpretations that identify the addressee of the "Addressess" as the muse of poetry and the poems of the cycle as broadly conceived *ars poetica* are of particular significance (Branczeiz 2023, 156). In the present study, however, an examination of the poems will be undertaken from the perspective of religious language, with an emphasis on the forms of address utilized in the Psalms. If we know the diction of the Psalms, we can recognise the similarities with them in the way they address the question of the privacy and collectivity of the poems simultaneously. "Eleven Addresses to the Lord" is both a personal testimony:

> "Shield & fresh fountain! Manifester! Even mine." (1st Address)

and an intercession for others:

> "Postpone till after my children's deaths your doom." (2nd Address)

There is a quotation in the first poem, a highlight, which refers to a biblical passage:

> "According to Thy will the things begins." (1st Address)

This passage refers to: "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. **15** And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him." 1 John 5:14-15 (New International Version)

This is also about God's responsiveness and reactivity. Taken together, this is a foretaste of the thematic arc of the cycle. In this gesture, we can also recognise the programme of the first psalm of the Book of Psalms, according to which man is happy who seeks the will of the Lord and lives accordingly. At the same time, "According to Thy will" also refers to the Lord's Prayer. This is confirmed by the references to the Lord's Prayer throughout the cycle.

Names played an important role in the faith and thinking of the peoples of the ancient East, Vladár argues:

> It is inseparable from the essence of a person, a deity or a demon; there is no person, no deity and no demon without a name. As far-reaching as a name is, so too is the radiance of its bearer's power. The one over whom the name is pronounced becomes the possession of the bearer of the name. However, none of this implies the magical power of the name, but only the power, the meaning, the authority of its bearer. … Knowledge of the name makes it possible to form a community. Whoever knows the name of a person or God can call on him, can converse with him. In this sense, knowing the name implies a certain power over the person who bears it. It should be noted that the magical use of God's name was always forbidden in Israel, but on the other hand, calling on God by name, for example in prayer, was not a privilege of a narrow clerical class. (Vladár 2004, 264. Author's translation).

Berryman's cycle also addresses God directly, without an intermediary, which is natural from the point of view of the Psalms, but not natural from the point of view of the Catholic tradition.

The issues raised by the cycle appear to be long-standing, deeply embedded in Christian culture, and still pertinent today. From this perspective, it is evident that the cycle on the subject of how to address God is articulated in the voice of the Psalms, and it is equally apparent that it makes a reference to the Lord's Prayer.

> "Thy kingdom come', it means nothing to me." (2nd Address)

The lyrical I is prepared to examine the foundations of faith. He indicates that several of the sentences he utters are merely a matter of habit. Furthermore, this intention to clarify is evidenced by his return to the beginning, where he names and addresses, which is of particular significance in the context of poetry.

The address of the third stanza reads: "Sole watchman of the flying stars" and an allusion to the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive me, Lord" is also found in the verse. All of this is framed by the desire to overcome the violent nature of the lyrical self. According to critics, "Addresses" also aligns itself with the points of the Alcoholics Anonymous so-called 'Twelve-Step' recovery programme (Rogers 2011, 365) and this third psalm can be equated with the step of admitting failing and asking for forgiveness from those one has hurt. For example, the poet's daughter.

> "Cross am I sometimes with my little daughter:
> fill her eyes with tears. Forgive me, Lord.
> Unite my various soul,
> sole watchman of the wide & single stars." (3rd Address)

The title "watchman" is a quotation from Psalm 130, one of the most famous psalms in the world, also known as "De Profundis." De Profundis has been rewritten by poets of all eras, including many modernist poems by poets such as Baudelaire, Federico Garcia Lorca, Georg Trakl, etc. They are poems of the deepest despair, of the greatest distance and loneliness from God, and sometimes also of the greatest liberation. Berryman connects to the tradition of penitential psalms by invoking Psalm 130.

Rózsa's commentary on Psalm 130 states: "Psalm 130 stands out among the penitential psalms (...) for its sincere and deep sorrow, from which the psalmist cries out to God to cleanse him of his sins, while relief from suffering remains entirely in the background" (Rózsa 2006, 611. Author's translation). The rich afterlife of Psalm 130 is perhaps due to its brevity, being only seven verses long, its sensual imagery and its sensitive portrayal of human pain. And the abyss from which the psalmist cries out to God, which seems the furthest point from him, is the abyss of man's own sin. The psalmist has to bridge this great distance. The psalmist may feel doubtful about the success of his address because he must first confess his own sin, overcome his shame.

In consideration of these factors, "3rd Address" evinces numerous parallels with the penitential psalms. The speaker of the poem confesses several sins, including impetuosity, impatience, addiction to alcohol, fear of death and a disharmonious relationship with his daughter. Similarly to Psalm 130, "3rd Address" associates his troubled thoughts with the night. In Psalm 130, the psalmist's soul awaits release, in a state of anticipation analogous to that of the watchmen awaiting the morning. In Berryman's case, the opposing qualities of darkness and lightness are counterpointed by the night and the stars. The Lord is depicted as standing guard and watching over the stars, which represent a path out of darkness and towards a higher power. The tropics are a familiar setting. The invocation of the fourth poem of the cycle continues in this vein, perhaps representing the most explicit expression of the issues raised thus far.

> "If I say Thy name, art Thou there? It may be so." (4th Address)

The concept of confessionalism is pertinent throughout the cycle, as elucidated by Tom Rogers in detail. In his study, Rogers demonstrates the influence of St. Augustine's *Confessions* on the theoretical and theological foundations of the "Addresses" (Rogers, 2011, 371-374). As Paul Mariani has noted in his monograph, Berryman's interest lies in Augustine's *Confessions* (Mariani 1996, 291). The '6th Address' evokes Augustine's portrayal of his conversion experience as described in *Confessions*.

"Confusions & afflictions
followed my days. Wifes left me.
Bankrupt I closed my doors. You pierced the roof
twice & again. Finally you opened my eyes.
My double nature fused in that point of time." (6th Address)

Another crucial element of Augustine's experience of conversion is that everything falls into place, man understands his dual nature. The process of conversion reaches its zenith in the reading of Romans 13:13, which occurs in the well-known Garden of Milan scene. "Not in revelry and drunkenness, not in bedchambers and lewdness, not in contention and rivalry: but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not make provision for the flesh in concupiscence." (Rom 13:13.[NIV]).

The authorial concept in the poems presupposes a "saving God," and much follows from this presupposition. For example: the one who needs to be saved has been in great, perhaps long-lasting, trouble or difficulty before. This is also the starting point of the lament psalms, and therefore it would be logical to discuss the poems in this light. The use of the past tense in the poems indicates that the narrator is aware of his own salvation, which allows us to understand them in terms of what Brueggemann called the psalms of Reorientation. Brueggemann synthesises the results of the psalm studies to group the psalms. The Psalms of Orientation – Disorientation – Reorientation describe the process of a man of childlike faith experiencing a period of doubt, followed by a subsequent period of reaffirmation (Brueggeman, 2022, 8). The first line of the first prayer, for example, is an example of this journey of faith:

You have come to my rescue again & again
in my impassable, sometimes despairing years. (1st Address)

However, if the cycle is imagined as trying to capture in its language the need to go back to the origins, to understand things by calling them by name, to finally address the 'saving God' in response to his call, then the stakes of this lyric are no less than to speak of a purification of address at the personal, linguistic, cultural level, the ultimate point of which is a personal testimony to that name. Augustine writes in the tenth book of *Confessions*:

> For the fruit is not small, O Lord my God, as by many you will be treated with thanks for us, and by many you will ask for us. [...] I will show myself to such; let them breathe in my good things, let them sigh in my bad things. My goods are your institutions and your gifts; my evils are mine, and thy judgments. Let them breathe in them, and sigh in them; and let hymns and cries rise before your eyes from brotherly hearts, with your torches But you, Lord, delighted with the fragrance of your holy temple, have mercy on me

> according to your great mercy, for your name's sake; and by no means forsaking your beginnings, my finished unfinished works.
> This is the fruit of my confessions

The self-discovery of Addresses is similar, from the first prayer question:

> Unknowable, as I am unknown to my guinea pigs:
> how can I 'love' you? (1st Address)

to the point of offering his own testimony:

> Make too me acceptable at the end of time
> in my degree, which then Thou wilt award.
> Cancer, senility, mania,
> I pray I may be ready with my witness. (11th Address)

The theme of addressing and clearing one's name also aligns with Culler's thesis, according to which the apostrophe is one of the most basic and most vital figures of lyric (Culler 1977). From my viewpoint, the spalmic attitude that appears in Berryman's cycle represents a fundamental questioning of the essence of poetry. Of the numerous lyrical elements present in the *Book of Psalms*, John Berryman's exploration of the apostrophe is particularly noteworthy in terms of its alignment with the research that has identified the *Book of Psalms* as a significant influence on the development of modern free verse. As an almost provocative idea in modernism, a response is expected from the person addressed. Berryman employs the dual loophole of persona construction and the use of the Psalms as a pretext to prevent the archaic ideal of addressability from becoming ironic in the cycle.

Conclusion

Both cycles invoke the Psalms when addressing archaic themes such as creation or dialogue with the transcendent, situated within the sceptical epistemology of literary modernity in relation to religion. Sexton's cycle looks at the *Book of Psalms* from the perspective of creation and the lyrical ego, who creates a damaged, fragmented, pathological state of consciousness in it, as a means of describing the world in which the lyrical ego attempts to live and survive, much as a child's play might speak of trying to make the strangeness of the world more habitable through the world-building power of language.

The speaker in Berryman's cycle seeks effective words to replace inadequate ones while confronting his sins and beginning to overcome them. In this cycle, the relentless pursuit of truth is also liberating. Calling on God becomes challenging, not only because of personal sins but also due to linguistic and cultural barriers. To dismantle these obstacles requires

thorough and detailed exploration. Just as God brought the animals to Adam to be named, the lyrical self seeks to return to that original moment to discover a name and a way to address God. However, this involves defining the relationship and, within that relationship, the self. The closure of the cycle opens outward; it necessitates witnessing. The Eleven Addresses to the Lord presents itself as a personal testimony, following the example of St. Augustine.

We have seen two poets, contemporaries, members of the same poetic group, write cycles of poems with an almost identical number of psalms, inspired by the same preface. But the result could hardly be more different.

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THE GREAT AMERICAN SATIRE

OR PHILIP ROTH'S *TWILIGHT OF THE IDOLS*

Cristina Chevereşan

Introduction

To the Philip Roth afficionado, *GAN* may appear quite mysterious. Its reception, as compared to most of the writer's other works, has been hardly generous in terms of reviews, presentations, and overall critical attention. The early articles dedicated to it were rather scant and little to not flattering at all regarding the quality of the manuscript. As attentive critic and biographer Ira Nadel points out,

> Thomas R. Edwards thought that Roth's determination to get in almost every joke he can think of is exhausting and self-defeating. By contrast, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt praised what he called the perfect "bathtub book." Not only was it overflowing with incident and characters, but it would be a perfect book for the bath. It's nonsense, fantasy, and hilarious, clearly over the top." (Nadel 2011, 110)

Moving beyond such immediate responses to the book's publication, the interested researcher will discover that the initial mixture of polarized opinions—from sneering or baffled reactions to unconvinced and unconvincing readings—has remained primarily dated, as few critics have been interested throughout the decades in an applied revisitation of this declaredly experimental piece. Even the chapters in comprehensive volumes on Philip Roth's work as a whole that do mention *GAN* only do so briefly, as a parenthesis among more notable accomplishments (Parker 2007, 22). Mike Witcombe's very recent 2024 chapter in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Philip Roth*, edited by Aimee Pozorski and Maren Schaurer, takes a few pages to shed additional light on the novel, noting that

> *The Great American Novel* (*GAN*) (1973) is Roth's most exhaustive treatment of sport, and arguably the only Roth novel in which sport functions as a primary theme. *GAN* is divisive, in part because of its willingness to experiment. That the novel is often seen as an aberration, even by Roth himself, is belied by the links that can be made between the novel and the rest of Roth's oeuvre. While *GAN* remains difficult to categorize, and while its satiric thrust depends on extensive knowledge on the part of the reader, Roth's focus on sport can give additional insight into the development of many of his thematic and stylistic interests. (Witcombe 2024, 106)

This particular angle on the way in which baseball opens the door towards a deeper understanding of Roth's universe shapes the present article. My selection of relevant passages is meant to bring to the contemporary readers' attention one of Roth's early attempts to expand his explorations from the individual to the communal and to move from the specifics of a particular situation to a generic commentary on the situation and predicaments of America. Thus, the first section shall focus on Roth's own passion for baseball and its transition into his fiction, which was to become, in time, an extensive exploration of Americanness, its iconic elements, and the rise and fall of idols. The second section emphasizes the discontinuities between reality and (mythical) representation, outlining ways in which *GAN* becomes an investigation of shared mindsets, discourses, and expectations. Roth's satirical views on indoctrination, manipulation, mass hysteria, herd mentalities, projected against the background an all-American phenomenon, provide the main topics of reflection for sections three and four, which offers insight into the Rothian world of critical readings and writings dedicated to capturing and understanding the evolving U.S. national conundrum.

1. Baseball and Americanness: Innocence Betrayed

As the nr. 1 unmistakably American sport, baseball encapsulates, to the point of quasi-identification, a host of complicated national identity conundrums and their implications, which are core constitutive parts of Roth's literary interests. Complementary to the socio-cultural and historical research that dominates his oeuvre, the author chooses to investigate the importance of this game to the collective consciousness of U.S. citizens, whom it has the power to unite and, at times, divide in significant and irreversible ways. In *GAN*, to capitalize on the deep symbolic meanings of this sport, the writer resorts to something that he was to develop more prominently in his later works: revisionist, counterfactual history.

The book revolves around a fictitious American baseball organization, the Patriot League, and the Port Ruppert Mundys of New Jersey, which become a road team as a direct consequence of leasing their stadium to The U.S. Department of War in 1943, for the embarkation of soldiers headed to the

European frontlines, i.e. to the benefit of the nation and its strategic global plans. Word Smith, the retired sports journalist who spends the season traveling around the country with the players, delivers in retrospect the convoluted and oftentimes rambling story of what he presents as a big-scale capitalist conspiracy to viciously and completely erase the team's history, because of a scandal of communist infiltrations.

Roth's passion for baseball and its inclusion in his novels was neither new, nor bound to stop there. The 1971 *Our Gang*, for instance, had already parodied President Nixon's reliance on sport as a quintessential American value to be exploited in political rhetoric, as an impactful persuasive tool. The book had also employed the rebellious figure of professional player Curt Flood which, as emphasized by Witcombe (107-8):

> allows Dixon to declare that "I do not know of a better way for our enemies to undermine the youth of this country, than to destroy the game of baseball and all it represents" (98) In *GAN*, Roth depicts the Soviets attempting to do just this. This builds continuity between the books, supporting Judith Paterson Jones and Guinevera A. Nance's (1981) argument that these works "made a deadly serious attack on the distortions and perversions inherent in the American myth." (Witcombe 2024, 157).

How exactly does this fictional assault happen in *GAN*? Focusing on a post Second World War U.S. climate of confusion vis-à-vis the grand American narrative and its definitions of integration and success, the author proceeds to rewrite the American 1930s-40s with hindsight, through the lens of imaginary baseball interests explained by an unreliable spokesperson. The postwar plot is recollected considerably later, at the beginning of the 1970s. While the truth-value of such a perspective is certainly not relevant for a non-documentary piece of fiction, its inspiration from real-life events and its believability in a highly recognizable socio-cultural context are elements that Roth habitually relies on whenever he challenges readers' expectations and moral sense.

Looking at *GAN* in the framework of Roth's entire body of work, Holmberg identifies elements that form a red thread, worth following in terms of his (extra)literary, yet significantly influential concerns. The pressures and side effects of living in a utopian environment, the dissolution of myths and ideals are prominent and ubiquitous:

> Decades later Roth wrote *American Pastoral,* a tragedy, in the true Shakespearean tradition, of a man whose perfect American life—principally defined by his high school sports stardom and a beauty pageant wife—is laid waste by a single, unexplainable event. Philip Roth uses baseball as representative of the complex and often alienating experience of being American, of embracing a specific nationality in an environment of

> otherness. For Roth, baseball represents childhood innocence, but it also represents the failure of this innocence and the search for a secular national religion or patriotism disconnected from nationality or national identity." (Holmberg 2005, 37-38)

2. Myth vs. Reality. Challenging Deep Structures

As emphasized by Holmberg's analysis, apart from its biting satire and labyrinthine plot twists, *GAN* can be read as a study of collective mentalities and rhetoric, which showcases the inherent growth of various American communities' resentment, disappointment, discord at the time(s) the book addresses. Innocent as the undeterred belief in the American Dream of worthiness and reward may still seem amid a twentieth century of turmoil and transformation, it is shattered on multiple levels. To illustrate the unifying nature of baseball as a system of faith in and worship of superhuman powers, Roth draws concise portraits of his protagonist sport's major fictional heroes (baseball players, supporters or administrators), as presumably perceived by general audiences. Roland Agni, Ulysses S. Fairsmith, Gil Gamesh, Frank Mazuma, General Oakhart, O.K. Oktatur, Bob Yamm a.o.: they all feature as legends in their own right, being, however, just as questionable as they are famous.

The display of their public personas is understandably predicated on exaggeration, metaphor, comparison, all meant to stir admiration and strengthen their popular following despite the hidden agendas behind their sportsmanship or managerial business. Take, for instance, the notorious Gil Gamesh, about whom the reader quickly finds out that:

> to the little kids of America, whose dads were on the dole, whose uncles were on the booze, and whose older brothers were on the bum, he was a living, breathing example of that hero of American heroes, the he-man, a combination of Lindbergh, Tarzan, and (with his long, girlish lashes and brilliantined black hair) Rudolph Valentino: brave, brutish, and a lady-killer. (Roth 1973, 80)

The baseball revelation is introduced to the reader in an exalted manner, his image combining features that bestow upon him an allegedly admirable American exemplariness, in spite of the dubiousness of the enumerated reasons behind this veneration. The diversity of the invoked V.I.P. figures (ostensibly real or fabricated pop-culture icons) is striking, as it coagulates prototypical public masculinity exemplars that supposedly inspire future leaders of the nation. However, the presentation does not omit mentioning, though fleetingly, that these personalities were shaped within the private realm of their families by rather pitiful specimens: unemployed, vagrant,

alcohol addicted. The reasons might be multiple, complex, and worthy of analysis.

The resonant, rhythmic, phrasal enumeration and alliteration quoted above (Word Smith's speciality) may create the superficial impression of a mere element of style. Roth, however, uses it to capture the predicament of an entire generation of postwar men: physically impaired in some cases but, more importantly, psychologically haunted and damaged by the disastrous consequences of a turbulent historical era. Talented, yet rebellious, the pitcher who gets banned from the Patriot League returns from his (re)education in Russia as a manager a decade later, only to reveal his double life as a communist spy, determined to destroy the American national sport from within. This plot twist enables a deeper investigation of fear, paranoia, ideologization, extremism—topics that become central in quite a few of Roth's other novels, the entire *American Trilogy*, *The Plot against America, The Counterlife* (among others).

The author captures the hypnotic appeal of baseball to a society in distress, which clings desperately to models that might replace yet another lot of broken twentieth century American dreams, after the second world conflagration. The game's redemptive, almost cathartic spirit is reflected in the parallels drawn by its afficionados, which envelop it in a much-desired aura of perfection and overall satisfactoriness.

> You could not begin to communicate through words, either printed or spoken, what this game was all about—not even words as poetical and inspirational as those Mister Fairsmith was so good at. As the General said, the beauty and meaning of baseball resided in the fixed geometry of the diamond and the test it provided of agility, strength, and timing. Baseball was a game that looked different from every single seat. (Roth 1973, 124)

The coexistence of myth and reality in the public sphere and the disconcerting combination of purposely harmless (though potentially harmful) images meant to reconstruct the national belief in common, and therefore flawless, aspirations lie at the heart of *GAN*. It is interesting to note that, while the (f)actual analogy between baseball and religion the book projects reflects the elation of baseball apostles and believers (one of fandom's essential ingredients), it also foregrounds the (auto)biographical connections that inform the manuscript.

In *Reading Myself and Others*, Roth revisits his incentives for the deeper meditation that constitutes the nucleus of this book. He addresses his own, often-quoted description of the American 1960s as "the demythologizing decade", and he explains:

> Much that had previously been considered in my own brief lifetime to be disgraceful and disgusting forced itself upon the national consciousness,

> loathsome or not; what was assumed to be beyond reproach became the target of blasphemous assault; what was imagined to be indestructible, impermeable, in the very nature of American things, yielded and collapsed overnight. The shock to the system was enormous—not least for those like myself who belong to what may have been the most propagandized generation of young people in American history, our childhoods dominated by World War II, our high school and college years colored by the worst of the Cold War years—Berlin, Korea, Joe McCarthy; also the first American generation to bear the full brunt of the mass media and advertising. (Roth 2013, 70)

The inherent inner earthquake of witnessing such a transformation in American civilization is both understandable and undeniable. It is also a shared burden, the common plight of a generation of fractured individuals and communities, subjected to confusing, successive changes and challenges to the mindset nature and nurture had simultaneously equipped them with. While Roth's penchant for humor as a vehicle for vitriolic criticism has been equally discussed as resourceful and denounced as frivolous over the years, the crucial influence of lived history upon his selected topics and character profiles is evident and undisputed. So are his discontents with the alteration of the public climate under the influence of conniving media and political discourses, which prompted him to dream up an aged—and ambitious - nostalgic, confronted with and befuddled by the shenanigans of the Cold War after having struggled through the Depression.

Initially published in 1973 and shaped by such impressions, *GAN* reflects (on) the turbulent 1960s as an age of paradoxes very shortly after the change of decades, and uses it as the background against which Word Smith's meditations and reminiscences unfold and gather into a "historical" account. Doing so, Roth's novel focuses primarily on the reasons behind the downfall of what had previously appeared to be solid, indestructible axes of American culture and mentality: "the fierce, oftentimes wild and pathological assault launched in the sixties against venerable American institutions and beliefs and, more to the point, the emergence of a counter-history, or countermythology" (Roth 2013, 71).

In this line of thought, Roth identifies the 1960s as a turning point in terms of questioning, challenging, reinterpreting, reshuffling the foundational notions of the American nation. It was this unsettling characteristic of a decade of turmoil which prompted him to discover in baseball "a means to dramatize the struggle between the benign national myth of itself that a great power prefers to perpetuate, and the relentlessly insidious, very nearly demonic reality like the kind we had known in the sixties, that will not give an inch in behalf of that idealized mythology" (Roth 2013, 72). Thus, a choice of main topic that has been dismissed as insubstantial proves, in fact, most suitable for the author's intentions to plausibly fictionalize a deeper battle

within the collective American psyche. He prompts his readership to meditate upon it via simple, direct, even embarrassing identification with or recognition of oftentimes ludicrous and unjustified exaltations.

Fascinated and appalled by the perplexing era under analysis, the writer resorts to the idea of the counternarrative to construe the over-emotional, paranoid, "narrative present" of his psychotic chronicler, Word Smith (pun intended, as many others in the novel). Confined to a retirement home, the sportswriter delivers the intricate story of the 1940s fall of the Patriot League, which comprises an impressive number of players with godlike (nick)names and debatable reputations. Quarrelling with and borrowing from major authors whom he concedes to acknowledge as masters of American fiction (Hemingway, Twain, Melville, Hawthorne, among others) and aiming to write the great American novel himself, "Smittie" claims to restore truth to a chapter of the country's past, obliterated by "a rewriting of our history as heinous as any ordered by a tyrant dictator abroad […] the annihilation of the Patriot League. Not merely wiped out of business, but willfully erased from the national memory" (Roth 27-28). Via his narrator's obsessive, self-important rants, Roth manages to construct a vivid fable on the vagaries of the American mind in mid-twentieth century.

3. Satire Inc. A Faux Epic

The chosen means to address the inherent tensions of American culture and society is one that Roth was not foreign to: a combination of satire with grand epic. His biased narrator launches from the very beginning the hypothesis of a criminal conspiracy against factual truth. Toying with the idea of rewriting history, Roth opens up a discussion that surpasses the realm of sports and marks the intersection of his lasting preoccupation with literary form, narrative technique, and intertextuality, with his already established inclination for perceptive socio-historical commentary. The result is a faux epic satire which I contend carries more weight than many of the readers and reviewers have cared to attach to it, distracted by the author's unconventional style.

As rightfully pointed out by Lazenby,

> Roth attacks hero-seeking, mother fixation, the veneration of Rules and Regulations, the callousness of the veteran, Christianity, and witch hunts. He also pokes playfully at some of America's literary heroes: Hemingway, Faulkner and Melville. Very little on the contemporary scene escapes Roth's wit. Although it has more satire in it than lore of baseball, reviewers call it a baseball novel and do not mention its satirical aspects. (Lazenby 42)

"Smitty"' – a diminutive that sounds endearing and ridiculing alike - begins his equally glorifying and demythologizing narrative in the vein of the epic

poem. "Back before years became decades and decades centuries, when I was Smitty to America and America was still a home to me, oh, about eleven, twelve thousand days ago, I used to get letters from young admirers around the country, expressing somewhat the same sentiment as the President of the United States, only instead of sardonic, sweet. O so sweet!" (Roth 16) This passage could authoritatively open a Bildungsroman or a fairy tale. The novel feigns both and is neither. It nevertheless prefigures the downfall and tragedy that the fictional writer intends to document via what passes for personal evidence.

Smitty's lyrically expressed thirst for national accomplishment and greatness is parallelled by his obsession with personal upward mobility: not on the social scale, however, but rather in the literary canon (Roth's complex engagement with intertextuality and literary humor in the novel is notorious. For lack of space within the present study, it may be the object of later, further analysis). Intersections between collective History and individual histories, reality and fiction abound in the introspective parts of Smith's monologue. For instance, the narrator rhetorically asks himself and consolingly answers: "How ever will I win the Pulitzer Prize? But then Mount Rushmore was not carved in a day neither will GAN be written without suffering. Besides, I think maybe the pain is good for the style". (Roth 16)

Foregrounding powerful symbols of American democracy as props for Smith's delusional existential bubble, his and, by extension, Roth's book employs a wide array of stylistic devices to challenge more profound values than merely the game of baseball's which, in all its intricacy, functions as an attention-grabbing pretext. The sometimes-aggressive satire, bordering on ruthlessness, points out the hypocritical mismatching between the images of perfection projected by the American nation and its real-life insecurity and paranoia. The increasing vulnerability of traditional values to the pressures of an age that questions the very essence and meaning of the patriotism imagined by the Founding Fathers is sublimated in the novel via the insertion of a communist conspiracy at the very heart of the U.S.A.: its best loved sport.

> Baseball, an institution as American as apple pie, is whispered to be a tool of the Reds, and quickly backs are turned, confessions demanded, innocents forced to flee, town names changed and stadiums torn down. Roth demonstrates how strongly the American fears being linked to communism. This is why the Patriot League no longer exists. (Lazenby 1973, 43)

What seems to be the most problematic part about the version of communist conspiracy that is featured in the novel is the frightening plausibility of the parody. For instance, the Russian re-education of one of the fictitious baseball league's prominent members includes a brainwashing session that is

simultaneously hilarious and chilling. It resonates authentic dictatorial discourses and events, particularly as it is placed after the previously unimaginable atrocities of the Second World War. The detailed description of this presupposed experience captures a mixture of horror, suspicion, maliciousness and manipulation, and paints a loaded picture of Russia, the United States' archenemy and fierce competitor. Roth's protagonist, Gil Gamesh, and the story of his adventures illustrate the fragile balance between factual truth and mental or ideological distortion, as an authorial strategy to make the reader question, revisit, rethink stories that may be easily taken for granted without direct access to information.

The passage that follows is a textbook example of indoctrination and its evil ramifications, derisively, yet ominously framed by a writer who many have regarded as an improbable contemporary moralist. Gil Gamesh recounts episodes of his communist conversion. In turn, they echo monstrosities and abominations that had occurred quite recently in the grim framework of a different type of authoritarianism.

> In 1938 I was called to Moscow, the highest honor that can be accorded a struggling young Communist agent. I was enrolled in the International Lenin School for Subversion, Hatred, Infiltration, and Terror, known popularly as SHIT." "You expect me to believe that that is the name of a school in Moscow, Mr. Gamesh?" asked the skeptical General. "General, they are nothing if not contemptuous of human decency and dignity. Irreverence and blasphemy are their business, and they know how to practice it, too. […] Summers off in the country, in slave labor camps, administering beatings and conducting interrogations while the regular torturers are on vacation—occasionally driving a prisoner insane or tormenting an intractable suspect into a confession, but by and large the usual student stuff, cleaning up after suicides, seeing that the bread is stale and there's nothing nourishing in the soup, and so on. And the talk, General. The unending lectures. The study groups. And then the murders, of course. Three roommates murdered in their beds during my senior year. (Roth 1973, 444)

On the one hand, by this seemingly detached, and even more appalling recollection of episodes of absurdity and deliberate cruelty, Roth outlines the sinister potential of any totalitarian regime. The excruciating scenes compose a fearsome, dystopian scenario. On the other hand, one must not overlook the fact that he also grounds his textual investigation and fictionalization of times past in the actuality of the Second Red Scare and the House Un-American Activities Committee which, in Nadel's opinion, "was Roth's way of establishing a connection between the imaginary and the real, joining the incredible with the believable" (11). Playing upon the recognizable nature of actual discourses on various sides of the political spectrum and on the wide

audience's ability to identify and affiliate, dissociate or merely observe and deplore, he transforms Smittie into the burlesque echo of disreputable precedents.

Reminiscing on how *GAN* reached its final shape, Roth himself points out that

> I was trying, then, at the conclusion of the book, to establish a kind of passageway from the imaginary that comes to seem real to the real that comes to seem imaginary, a continuum between the credible incredible and the incredible credible. […] Smitty's book, like those of his illustrious forebears, attempts to imagine a myth of an ailing America; my own is to some extent an attempt to imagine a book about imagining that American myth. (Roth 2013, 73)

This insightful self-analysis of intentions reveals Roth's attempt to portray the disquieting coexistence between the positive, idyllic representation of American ideals and the dissolution of expectations as the latter part of the 20th century unfolds. Baseball offers him the perfect tool to parody the inconsistencies of American history, its inherent contradictions and the discrepancies between large-scale delusions of grandeur and the human proportions of individual decisions, desertions, destinies. To achieve his confessed resolution for this book, Roth connects the world of this sport inextricably with the pitfalls of indoctrination (be it political, religious a.o.) Fictionalizing the evolution of baseball as an opium for the masses in itself, he manages to sublimate and subtly introduce topics that are further reaching.

4. Individual Paranoia vs. National Fantasy

One of the few researchers who dedicates a longer study to *GAN* notes that,

> While Roth seems clearly critical of the actual ideologies supporting baseball mythology, the novel as a whole is difficult to classify critically because its satire is both obvious, in its general aim to rethink American history circa World War II, and remarkably obscure in its details, as Roth satirizes actual American history via semi-fictional baseball history. The novel even mocks its own excessive ambition without ever attempting to restrain or curtail that ambition. Roth asserts that it is the implications of American history he is concerned with far more than the specifics of baseball's role, real or psychological, within that history. (Holmberg 2005, 45)

Nevertheless, the aforementioned sport and history remain inseparable throughout, which the text illustrates bountifully. The onset of the entire charade (moving the baseball team which has become homeless) is framed as

a patriotic act via calculating rhetoric. "A city of two-story barracks was to be constructed on the playing field to house the soldiers in transit", thus transforming the formerly idyllic location into "headquarters facilities for those who would be shipping a million American boys and their weapons across the Atlantic to liberate Europe from the tyrant Hitler" (Roth 1973, 69-70). Additionally to the beguiling aura of heroism such a presentation entails, via its fastidious tone and lexical choices, the alleged results of the selfless sacrifice are projected in an equally grandiloquent manner.

The national and international echoes of the evacuation of the Ruppert Mundys are to reach monumental proportions, inscribing the team's sacrifice in the grateful memory of the entire world. The illustrative passage below echoes Tricky E. Dixon's pretentious digressions in *Our Gang*.

> In the years to come (the local fans were told), schoolchildren in France, in Belgium, in Holland, in far-off Denmark and Norway would be asked in their history classes to find the city of Port Ruppert, New Jersey, on the map of the world and to mark it with a star; and among English-speaking peoples, Port Ruppert would be honored forever after—along with Runnymede in England, where the Magna Charta had been signed by King John, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where John Hancock had affixed his signature to the Declaration of Independence—as a Birth-Place of Freedom. (Roth 1973, 69-70)

As his narrator invokes a conglomerate of milestones for world freedom and democracy, Roth intentionally attaches symbolic significance to his bombastic passages. He exposes the intentional conflation of national and personal ideals in the official discourses supporting war interests above anything else, baseball included. The resonance of unique historical moments and characters, however, turns out to be futile, and the forced parallelism between the echoes of History and the rather pitiful fate of the baseball team highlights the absurdity and ridicule of propaganda (yet another favorite Roth topic in a few of his later works). Since the highly romanticized, utopian construction of the American Dream that it references was significantly shaken by the evolving realities of violence, corruption, disorientation in post World War II United States, *GAN* questions, in fact, the very essence and underlying strata of Americanness.

Although experimenting with postmodern style, humor, playfulness and fragmentariness, Roth carefully frames his arguments and arranges the apparently disjointed narrative. His choice of narrator (an overly ambitious, yet obviously failed writer) is explained by his desire to shed light upon types of psychosis, neurosis, megalomania, maladjustment that he sees as deeply rooted in the continued representation of America and its constitutive elements as eternally flawless and entitled to accomplishment, against all odds or evidence to the contrary. The author confesses that

> By attributing the book to Smitty, I intended, among other things, to call into question the novel's "truthfulness […] The idea is simply to move off the question "What is America really like?" and on to the kind of fantasy (or rewriting of history) that a question so troublesome and difficult has tended of late to inspire. I would not want to have to argue that Smitty's is the true dream of our lives, his paranoia a wedge into the enigmatic American reality. I would claim, however, that his are not so unlike the sort of fantasies with which the national imagination began to be plagued during this last demythologizing decade of disorder, upheaval, assassination, and war. (Roth 2013, 72-3)

The American Dream becomes increasingly fragile as the narrative unfolds between the remembered past and the degenerate present (literally embodied by narrator Smith). It is increasingly ruined by the everyday situations the population is confronted with and unpleasantly surprised - let alone deeply affected – by. To mirror this gradual decay, some of the strategies employed in *GAN* capture the perverse nature of a highly spectacular game, in politics and sports alike: constructing the enemy according to one's needs and purposes. Star pitcher Gil Gamesh's fall into the communist trap is explained by the large-scale vulnerabilization of optimism, triggered by numerous citizens' disappointment with what they perceive as their country's failures to significantly provide for them. "There was no Germany or Japan to hate then—only one's own, one's native land. Whom did he meet in those Depression years who had not been abused, humiliated, cheated, thwarted, and wrecked (to hear the victim tell it) by America?" (Roth 1973, 443).

Against the background of such growing bitterness and hostility among common Americans, who felt betrayed in their long-standing faith in trustworthy leadership, the apparently providential intervention of Russian intelligence, despite its vicious means of persuasion, becomes not just believable, but also desirable for at least some categories of the population. Regardless of its ruthlessness, it is perceived as a departure from what appears to be a faltering authority. It presents itself as ready to equip effective reactionaries against a dissatisfying system, which they might be able to overturn: "They gave him books to read. They gave him fraudulent birth certificates. They gave him dynamite. They gave him guns. They told him America was on its last legs—brave revolutionary leaders like Gil Gamesh would deal the deathblow to their homeland" (Roth 1973 443).

The interplay of unidirectional, self-serving rhetoric from both American and Russian sources is convincingly mimicked in the novel. It captures the race for world supremacy, as well as the fierce national competition for public support and individual allegiance, which dominated the period Roth focuses upon. The author's reliance on satire to express uncomfortable points of view is explicable by its intensity as a genre which allows the liberty to expose otherwise delicate issues and to denounce practices which often debunk the

very mythology they are built on. Placing *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Our Gang*, *The Breast*, and *GAN* among the writings wherein Roth examines the diseased collective twentieth-century psyche, Lazenby points out how their satirical auras exempt the writer from traditional expectations and "free in Roth that obsessively critical animus which Podhoretz and others found an obstacle to his development in the novelist's craft […] Roth's satire, like Swift's, is essentially serious, and his satirical points amount to a scathing denunciation of contemporary social ills" (16).

Irony has a crucial contribution to this effect. It is used to unmask the unfeasible reform of a society whose essential motivational discourses are predicated on exceptionalism and hero-seeking, at a time when both have become obsolete. The next passage I have selected showcases the recurrent stratagem of forcing similarities between things that have little to nothing in common in order to justify unreasonable gestures and reactions. It is part of an outraged conversation between Angela Whittling Trust (billionaire widow, philanthropist, notorious for her affairs with ballplayers and convinced of the infiltration of communists in the country and the League) and Roland Agni, young center fielder who stumbles upon evidence of Gil Gamesh's being a communist agent.

From blatant racism to the simplistic belief that the defeat of Nazism necessarily equals the triumph of aggressive communism, which will inevitably impact American institutions (baseball included), their exchange projects a gloomy, ominous perspective, which perpetuates the fear of vilified and catastrophic scenarios. Exasperated, Angela exclaims:

> Colored, Roland, colored major league players! And that is only the beginning. Only wait until Hitler is defeated. Only wait until the international Communist conspiracy can invade every nook and cranny of our national life. They will do to every sacred American institution, to everything we hold dear, just what Mazuma has done to the integrity and honor of our league. They will make a travesty of it! (Roth 1973, 363)

The panic that such agonizing predictions can stir explains the growth of public angst, anxiety, dread and sheer irrationality, which is why the inclusion of such instances of uncontrolled frenzy is essential to the novel's purpose of disclosing the perfidy of the increasingly duplicitous Cold War environment. Another example of how caustic ridicule is built into its deep structure to examine the vulnerability and subsequent vagaries of the American mind can be seen in the novel's caricature of hero mania in times of trouble, as emphasized by Lazenby: "The country is suffering from the depression; it needs a common ideal to hold it together" (50). However, in Roth's fictional version, the U.S. goes blatantly against its declared principles and the good practice examples that are so frequently quoted when thinking about its model citizen, worthy of admiration and following. "Instead of

choosing a man of scruples and integrity, Americans choose the successful pitcher, Gil Gamesh." (Lazenby 50).

This proves relevant particularly in the context of the following note: "He had "the arm of a God, but the disposition of the common man: petty, grudging, vengeful, gloating, selfish, narrow and mean. How could they not adore him" (Roth 1973, 67)? The American love of valiant and prodigious figures is, thus, surpassed by their craving for representativeness and identification. The flawed nature of the embraced example speaks for the fall of idols and extraordinary figures during the age of reshuffling values. It also brings forth the disappearance or at least relativization of exemplariness under the pressure of recognition and togetherness in a shared, though erring, humanity.

In fact, in a society bewildered and harassed by the instability of uncertain times, relevance is easily lost, and cardinal values are questioned or fall into sheer conventionalism, rather than genuine devotion. Cynicism, detachment, suspicion, resistance become key terms in a new vocabulary of trauma and (self)-annihilation. "America?" said Gamesh, smiling. […] It's just a word they use to keep your nose to the grindstone and your toes to the line. America is the opiate of the people, Goldilocks" (Roth 1973, 488). Obliquely referencing Karl Marx's metaphor on the power and intentions of religion, the troubled and troublesome protagonist exposes the nostalgic, mythologizing drive of America as simply meant to alleviate the people's various types of pain and to preserve the illusions that are necessary to carry on.

Conclusion

GAN abounds in experiment and playfulness while it contains, *in nuce*, many of the ideas that were to shape Roth's later, more impactful writings. While the traditional reader may be both titillated by the constant dialogue with canonic American literature and taken aback by the postmodern disinterest for order, linearity, cohesion in terms of storytelling, the book's stakes seem higher in retrospect than what was commonly perceived at first. Its place in the Rothian continuum is not to be neglected, nor is the role it plays in the advancement of the author's oeuvre and philosophy. As emphasized by Witcombe, it is an important text, though mostly overlooked as merely a transition piece:

> In its conspiratorial atmosphere and focus on definitions of American identity in the immediately postwar era, *GAN* prefigures works such as *I Married a Communist* and *The Plot against America* (2004). In its satiric engagement with American culture at large, it is also indebted to the "uncharacteristically freakish" (Roth 2008) satirical works that Roth published following (and in response to) the commercial and critical success

> of *Portnoy's Complaint* in 1969, including "On the Air" (1970), *Our Gang* (1971), and *The Breast* (1972). Traces of all three of these texts can be detected in *GAN*: the ribald anti-Semitism in "On the Air," the self-serving hypocrisy of American leadership in *Our Gang*, and the intertextual anxieties in *The Breast*. (Witcombe 2024, 107)

The aim of this article has been to revive critical interest in one of Roth's least discussed novels. As emphasized by the brief, yet provocative examples I have selected, the writer's use of multiple, convergent vs. divergent discourses, blows up conventional understandings of American history and literature alike. It produces a revolutionary, though underrated, approach to U.S. history and its essential moments or anti-moments of glory. The revisionist version of events that lies at the heart of this book, shared by Word Smith in order to presumably unmask a governmental conspiracy against the American people and its preferred means of entertainment, elicits a deeper meditation on extremism, bigotry, immoderation, lack of solid landmarks and values.

While making his narrator sound convincing and recognizable, Roth also debunks his claims from within. As warned by Holmberg,

> The novel's title should be taken seriously, or at least as seriously as Roth intends *Smitty* to mean it; this is Roth's meta-narration of a sportswriter's imagining of the great American novel, in all its preposterousness. Roth manipulates the American narrative to such an extent that the *real* history becomes something of a mythology, with the *fictional* history assuming at least the sensation of an authorized truth. As the ultimate unreliable narrator, Smitty attempts to recast and rewrite an entire segment of history. (Holmberg 2005, 47)

Blending fact and fiction in a challenging, almost instigating manner, resorting to postmodernist narrative tools to blur boundaries and take advantage of the permissiveness of the literary realm to break taboos and question official discourses, Philip Roth's *GAN* may be read as a prologue to the irreverent, irascible yet indispensable critical perspectives offered by several of his multi-awarded later novels, like *American Pastoral* and *The Plot against America*.

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"Bursting under the Pressure of Unspeakable Pain"

Mickey Sabbath between Degeneration and Regeneration

Rachele Puddu

> If this was death, then death was just life incognito. All the blessings that make this world the entertaining place that it exists no less laughably in the nonworld, too.
> Philip Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 469

In 1995 Philip Roth published *Sabbath's Theater*, "a wicked book," as he himself defined it when he wrote the acceptance speech for the National Book Award he won that year (Bailey 2021, 591). The Newark-born author had written not only a wicked, or a "distasteful and disingenuous book," in the words of Michiko Kakutani (1995), but also the first novel that deals with a different subject after almost two decades of autobiographically writing about himself and his fictional double, Nathan Zuckerman.

From 1979 to 1986, Roth took on the challenging task of metanarratively writing about his idea of fiction, as the so-called *Zuckerman Bound* and *The Counterlife* (1986) prove. And from 1988 to 1993, he wrote a series of books that transcend the very definition of the novel as they shift thoroughly between the realm of autobiography and that of fictitiousness. *The Facts: a Novelist's Autobiography* (1988), *Deception: a Novel* (1990), *Patrimony: a True Story* (1991), *Operation Shylock: a Confession* (1993), or, following the author's designated name, "Roth Books," all appear with a subtitle that aims at explaining the genre Roth, with his typical overseeing attitude, intended them to be read. Moreover, if we take a closer look, we see that what Roth wrote after the publication of *Sabbath's Theater* is the first chapter of the American trilogy, *American Pastoral* (1997), which established him as one of the most prominent novelists in the American and global literary scene.

Therefore, the 1995 novel acquires a unique position in Roth's production, and more so, it is placed at a distinctive moment in his real life, making it an intriguing case study from the perspective of a continuous shift

between fiction and reality, or autobiography. Roth wrote *Sabbath's Theater* at the peak of a very delicate moment in his life. His father had died a couple of years prior, and he himself was suffering from severe back pain, as he did for most of his life, and had gone through an occlusion of his major coronary arteries that resulted in a quintuple bypass, and a nervous breakdown at the beginning of the 1990s that coincided with a crisis in his marriage to Claire Bloom (see Bailey 2021, 540-561; Nadel 2021, 384).

In light of this, the aim of this paper is to read the novel considering both the impact of the real-life events Roth was going through, and the consequences of such a controversial book for his literary production and style. To do so, we will have to take a look at the role of illnesses and pain both in Roth's works, as well as in his real life, and therefore try to understand the ongoing dialogue between facts and fiction from a scholarly perspective. To do so, I will read the 1995 novel through the critical lenses of narrative medicine, a perspective that reevaluates the role of storytelling and sees it as a crucial element of the healing process. Furthermore, drawing from Miriam Jaffe's claims, I will show how both Roth and Sabbath can be considered "wounded storytellers," for in their respective cases, the act of storytelling is deeply intertwined with their healing processes: "the stories we tell about our lives are not necessarily those lives as they were lived, but these stories become our experience of those lives. A published narrative of an illness is not the illness itself, but it can become the experience of the illness" (Frank 2013, 22). In other words, their pain is eased by the very act of telling stories; they narrativize that illness and, eventually, they engage in an active attempt to overcome it.

1. Death, pain, and degeneration

Just like many other Roth novels, especially the late ones, *Sabbath's Theater* deals with the thorny topic of death. Or, in Mickey Sabbath's case the topic is the fear of death in relation to, and as a consequence of, the mourning of his loved ones. *Sabbath's Theater* is a novel about suffering, about a wrecked character who hits rock bottom and struggles to rise back up. Roth gives us a glimpse of man's degeneration, a grotesque story of a former puppeteer who happens to be obsessed with sex. As many scholars have pointed out in the past few years (Jaffe 2014, 2022; Nadel 2021, 329; 2024), there are quite a few novels that are concerned with physical pain or illness, both of which are strictly related to death. Similarly, the more Roth approaches his own death, the more his novels seem to be attracted by it and, at the same time, distrustful of it.

For Roth, fiction is an indispensable tool for understanding real life. His thoughts on the unbreakable bond between facts and fiction are the framework and stage on which his poetics is built. When it comes to

representing the human condition of suffering and pain, he is coherent with his purpose, as he demonstrated in *Patrimony*, for, "[w]riting a straightforward account of his father's illness and death was for Roth the only way to deal with its reality, which for him became real *only* when written down" (Nadel 2021, 368). It is not a coincidence that Roth often relies on characters who can be considered his fictional doubles (Zuckerman and Kepesh, just to mention the most explicit ones) when it comes to representing illnesses and death. For him, this is a way to overcome his own struggles, both personal and artistic. As Miriam Jaffe rightly claims, "Roth writes because he feels he does not deserve the pain. And in his benevolence, no one of his readership deserves the pain. He offers the narrativization of illness as comfort, reassurance, empathy, and interest in other people's stories" (2014, 4). Ira Nadel shares Jaffe's opinion, as he states that "[w]riting becomes not only therapeutic but the source of a constructive aesthetic to process the meaning of heart disease, depression, appendicitis, knee surgery, arterial disease, aortic stenosis, blocked heart arteries, and the need for stents, medicines, and exercise" (Nadel 2024, 244). And further on, he stresses how "[t]he therapeutic and narrative dimension of transforming illness, pain, and the body into fiction gives it meaning and ownership for Roth. […] For Roth, to know pain is to know life" (246).

2. The body

What I would like to argue here is that Mickey Sabbath can be considered alongside those fictional characters that come in handy to Roth to serve this exact purpose. But unlike the majority of Roth's characters who testify to the importance of pain and illnesses, Mickey Sabbath is an exception. His pain is not only physical; on the contrary, he seems to be in excellent condition, given his numerous sexual encounters; rather, his pain is psychological. Most importantly, he is often the one who causes pain, rather than receiving it.

At the beginning of the novel, the sufferers are Mickey's mother and Drenka. His mother is still mourning his son (16), Morty, who had died fifty years prior in WWII. Drenka suffers because of the unbearable situation caused by Sabbath (19). Sabbath is married to Roseanna, but she is also married to another man, and regardless, she requests that Sabbath practice monogamy. To this demand, he answers: "You wish to impose a condition that either deforms or turns me into a dishonest man with you. But like all other living creatures I suffer when I am deformed" (Roth 2016, 21).

However, the real suffering for Sabbath comes suddenly. As we learn quite early in the novel, Drenka dies from a pulmonary embolus caused by cancer. This is not the first significant loss for Mickey. His first wife, Nikki, had vanished years earlier and never left a trace nor a note; her destiny is unknown both to the reader and to Sabbath. He still mourns his late brother,

just like his mother did. His mother herself dies right before Drenka, leaving Sabbath in a state of unspeakable pain and a condition of explicit psychological distress.

Readers are witnesses to a farce, a grotesque tragedy with two significant outcomes. The first one is Sabbath imagining seeing his mother's ghost, who haunts him and becomes a never-ending reminder of his mortality and fools him for not being able to kill himself: "[…] Making death itself into a farce. Is there anything more serious than dying? No. But you want to make it into a farce. Even killing yourself you won't do with dignity" (172). The second outcome of this degeneration is the necrophilia developed by Sabbath after Drenka's death: he begins to visit the cemetery daily to masturbate on her grave. Toward the end of the novel, he goes to her grave for the last time, and he announces himself by saying, "It is I, Necrophilio, the nocturnal emission" (481). As Joel Diggory notices,

> Sabbath's entire existence has been "Nothing but death, death and the dead" (106) […]. In behavior characteristic of melancholia, rather than abandoning his attachments to the dead, Sabbath "behaves like an open wound," reveling in the "cathectic energies" accessed in the endless work of mourning. (Diggory 2016, 59)

Sabbath has an open wound, and it takes a while for him to acknowledge his issues. When he finally decides to seek help, he goes to Norman, an old friend, and finally relieves himself from the distress and pain he has been feeling. This is how Roth describes Mickey's condition:

> Wifeless, mistressless, penniless, vocationless, homeless . . . and now, to top things off, on the run. If he weren't too old to go back to sea, if his fingers weren't crippled, if Morty had lived and Nikki hadn't been insane, or he hadn't been—if there weren't war, lunacy, perversity, sickness, imbecility, suicide, and death, chances were he'd be in a lot better shape. (153)

He then starts crying, even though he seems to struggle to accept his own vulnerability. And yet, his painful efforts make him appear more human than ever: "He was crying now the way anyone cries who has had it. There was passion in his crying—terror, great sadness, and defeat" (158).

Sabbath is defeated; he is suffering not only because he has lost his beloved mistress, his brother, and his mother. He is suffering because he is afraid of losing his own life, he fears death. It all comes down to the "overbearing consciousness of his own mortality" (Diggory 2016, 49, see also Neelakantan 2017, 99), which leads him into a state of degeneration without the possibility of coming back. Despite having started to deal with his mortality, he struggles to address it; his memory, thought, and language seem to be obscured by pain (see Jurecic 2012, 43). He is constantly announcing

his suicide, but he never dares to do it. What emerges here is that Sabbath is conscious of his fears and pain, but instead of facing them and seeking help, he falls into a spiral of degeneration and indulges in his sexual desires, an antinomy of death in itself, in order avoid his own death, and the pain caused by the death of his loved ones. Therefore, Sabbath becomes representative of the inextricably human principles of *Eros* and *Thanatos*. He becomes even more obsessed with sex, and, at the same time, cannot stop bringing it all back to death:

> That's all he did there now, read book after book about death, graves, burial, cremation, funerals, funerary architecture, funeral inscriptions, about attitudes toward death over the centuries, and how-to books dating back to Marcus Aurelius about the art of dying. (94)

From a more general perspective, we can claim that *Sabbath's Theater* is one of the most fascinating examples of Roth's reflection on the limits of the human body and life. A human body can simultaneously feel pain and pleasure, and these two perfectly natural feelings do not necessarily contradict each other: "[a]s Roth seems to convey throughout his career, the unexpected reality of the body turning against itself is the other side of that experience: the body gives us pleasure; the body gives us pain. And the body gives us life as naturally as it takes it away" (Pozorski 2015, 108).

At the beginning of the second section of the novel, titled "To be or not to be," Sabbath seems to be making an effort to address his condition, even though grotesquely. He writes his own obituary, in which he recounts his life and discomforts:

> MORRIS SABBATH, PUPPETEER, 64, DIES
> Morris "Mickey" Sabbath, a puppeteer and sometime theatrical director who made his little mark and then vanished from the Off Off Broadway scene to hide like a hunted criminal in New England, died Tuesday on the sidewalk outside 115 Central Park West. He fell from a window on the eighteenth floor.
> The cause of death was suicide, said Rosa Complicata, whom Mr. Sabbath sodomized moments before taking his life. Ms. Complicata is the spokesperson for the family.
> […]
> In his fifties he developed erosive osteoarthritis in both hands, […]. The result was radical instability and function loss from persistent pain and stiffness, and progressive deformity. (207)

Writing his obituary becomes, for Sabbath, a way to address his pain, to expose his "nakedness" (Posnock 2006). This act can be described as a narrativization of illness, with a consequent realization of his suffering:

> The pure, monstrous purity of the suffering was new to him, made any and all suffering he'd known previously seem like an imitation of suffering. This was the passionate, the violent stuff, the worst, invented to torment one species alone, the remembering animal, the animal with the long memory. (433)

With this newly found consciousness of his pain, something unbearable compared to what he had experienced before, Sabbath is now entering a new stage, one that could potentially heal him and ease his fear of death.

3. Narrative medicine

Once established the character's journey into his degeneration and, if not regeneration, at least into an attempt to acknowledge his pain, I would like to take a step back and reflect on Mickey Sabbath as an artist, hence trying to read his path in relation to that of Philip Roth, his creator. First of all, one might notice that in his obituary, Mickey refers to himself as a puppeteer. He is actually a former puppeteer, but this is not the main point. As we can imagine, losing control of one's own body, especially for an artist, and especially for an actor, or a puppeteer, in this case, one whose job consisted of quite literally impersonating characters and identities, can be utterly devastating. Debra Shostak gave a brilliant reading of the novel, and argued that:

> Lack of control over his body implies that Sabbath will at some time no longer be able to invent a self, and in suggesting that self-invention is nothing more than fleeting performance, Roth uncovers the central paradox of the phallic myth. Self-performance simultaneously materializes and dematerializes a subject constructed in relation to the body. The subject vanishes at the very moment of its coming into presence—literally, at the moment of orgasm, when phallic power is at once confirmed and terminated. Physically, tumescence implies detumescence. So, too, does performance of the subject imply its own negation, the time when the show is over and the subject is unrepresented. (Shostak 2004, 51-52)

What Shostak is highlighting here is the strong bond between awareness and control over the body, and I would add, the pain and illness that affect it, to the artistic ability to "invent a self." For Roth, the whole purpose of art lies in this exact skill. One's self can be invented, and created, only through art, and only through fiction. The act of storytelling is what makes something real, even illness and pain. And by extension, giving voice to every distressing feeling one might feel, can be crucial in the healing process.

> In studies of self-making, narrative offers an avenue for linking personal experience to cultural knowledge, norms, and tenets. […] Narrative

> provides an arena for "coming to terms" […] with a problematic experience and making some sense, at least provisionally, of what is happening. (Cheryl 2000, 28)

One of the most interesting tools that might help us to better understand this process is the field of narrative medicine, which in the past two to three decades has persuasively established the role of storytelling and narration of the illness as fundamental and helpful in the therapeutic journey. In this regard, one of the most prominent scholars who contributed to the development of the field, Rita Charon, highlights an intriguing feature of her job as well as that of clinicians in general:

> We clinicians donate ourselves as meaning-making vessels to the patient who tells of his or her situation; we act almost as *ventriloquists* to give voice to that which the patient emits. I put it that way because the patient cannot always tell, in logical or organized language, that which must be told. (Charon 2006, 132, emphasis mine, and see Jaffe 2014, 7)

This sentence might seem like it has nothing to do with the novel. But taking a closer look at the words she chooses, and thinking about it within the context of Roth narrative, we are reminded of two things. The first one is that Mickey Sabbath's former job was exactly that of the ventriloquist. Most importantly, the topic of the ventriloquist, along with that of the theater is something that is very much present throughout Roth's oeuvre (see Masiero 2011, 43; Masiero in Pozorski and Scheuer 2024). As we read in *The Counterlife*, for instance, Zuckerman doubts his own performative self, claiming to be "a theater and nothing more than a theater" (Roth 1986, 321).

Conclusion

What is crucial to highlight here is Roth's interesting propensity to consider his characters as masks, as puppeteers and ventriloquists in order to carry on the narrative and the plots of his novels. What I would like to argue is that in this novel Roth himself is the main ventriloquist, who uses his puppets to give a voice to his own pain. He is a "wounded storyteller", in the words of Arthur Frank, who reflected at length on this definition of a storyteller who has experienced an unbearable pain, such as that Roth was actually feeling around the time he wrote *Sabbath's Theater*, and just like he has mastered in his long-lasting career, he is now able to face this pain head on and overcome it. The first occurrence of the term "wounded storyteller" in relation to Roth can be found in the essay written by Miriam Jaffe in 2021, where she highlighted how

> Roth teaches readers how to bear witness, how to offer testimony, and how to closely read, not just texts, but people. In some ways, Roth is what Arthur Frank calls a "wounded storyteller," someone who uses the experience of pain to give voice to the body. […] Roth's mastery of autobiographical gestures – dualistic creations of fictional selves – gives him rare expertise in the field of narrative medicine: he reverse engineers what the founders of narrative medicine call the "discontents" of dualism by tapping into his own pain to imagine the pain of others, through fiction. (Jaffe in McKinley 2021, 194)

Given the outcome of his life, which is surely not a happy ending, we might conclude by establishing that there is no regeneration for Mickey Sabbath, only degeneration. However, thanks to this reading of the novel, I would like to think that the only one who managed to achieve a positive outcome is Roth himself. Thanks to Mickey Sabbath, and thanks to the healing process of writing *Sabbath's Theater*, Roth did not overcome his fear of death, but at least managed to understand a few things about it and find the words to hopefully ease his own pain.

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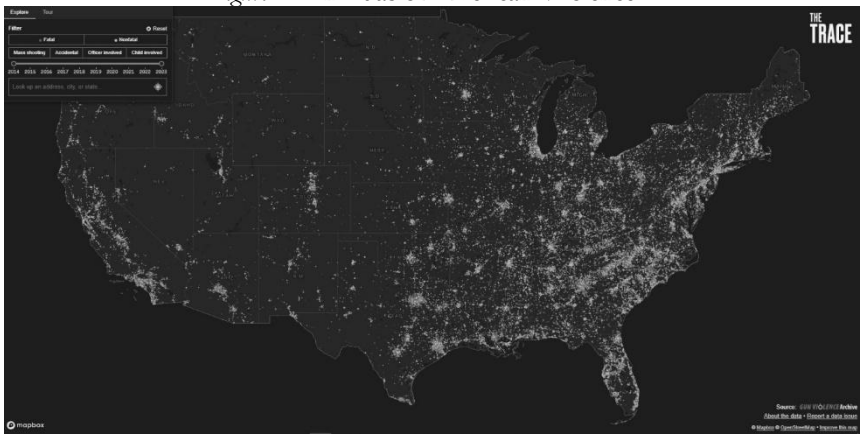
BLANKS INTO TEXT AND VISUALITY: HETEROTOPIC COPING MECHANISMS IN PAUL AUSTER'S *BLOODBATH NATION*

Pál Hegyi

In February, 2024, a deadly shooting erupted at the end of Chief's Super Bowl victory parade in Kansas City, Missouri. One person died and twenty-two were injured including eleven children by the gunfire. Three juvenile suspects were detained. The police later confirmed that the violence is thought to have stemmed from personal dispute. Although 800 law enforcement officers were on duty during the celebration, violence was bound to unfold as the three juveniles in conflict with law and each other were armed to the teeth.

In 2021, Paul Auster, an author oftentimes labelled by critics as a 'trauma writer' (Gibbs 210) took it upon himself to write a non-fiction book against the incessant, unstoppable crisis of gun violence in the USA. The frequency of shootouts that every year results in a death toll soaring up to 40,000 on average is illustrated by an atlas below displaying the following caption: "Ten years. 370,000 shootings."

Figure 1 "An Atlas of American Vilolence."



Source: Gunviolence Archive

In *Bloodbath Nation* (2021) Auster, who "produces a challenging narrative structure through which the characters' numerous experiences of trauma are explored" (Gibbs 2014, 210), sets out to negotiate trauma residing in the aftermath of mass massacres. However, the task at hand is questionable and unsettling as is always the case in the Austerean *oeuvre*. The absence and loss in trauma can only be approximated as compulsive returns to mere symptoms and traces that delimit a domain exhausted and emptied out by intrusive violence and chaotic lacunae. Unexplainable homicide committed in insensible and unremitting acts of terror is beyond any possibility to be narrated.

Paul Auster's work has always been, at least in part, in the center of literary attention for the very reason that his prose seems but a by-product of an ever-failing effort to tell stories never-to-be-told. One of his critics when interpreting the author's first novel insists that it is imperative to analyze his "novels in terms of problematic representation, omission and impersonation conveying a heightened state of loss" (Besbes 2017, 53). Different texts by Auster construe versatile strategies with the same objective to create forms that have the capacity to inversely reach the traumatic core. Alan Gibbs in his critical volume *Contemporary American Trauma* (2014) gives a detailed interpretation of Auster's *Man in the Dark* (2008) as a "neo-naturalist form" (214) and includes *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) and *Invisible* (2009) by the American author as narratives using "techniques such as procrastination, distraction and displaced subjectivity in order to avoid the subject of trauma" (Gibbs 2014, 202). Since Paul Auster's 2021 narrative is written as a nonfiction piece, it takes a different approach with regard to its poetics, which fact is highly emphasized in the full title of the book: "Paul Auster: *Bloodbath Nation – Photographs by Spencer Ostrander*." The main body of text in this work is constantly disrupted by sequences of black and white photographs that divide, separate and isolate the ensuing sections of the volume. These textual interludes, detours or digressions, as the narrative itself accentuates, are failing attempts to put sense to the nation as a whole, to explain the unexplainable. In Auster's words,

> The logical next step would be for me to start talking about the growth of the NRA, the Second Amendment, the gun-control movement, and the various positions advanced by partisans on both sides of the issue, but all those arguments and counter-arguments are numbingly familiar to us by now (Auster 2021, 44).

"Numbingly familiar," indeed, yet, despite the evidence, it is exactly these useless arguments that the text compulsively reiterates and repeats. For lack of any chance to get to the crux of the matter, Auster touches upon the most significant aspects of transgenerational curses from colonial skirmishes

through the extermination of indigenous peoples to reconstruction era lynching. *Bloodbath Nation* is a futile effort to make sense of the insensible act of mass murders by echoing surrogate narratives of historical, cultural, legislative, ethical, social, existential, and political explication of possible causes for which *Bloodbath Nation* was heavily criticized by some reviewers. The book starts with the obvious by stating the facts and the narrator informs the reader, for instance, that statistics show that "[t]here are 393 million guns currently owned by residents of the United States" (Auster 2021, 39). After such an overture, differing domains offer themselves as points of departure for approximating the inert core of the paradox, especially that of the country's history, as seen by Auster, who writes that

> [T]his is a country that was born in violence but also born with a past, one hundred and eighty years of prehistory that were lived in a state of continual war with the inhabitants of the land we appropriated and continual acts of oppression against our enslaved minority. (127)

alongside the existence of the Second Amendment, which includes that "nowhere in the history of the English language has the phrase 'bear arms' ever carried a meaning that does not refer to the military" (55-57) and a culture as such, where

> Cars and guns are the twin pillars of our deepest national mythology . . . push the gas pedal to the floor, and suddenly you are racing along at one hundred miles an hour; curl your fingers around the trigger of your Glock or AR-15, and you own the world. (42)

Furthermore,

> [T]he truth was that legendary towns such as Dodge City, Tombstone, and Deadwood, the supposed hot spots and capitals of one-on-one armed showdowns . . . were largely devoid of the non-stop violence presented in classic Westerns. (59-60)

In terms of legislation, Auster emphasizes that

> [T]he proliferation of the tommy gun was a direct result of the rise of criminal gangs and gangsterism in the 1920s, and the principal reason for that rise was another amendment to the Constitution, the eighteenth, which outlawed the sale of intoxicating liquors and ushered in the upside-down, topsy turvy years of Prohibition. (61)

Moreover, in terms of ethical considerations, the American writer claims that "we aren't designed to take the life of another person. It damages us. It changes us" (104). The social aspect is also seen critically, as the following:

These grisly spectacles have occurred often enough in the past two decades to qualify as a new form of American ritual: bloodshed and grief transformed into a series of ghoulish entertainments that time and again plant us in front of our television sets . . . Meanwhile, the networks boost their ratings and increase their profits by reversing the old huckster's jingle, "more bang for your buck," into "more bucks from the bang." (80)

In line with the previous ideas, Austers' existential argument is that

> What we don't understand is the arbitrariness of random killing, and each time another mass shooting claims national attention, all of us begin to feel more vulnerable, for if that old person or that young person or that small child can be shot and killed for no reason, why couldn't it happen to my child or to me? (81)

As political framing, Auster maps transformations of culture by observing that

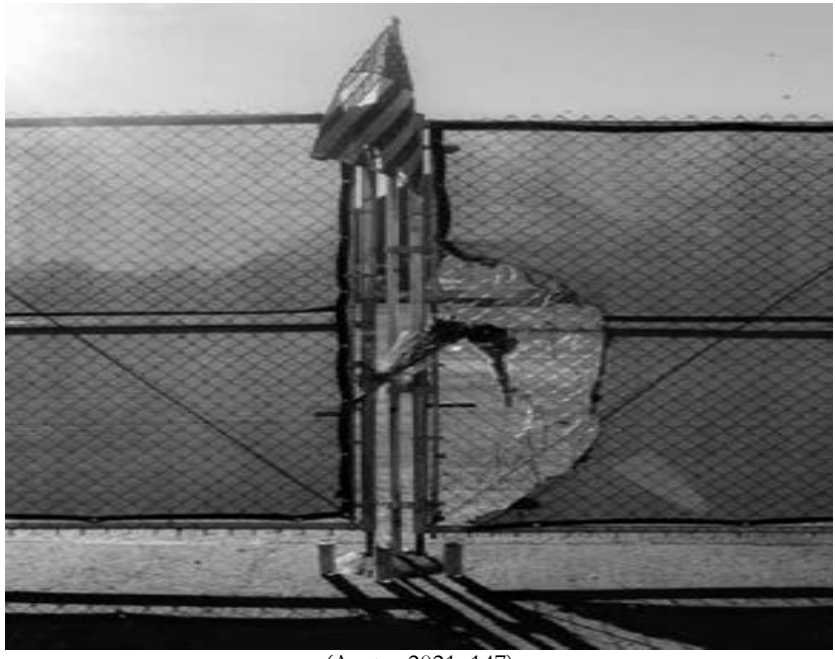
> What happened over that next decade was the transformation of the NRA into one of the most powerful lobbying groups in the country . . . The irony is that a movement which is predominantly white, rural, and conservative should have come into being because it embraced the gun philosophy of a group which was black, urban, and radical: the foundational belief that guns are primarily an instrument of self-defense and, to quote Chairman Mao (as the Panthers did), that 'political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.' (126)

Gary Younge, one of Auster's critics, comments on the above-mentioned angles and approximations with the following sentences on Auster, who

> takes us on a journey that passes by the second amendment, slavery, Native American genocide, Vietnam, the Black Panthers, Black Lives Matter, Donald Trump, neoliberal globalisation and much more. It's a lot of ground to cover in such a small book: arguably too much. Auster, one of the finest storytellers in the English language, makes for an informed and enlightened companion as he meanders through the subject. But his failure to signal a destination, let alone arrive at one, leaves the reader lost and feeling as hopeless as when they started. (Younge 2023)

Therefore, the question remains whether the book completely fails to address the issue at hand. In part, it does, even if it doesn't. The work is a compound artifact, a binary structure erected upon textual and visual archives, gathering and repeating arguments and counter-arguments, which are "numbingly familiar" to the nation while creating a subtext that questions the identity of the very nation. The founding fathers needed rifles because of grievances caused by the oppressors from the motherland, a forming nation needed

arms to maintain an economic system built on first indentured than chattel slavery, the new, contemporary nation needs weapons to fend for itself against its own minorities, up to a point when the vicious cycle of gun violence turns firearms into a means to itself, the new Eden, into a space of recurrent senseless mass murders. The 'bookends' of this work are represented by two photographs of the star spangled banner. The cover features a twisted flag while the last photo on the penultimate page of the book gives a dramatic depiction of a torn national banner. Yet, there is no story to be told between these two poles. The barrel of the gun turns against the weapon wilder as the domain of national identity becomes obliterated by a space of repetition.



(Auster 2021, 147)

Yi-fu Tuan in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (2001) creates a distinction between the two terms when insisting that unmarked space gains meaning and definition by being observed in experiential perception. In his theory, it is the areas of interest and familiar sites that create places. And such is that of the homeland.

> A homeland has its landmarks, which may be features of high visibility and public significance, such as monuments, shrines, a hallowed battlefield or cemetery. These visible signs serve to enhance a people's sense of identity; they encourage awareness of and loyalty to place" (Tuan 2001, 159).

Yi-fu's "perspective of experience" is a concept that is, in essence, phenomenological in nature inasmuch as it places the focus on the observer from whose vantage point the particularities of their surroundings inadvertently turn into intentional objects. However, his book in its function and capacity as an album, does not contain photographs of famous historic battlefields or war graves but are rather visual representations of abandoned buildings, barren fields, and vacuous spaces. Here, experience is being inexperienced and once meaningful places are left 'unsaid,' non-narrated as, in an inverted process, place is reduced to space, the homeland is stripped to its mere set of scapes.

Mongia Besbes's "The Trauma of Existence in *The New York Trilogy*" claims that a "linguistic block impedes the subject from voicing a latent wound that scars his being" (Besbes 2017, 54). What seems evident in the critical reception of Auster's traumatized protagonists is also detectable in the visual installment of the volume. Here, linguistic inexpression as the complete lack of convincing arguments is paralleled by visual voids. Instead of a compulsive return to the traumatic core, the observer arrives at his heterotopic spaces created by a constant oscillation between linguistic and visual inexpression. Just as historic, socio-political argumentative approximations fail to create a narrative to give account for any plausible motivation for some heinous deeds, visual representations of once homely places imbued with a strong sense of American identity began being transformed into undefined spaces devoid of any capacity to reconstruct identity as such. The sequences of sites of recurring massacres are mediated and meditated as nothing but symptoms generating narrative and visual spaces of pure repetition itself. Just as recurrent failings in communication inevitably result in a type of "traumatic speech impediment" (Besbes 2017, 55), in a similar vein, the visual fissures, hiatuses can be seen as ocular impediments. These sites do not entail traces (headstones, monuments, memorials, and so on) pointing to events that could serve as a basis for family lore, national myths, or narratives of memory politics, they simply denote their own stability in frequent replications. In these pictures, trauma is only made perceptible as effect and symptom, as entrapment caused by the atemporal, stationary state of absence and vacuous spaces.

Mariano Yela in "Behavior and Metabehavior" paraphrases Sigmund Freud's famous motto "Wo Es war, soll Ich warden" (Freud 1964, 80) the following way by stating that "Where the unknown forces that determine human behavior were, let man's subjectively meaningful action be" (Yela 1984, 263). Here, this claim is taken out of the contexts of language, society, and history thus making subjectively meaningful actions impossible. With regard to the "incomprehensible" and self-copying nature of mass shootings, Auster creates a parallel with the twenty-seven grievances enlisted in the Declaration of Independence:

> Family grievances, spousal grievances, sexual grievances, workplace grievances, institutional grievances, political grievances, racial and ethnic grievances (hate crimes), and, as the epidemic of mass shootings continues to spread, the ambition on the part of many of the youngest killers to surpass the death tolls achieved by their predecessors, to break the record and thereby win fame and everlasting outlaw glory as the greatest mass killer in American history. Social media sites swarm with the braggadocio of these would-be destroyers as they prepare themselves to carry out their versions of the armed massacre in a school, a college, or a church, and to read through their communications is to understand that the annihilation of strangers has been turned into both a competitive sport and a sinister new variant of contemporary performance art. (Auster 2021, 45-46)

The labyrinthine circularity of the compulsive return to the static traumatic event would render the subject speechless, yet the visualizations of the lacunae created by the repetitive cycles of surrogate narratives make gateway to what Jacques Lacan first termed the "symptom" which later was transformed into "sinthome" a fort/da mechanism within a narrative chain repetitively describing nothing else but the space of repetition itself (Lacan 106). However, this circularity is further complicated by the inherent tautology of a revengeful crime that is instigated by aimless revenge itself. Just as grievances are described in Auster's work as manifestations of an undetectable source of panic that cannot be directly linked to a yet imaginary but always already arbitrary homicide to be committed, trauma itself becomes doubly unlocatable. The symptom remains short of an original problem, the syndrome stands in itself without any disorder that could have caused it. Slavoj Žižek comments on this controversy with the ensuing sentences:

> What do we do with a symptom, with this pathological formation which persists not only beyond its interpretation but even *beyond* fantasy? Lacan tried to answer this challenge with the concept of sinthome . . . If the symptom in this radical dimension is unbound, it means literally 'the end of the world'—the only alternative to the symptom is nothing: pure autism, a psychic suicide, surrender to the death drive, even to the total destruction of the symbolic universe. (*emphasis added*) (Žižek 2008, 81)

The aforementioned "beyond" is indexed in the heterotopic ellipses between the peopleless photos and the pointless argumentation of surrogate narratives. In "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault choses the cemetery as his primary example for heterotopias, a space that is deprived of its social and cultural context in a way that still connects it to all sites of the citystate as each and every family locates the absence of a family member within it (Foucault 1998, 233). Thus, dwellings and graveyards are in constant dialogue created by the heterotopia, as "heterotopias . . . have a function in relation to all the space that remains" (Foucault 1998, 235). In the still life(less) photos

of once populated crime scenes questions and answers remain enclosed within each location. When negotiating the distinction between utopias and heterotopias, Foucault explains that a mirror as a placeless place is both utopia as it projects the absence of the observer, but also heterotopia since the virtual image behind the silver foil, through their own gaze, prompts the observer to reconstitute their identity in the originary location. The tautology generated by the incomprehensibility of senseless mass massacres would render it impossible to create a mirroring dialogue between photographs of the shootings in progress and the audience, thus it is between textual and visual voids that the unreality of the real is made possible to be gazed at; an event placed within, as it were, the foil or tain of the mirroring surface. In his lecture, Foucault references (Foucault 1998, 231) Gaston Bachelard as a major source of inspiration for his theory of other places. Tautological trauma is centered on, when in *The Poetics of Space* (1994) Bachelard demonstrates his dialectics of outside and inside and the domain of the surface in-between by analyzing the prose-poem "L' espace aux ombres" [Shade-Haunted Space] by Henri Michaux (Bachelard 1994, 216-221). Quoting one single phrase from the text, Bachelard insists that

> [i]n this "horrible inside-outside" of unuttered words and unfulfilled intentions, within itself, being is slowly digesting its nothingness. . . . If there exists a border-line surface between such an inside and outside, this surface is painful on both sides. . . . The fear does not come from the outside. Nor is it composed of old memories. It has no past, no physiology. Nothing in common, either, with having one's breath taken away. Here fear is being itself. (Bachelard 1994, 217-218)

As if shooting blanks into the void.

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ANALYZING TRAUMA, CAUSALITY, AND HEALING IN PAUL AUSTER'S BAUMGARTNER

Fanni Orsolya Kovács

In memorian Pail Auster

Introduction

Much of the available literature—whether it be reviews, essays, or scholarly works—positions Paul Auster as one holding a firm place as a trauma writer (cf. Carsten 2011; Gibbs 2014; Shi 2017), at once duly proclaiming him as a narrator of crises. Beginning with his first seminal work of prose, *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), Auster opens his prosaic *oeuvre* by recounting the death of his father, thus facing the "impossibility of speaking" (Hegyi 2024*,* 38). The commemoration of his father not only depicts his longing for the absent parent but reveals a multi-generational trauma, the murder of his grandfather. Following with *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), Auster's writing provides an "apocalyptic" vision (Pascariu 2013, 679), an entropic world that operates on a system of constant loss that is "grounded in the dystopian or post-holocaust tradition of science fiction" (Auster 1995, 148). It is a work of disappearances: people, objects, buildings, memories, feelings, and words vanish without the faint hope of their restoration; hence one must learn to adapt to the ever-changing living conditions. In Alan Gibbs' interpretation, Auster's 2008 novel, *Man in the Dark*, "concerns the traumatic impact of global political events upon a family" (Gibbs 2014, 209) in post-9/11 America; concurrently the novel's embedded story proffers a metaleptic journey to the version of the U.S. "where the events of 9/11 have not taken place" (Gleich 2014, 167). This vision of obliterating one of the greatest tragedies in American remembrance opens up the possibilities of recovering the fissure and healing the scar that is left on the nation's memory.

Ensuing the publication of *Man in the Dark*, Auster authors *Invisible* (2009): a *mise-en-abymic* narrative that tells about a shocking act of violence. The novel, in a similar manner to the second book of *The Invention of Solitude*, "renders futility a gateway towards the invisible aspects of human condition, where the Self ensures presence by disappearing into a state of exile from its own Self" (Hegyi 2014, 109). The eyewitness of a murder (the triad of the

protagonist/doppelganger/pseudo-narrator) can only survive by yielding up his identity and replacing it with several others, mending the narrative to avoid further harm to the self. Auster's maximalist endeavor of *4321* (2017) is about "human tragedy" (Auster 2017, 181): the narrative line running on several, simultaneous diachronic dimensions of a life chronicles personal and communal, individual and national instances of crises and traumata (e.g., the Kennedy assassination, political upheavals, death of a father, loss of a friend—incorporating historical events into a fictitious frame). A collaborative work with photographer Spencer Ostrander, *Bloodbath Nation* (2023), contemplates gun violence, commencing from the personal to the national, from the autobiographical to the historical. It is an amalgamation of words with "photographs of silence" (Auster 2023, xii) fabricating the "gravestones of our collective grief" (Ibid.). Thus far, it can be asserted unequivocally that traumatic experiences and climacteric life situations are recurrent themes in, and hence, are integral parts of Auster's writing.

Baumgartner (2023) is the concluding piece of Auster's *oeuvre* that seals the work of the author. The last novel presents the reader with *la condition humaine*—the term originating from Michel de Montaigne, borrowed by Hannah Ardent, and even used by Albert Camus concentrates on *temporal* human existence presupposing a universality of human nature and behaviour (cf. Suchting 1962, 47; Hall 1960, 28). Seymour Baumgartner is an aging professor of philosophy who loses his wife in a sudden, tragic accident. Being a widower for almost ten years, one day, Baumgartner is informed that his housekeeper's husband, Mr. Flores, lost two fingers during carpenter work, which incident leads Baumgartner to parallel his grief to "phantom limb syndrome" (27).

The present paper aims to explore Baumgartner's trauma, drawing on the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, arguing that the amputation of the fingers serves as the traumatic stimulus, indicating the belated (*nachträglich*) (Freud 1966, 356) nature of his trauma. The "phantom limb" not only functions as a trope cognate with the loss of his loved one, a missing part of him—the trauma seen as a value of a hole (*troumatisme*) (Lacan, *Les nom-dupes errent*)—but as an attempt to verbalize the trauma, thus assigning a signifier to the void in a catachretic process. In such context, Baumgartner's drive could be interpreted as an exertion of filling the traumatic hole by symbolically acquiring prosthesis, an 'artificial limb' in the image of the *Other* that would resemble his lost wife and at once their never-born child. Before delving into the analysis of the trauma work of Baumgartner it is essential to introduce the main concepts, the principal notions of the psychoanalytical framework.

Theoretical background

First and foremost, it is indispensable to explicate Freud's general theory of the neuroses, concentrating on traumatic fixation and the role of the unconscious, repression, and suppression. Most scholars, researchers, and psychologists concur that certain aspects of Freud's ideas are questionable and lack empirical evidence; however, his impact and contemporary relevance are unmistakable (Falzeder 2012; Frick 2003; Gaude 2021; Sandler et al. 1992). While contemporary sciences aim at integrating, refining, and redefining Freudian psychoanalytical concepts, cultural studies and literary criticism have been cultivating and utilizing those in their own domains.

One of the predominant symptoms that Freud and Breuer observed in connection with patients suffering from neuroses is fixation. These patients seemed to be fixated upon a particular segment of their past from which they were incapable of liberating themselves, to such an extent that they were alienated from both the present and the future (Freud 1920, 236). Traumatic neuroses "show clear indications that they are grounded in a fixation upon the moment of the traumatic disaster" (Freud 1920, 237). The cause of such fixation is that the traumatic experience overwhelms the individual's psyche which cannot be processed by normal means. In other words, trauma could be defined as a 'psychic wound' that is "stored in our consciousness layers, carrying a volatile quality" (Mandal 2022, 10257).

It is important to differentiate between the general causes of traumatic neuroses: a) experiencing physical trauma (which could occur in sexual nature) or near death encounter that threatens the living organism, b) emotional and verbal abuse, or c) as in the case of posttraumatic stress disorder the witnessing of the destruction of another living organism (cf. *DSM-5* 271). In each case, it could be concluded that traumatic neuroses "arise from the inability to meet an overpowering emotional experience" (Freud, General Introduction 238). In the matter of mourning, the overpowering emotional experience appears as a fixation upon the past, which manifests in symptoms akin to traumatic neuroses (ibid.).

Patients suffering from neuroses may develop obsessive-compulsive behaviors; they perform senseless compulsive activities which are fundamentally symptoms connected to the traumatic experience. On the one hand, obsessions, preceding the compulsive activities, are "recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or images that are experienced as intrusive and unwanted" (*MSD-5* 235). Obsessions may be recognized as mental flaws leading to compulsive activities. On the other hand, compulsions are "repetitive behaviors or mental acts that an individual feels driven to perform in response to an obsession" (Ibid.). The causality could be mapped as the following: the occurrence of the traumatic event accompanied by the repression of the traumatic memory to the unconscious causing the

development of symptoms, the emergence of obsessive thoughts and compulsive actions. Until the symptoms and their origins are not realized through therapy, the patient will continue repeating the compulsive activity (Freud 1920, 241).

Subsequently, two additional terms should be introduced: repression and suppression. Based on Breuer's observations, "the existence of a symptom presupposes that some psychic process was not carried to its normal conclusion, so that it could not become conscious. The symptom is the substitute for that which did not take place" (Freud 1920, 254). To put it simply, symptoms signal the insufficient execution of the psychic processes, however, this incompleteness is not apparent to the patient. Repression is an act of censorship that prevents the unconscious thought from surfacing in the conscious mind (Freud 1920, 255). Suppression is a process akin to repression: it is generally considered to be a conscious and deliberate act of the patient, that is, an intentional forgetfulness, obliteration of the unpleasant memory, of the traumatic impression (Freud 1920, 256-258). To conclude, the evocation of what is repressed is a prerequisite for the advancement of therapy; the realization of the (un)consciously forgotten event and the verbalization of the traumatic occurrence are key elements in eliminating symptoms, and overcoming suppression and repression.

In his prominent work, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1973), Lacan aspires to reinvent and rework four Freudian principles **(**unconscious, repetition, transference, and drive) grounded on his theory that the "unconscious is structured like language" (20). Lacan stresses that his system is disparate from the Freudian unconscious, where the meaning of symptoms and the cause of traumatic neuroses are hidden but could be extracted and revealed to the conscious mind through therapy (Freud 1920, 240-240). In Lacan's view, the unconscious gains status through its linguistic structure which ensures that underneath the term unconscious lies "something definable, accessible and objectifiable" (21). In Freud's understanding, the patient suffering from neuroses represses the traumatic event, forcing it unavailable to the conscious mind (Freud 1920*,* 254-255). The repression materializes as an amnestic gap, a hole: a scar "not of the neuroses, but of the unconscious" (Lacan 1973, 22) where "something of the order of the non-realized" (Ibid.) is found. Thus, the psyche holds a crucial role when it comes to the "recognition and realization of signifiers and their relations" (Lacan 1973, 20). Since the Lacanian framework holds that the unconscious is structured like language, then the Freudian 'unforgotten' (that is situated in the amnestic gap) is hence not forgotten, simply 'non-realized'. In short, the focus of psychoanalysis (including dream-interpretation) is to locate the domain from where the gap is produced, that is, the origin or cause of the trauma, the traumatic event itself.

Lacan emphasizes that the unconscious repetition and transference are two separate domains and should not be mistaken for one another (Lacan 1973, 30). Transference in Freud's terms means the *transferring*, the projection of either positive or negative emotions that the patient feels for a certain person, in an ideal environment, onto the analyst (Freud 1920, 382-383). Repetition (*Wiederholen*), on the other hand, is related to remembering (Erinnerung) (Lacan, *Four Fundamental* 49), that is, the act of repetition arises from a past event that is connected to the induction of the traumatic experience. Repetition, however, is not equal to reproduction (*Reproduzieren*), since the moment of repetition in act is realized as the "*resistance of the subject*" (Lacan 1973, 51) (emphasis in the original), which resistance is oftentimes not recognized, its cause is repressed, that is, it is not a conscious action. Consequently, as Lacan draws attention to it, "[w]hat is repeated, in fact, is always something that occurs—the expression tells us quite a lot about its relation to the tuché—as if by chance" (54). Lacan distinguishes two types of causality: the tuché and the automaton. Automaton, the term Lacan borrows for Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, "refers to a kind of mechanic unfolding . . . [that] produces predictable results" (Wright 2021, 239). In opposition to this predictability, tuché is the unpredictable "*encounter with the real*" (Lacan 1973, 53) (emphasis in the original). Since the Real is associated with trauma and the unspeakable—the order of the Real stands as a pre-linguistic psychological state—such encounters may provoke discomfort and anxiety that cannot be properly verbalized or expressed linguistically. Nevertheless, the automaton appears to be antithetical to the real that operates in an arbitrary manner. As Colin Wright points out, the real "cannot be predicted or represented or spoken fully . . . This is why Lacan will later invent the neologism, 'troumatisme,' with 'trou' meaning hole. An irruption of the real in the midst of what had been our reality, trauma tears a hole in the very fabric of meaning" (Wright 2021, 239). In simpler terms, Lacan characterizes trauma as "the irruption of a 'real' deprived of imaginary or symbolic representation" (Bernet 2000, 161).

Baugmartner's trauma

Auster's final novel centers around absence and the ache of memory. It narrates the ordinary life of Sy Baumgartner, a retiring professor of philosophy, author of numerous books, venturing into his seventies. Baumgartner's existence has been stained with grief for the past ten years when his wife, a freelance writer, editor, and translator, Anna Blume lost her life in a tragic accident. Ever since *witnessing* the tragedy, Baumgartner has been a stranger in his life; life eludes him. He is disoriented, absent-minded, and becomes easily disrupted: he leaves the stove burning under an aluminum pot, enters a room then forgets the purpose for entering the room, fails to

make pre-arranged phone calls (*Baumgartner* 1-4). He is incapable of being in the *present*, living in the here and now; instead, he lives in a regression to the past "in a blur of forgetfulness" (30). Furthermore, not only Baumgartner's actions are strikingly revealing but his one-time consultation with the grief counselor. The grief counselor suggests that Baumgartner is numb, "still haven't absorbed what's happened" to him (30). Baumgartner insists on the contrary: "I saw her dead body on the beach, and because I carried that dead body in my arms, I've fully absorbed what happened to her" (31). What is striking here is Baumgartner's cold distance which could be read, on the one hand, as the grief counselor propounds, the resistance to process Anna's death in its entirety, or, on the other hand, it may signal that he has overcome the phase of denial. It may indicate that Baumgartner has acknowledged that "Death takes a man's body away from him. In life, a man and his body are synonymous; in death, there is the man and there is his body" (Auster 1982, 14). Nevertheless, the grief counselor is not convinced by Baumgartner's responses and objects that Baumgartner *resists* him (cf. Freud 1920, 248) and to a certain extent he holds himself accountable for not being able to prevent the accident.

Baumgartner describes his then-current state as feeling "wretched, miserable," "hammered into thousand pieces," "dissociated," not quite himself (32). This depiction underscores two things: first, it shows that these formulations of words prove to be futile, they cannot represent the essence, the true meaning he wishes to verbalize (in contrast to "phantom limb syndrome"). Second, dissociation and the split of the self, in the case of a person suffering from traumatic neuroses, manifest itself in various ways. During the first six months following the accident, Baumgartner "lived in a state of such profound confusion that there were times when he would wake up in the morning and forget that Anna was dead" (29). This absent-mindedness, however, did not last for a few seconds but for a longer period of time (he had time to go downstairs, make coffee, look at the newspaper, and look for his spouse without realizing she being dead). The fact of Anna's death, its memory has been repressed into Baumgartner's unconscious, hidden in the traumatic fissure, temporarily unforgotten in the amnestic gap (cf. Freud 1920, 255).

Baumgartner suffers from obsessive-compulsive behaviors that are connected to the traumatic event of witnessing his wife's death. Obsessions occur as intrusive, recurrent and persistent thoughts; hence Baumgartner's life is governed by the 'thought of Anna.' This obsession gives rise to numerous compulsive, repetitive behaviors which are presented throughout the narration and not solely restricted to the early phases of Baumgartner's mourning. The initial symptoms of obsessive behaviors manifest in such senseless activities as "banging out gibberish on Anna's typewriter" (47) and listening to its clacking sound, "squandering two entire evenings folding and

refolding the things in her bureau drawers . . . and aligning them in neatly ordered rows before placing each stacked pile into the drawers" (Ibid.), "buying expensive wooden hangers to replace the metal and plastic ones and then rehanging Anna's dresses" (Ibid.), "buying half a dozen transparent, zippered containers for storing her sweaters on the shelf above" (48), "pouring a cup of coffee for her every morning" (Ibid.), "writing several dozen pornographic love letters to her and sending them through the mail, going to the absurd trouble of folding them into envelopes, addressing them, affixing a stamp to them, and dropping them into a mailbox" (Ibid.). Through such absurd and pointless occupations, Baumgartner keeps his wife 'alive,' maintains her presence in the mundane episodes of life. These instances are characterized by three cardinal Freudian concepts: fixation, regression, and suppression. Baumgartner is fixated "on some particular phase of the past" (Freud 1920, 238), that is, when his wife was alive. These fixations not only reveal themselves as recurring, intrusive thoughts but as regression: Baumgartner is a captive of the past, constantly returns to a prior state of life through the repetition of habitual actions linked to that certain time (cf. Freud 1920, 277). Lastly, suppression occurs in a form of a conscious act of intentionally 'forgetting' Anna's death, thus persevering former practices.

A decade later, Baumgartner's reentering into the world of the living at once leaving behind "the lost world of Then" (23) is, in effect, deception.

> Ten years later, Baumgartner marvels at how little has changed for him since those early months of near insanity. He has pretended otherwise, of course, and once he managed to hoist himself from the ground, stand up on his feet, and start walking again, it appeared that he made his way back into the world of the living. (Auster 2023, 53)

In lieu of overcoming the above-listed compulsive actions, Baumgartner's neurotic symptoms persisted in different forms, which may be more acceptable in the public eye. Governed by the same obsessive thoughts connected to Anna, Baumgartner launches into the great endeavor of refurnishing his entire home: replacing "the bed, the stove, the refrigerator, the table and chairs in the kitchen, the living room furniture, the sheets, the pillows, the towels, the silverware, the plates, the bowls, the cups, the mugs, the drinking glasses, the teapot, the coffee maker, and thousand other small and large things" (54). Following all these alterations in the composition of the house, the "purging . . . of all traces of her" (Ibid.), two things remained intact, meticulously preserved in their primary arrangement: Anna's workroom and the aluminum pot. Both the workroom and the pot bear a decisive and symbolic role in the narrative. The workroom, on the one hand, remains Baumgartner's space for escaping the lack of Anna (a lack he partially created, enhanced) at once releasing him from and tying him to the memories.

On the other hand, the untouched room is where he feels Anna's presence the most vividly; where his dream takes place. Moreover, along with Anna's workroom belongings, preserving her manuscripts proves to be a crucial decision in the narrative.

Causality

Trauma and causality in the narrative are played out in a constant parallel between physical, bodily pain (injuries, amputation, explosion, burn) and between sorrow and emotional distress. The first instance of physical injury introduced is Baumgartner burning his hand with the aluminum pot. After cooking his breakfast, Baumgartner forgets to turn off the cooker under the vessel, hence when he reenters the kitchen "without bothering to fetch a pot holder or a towel, he lifts the destroyed, smoldering egg boiler off the stove and scalds his hand" (2). The pot is symbolic; its destruction is even more so. The twenty-year-old Baumgartner first sets eyes on Anna when he is buying "cheap, second hand utensils" on Amsterdam Avenue (24). The pot thus remained a reminder, a reliquary of that event: the two "married five years later and his true life began, his one and only life" that lasted until the tragic accident of Anna (Ibid.). It was the only item that Baumgartner did not give away after Anna's death (cf. the list above) and now the cycle is closed: Anna passed away, the pot is pulverized. Although the physical damage that Baumgartner's hand suffered is far less severe than what its emotive association had.

Baumgartner when combing through Anna's manuscripts encounters the narrative of "Frankie Boyle." This story within a story recapitulates the terrible and sudden death of Anna's first love, Frankie Boyle. Boyle was enlisted to fight in the Vietnam War, however, before even reaching the destination, "a rocket launcher misfired and blew up in his hands. The explosion tore his body apart" (44). Baumgartner was familiar with the incident, "the horror of his ghastly annihilation, which had cut through [Anna] like a sword" (44), leaving a "*permanent gash in her soul*" (45) (emphasis in the original). As a recurrent theme, the duality of bodily pain and the sorrow of the heart is connected to Anna. This moment holds significance not merely because Anna is mourning her ex-boyfriend (implying that Baumgartner shares her distress), or by reading her words Baumgartner "felt as if he was hearing Anna's voice rise from the paper and that she was talking to him again" (45), but rather due to Baumgartner's *choice* of revisiting this particular story; he unconsciously searches a narrative to which he can connect, to find a way to release his grief.

Lastly, it is imperative to contemplate Mr. Flores' accident acting as a catalyst of the trauma work in the narrative. One morning, Baumgartner receives a phone call that his housekeeper's husband (he has been employing

a housekeeper since Anna's death), Mr. Flores, suffered an accident during carpentry and lost two fingers. While Baumgartner attempts to soothe Rosita, the messenger (one of Mr. and Mrs. Flores' children), he "sees the two severed fingers falling into a pile of sawdust on the floor. He sees the blood flowing from the bare, skinless stumps. He hears Mr. Flores scream" (8). In contrast to the child's muffled and fragmented record of the event, Baumgartner has a vivid image of the injury in his mind. After the phone call ended, Baumgartner remained preoccupied by the incident. He contemplates what might have caused Mr. Flores to make such a fatal error, but most importantly, how can an everyday act end in irrevocable repercussions? Likewise, how can an ordinary practice such as going for a swim result in the loss of his loved one? Thereafter, Baumgartner keeps returning to the subject. Months passed after the amputation of Mr. Flores' fingers and Baumgartner worked on "a new idea," "the knotty, intractable mind-body conundrum called *phantom limb syndrome*" (27) (emphasis in the original). As Baumgartner learns that

> [I]n cases of permanent amputation nearly everyone who loses an arm or a leg will continue to feel that the missing limb is still attached to his or her body for years afterward, often accompanied by acute pain, itching, involuntary spasms, and a sense that the limb has shrunk or has been contorted into an excruciating position. (27-28)

He recognizes that as much as it is a proper medical description of a neurotic-biological condition, it is a fitting resemblance for the metaphorical depiction of grief: not merely of grief in general but of his own feelings and distress. In other words, it is "the trope Baumgartner has been searching for ever since Anna's sudden, unexpected death ten years ago, the most persuasive and compelling analogue to describe what has happened to him since" (28). Phantom limb syndrome is the trope through which he is capable of putting into words how

> [H]is limbs were ripped off his body, all four of them, arms and legs together at the same time … he is a human stump now, a half man who has lost the half of himself that had made him whole, and yes, the missing limbs are still there, and they still hurt, hurt so much that he sometimes feels his body is about to catch fire and consume him on the spot. (28)

As it was formerly introduced, Mr. Flores's amputation serves as a stimulus that leads Baumgartner to reflect on his trauma and forces him to search for a linguistic framing, a new way of meaning-production to verbalize the traumatic event, since "it cannot be processed through existing frameworks of meaning" (Wright 2021, 237). This processing, however, takes place much later than the traumatic event occurred. The shock of the first event

(witnessing the death of Anna) had not surfaced until the traumatic stimulus (the amputation of the fingers) occurred. Thus, the "trauma only came into being *retrospectively* when a link was made to the 'second' experience . . . a response to what registered as traumatic only *après-coup*" (Wright 2021, 239) (emphasis in the original) (cf. Lacan 2006, 711). As such, the first traumatic event at the time of its occurrence cannot be completely processed because "the subject lacks the necessary symbolic means for it" (Bistoen 2014, 676). According to Gregory Bistoen, "[f]rom within a Lacanian framework, this first episode is engraved in memory by the promotion of a single signifier or representation that comes to signal and cover up the original lack of understanding . . . This single signifier, which is metonymically chosen by the subject" (Ibid.). Lacan proposed that trauma is the encounter with the real (Lacan 1978, 53); the traumatic event is something "which cannot be said but about which one must speak, is what Freud called 'trauma.' Lacan's real is always traumatic. It is a hole in discourse" (Miller 2013, 17). The traumatic incident produces a fissure in the discourse, a scar in the composition of meaning.

With the aim of filling the hole in the discourse, through the catachrestic shift among the signifiers (Bollobás 2012a, 274), Baumgartner gives rise to the metonymically chosen signifier as "creation *ex nihilo*," out of nothing (Lacan 1986, 121) (emphasis in the original). Catachresis, often likened to metaphor, in classical rhetoric is defined as the trope of "misuse" (*katakhresis*) and "abuse" (*abusio*) (Bollobás 2012a, 272). Catachresis, as opposed to metaphor, does not build upon similarity-based doubling and replacement of words: it is brought about by the extension and expansion of meaning of a preexisting phrase or expression, thus producing a new meaning which previously had no assigned linguistic space (Bollobás 2012b, 41); providing a name to the thing which had been nameless. Baumgartner attempts to fill the hole in the discourse by verbalizing the traumatic event and assigning a signifier to the traumatic void.

> As a figure without a referent, catachresis, moreover, is an empty signifier, operative solely in signifier-signifier relationships, and not by establishing an analogy between referent and sign, signified and signifier. As such, it does not point outside language. (Bollobás 2012a, 274)

It is then easily realized that the phantom limb syndrome in Baumgartner's system (the expression of his inner feelings, personal emotions) gains meaning through the expansion of a preexisting phrase, a neurotic-biological term. This process only takes place on the signifier-signifier level; Baumgartner's phantom limb has no referent in the physical world, his loss is not corporeal.

Healing

Baumgartner, on one occasion, has a dream about Anna which later proves to be a turning point in the narrative. The dream itself takes place in a liminal space, the borderland of dream and wakefulness. In his dream, Baumgartner receives a phone call from Anna. The fantasy reveals his desires, that is, to ensure that Anna is not suffering in the afterlife: "there are no divine punishments or rewards" (60), "she sees nothing and hears nothing because she has no body anymore" (61), and "as long as he is alive and still able to think about her, her consciousness will continue to be awakened and reawakened by his thoughts" (62). The message is plain: Baumgartner desired to hear Anna's voice once again and to be reassured of her love; thereby Baumgartner should not feel guilt for moving on and (re)entering the world of the living. Although Baumgartner is not deceived by the soothing fantasy, "something begins to change in him. He is fully aware that the disconnected telephone did not ring, that he did not hear Anna's voice, that the dead do not go on living in a state of *conscious non-existence*" (63) (emphasis in the original). In that dream, a realization emerged within Baumgartner's consciousness, allowing him to embark on a vessel toward the *here* and *now*.

Lastly, a final notion should be mentioned in respect of Baumgartner's neurotic condition, that is, transference. Transference is the projection of feelings and emotions felt for one person onto another (cf. Freud 2012, 382-383). Baumgartner has been driven by the urge (Trieb) to substitute the lack of Anna with someone who resembles her; following his analogue, someone who completes and complements him, enables him to function again, like a prosthetic limb. First, it is Molly, the UPS woman whose "*radiant vigilance*," "*illuminated selfhood*, human aliveness in all its vibratory splendor emanating from within to without in a complex, interlocking dance of feeling and thought" (4) (emphasis in the original) reminds Baumgartner of Anna.

The other woman, an old friend of theirs, is Judith. Judith is unique in a sense that she grieved the loss of Anna greatly, helped Baumgartner in the early phases of mourning (81), whom he plans to marry. It was their mutual sorrow following the death of "someone as precious as Anna" (82), and Judith's vocabulary that connect the two women. They are strikingly dissimilar in their appearances (Anna was slender and sportif, while Judith is fuller and rounder) and in their temperament, however, the key difference between them is that Judith is a mother (82). It is only through the depiction of Judith that one is informed that Baumgartner and Anna never had children since both suffer from infertility (83). This detail gains great importance by the end of the narrative since one can witness a turn in Baumgartner's desire: it is no longer the female partner he desires but the unborn child.

The third doppelgänger of Anna is Beatrix Coen, a student of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan (167). Beatrix is familiar

with Anna's poems and plans to write her dissertation on Anna's work, thus she reaches out to Baumgartner in a letter inquiring about further, unpublished manuscripts she could include into her research. The semblance between Anna and Beatrix is affirmed by her faculty adviser, a long-time confidant of Baumgartner: "sometimes she makes me think of Anna herself" (168). Soon Baumgartner and Beatrix develop a grand friendship. Under the two months of their acquaintanceship, "she has now become the most important person in his life" (191): "Baumgartner already loves Beatrix Coen as much as the daughter he and Anna would have made together if such a thing had been possible" (Ibid.). A new beginning is thus offered to Baumgartner: instead of chasing a substitution of Anna he finds the person whose semblance to Anna is undeniable, meanwhile represents at once the absence of the unborn child. Beatirx consequently becomes the subject of transference and simultaneously transforms the projection of feelings by filling in a position that was never occupied in Baumgartner's life. She also becomes a catachrestic index: the unreal, unborn child (the unspoken traumatic fissure) is realized in the figure of Beatrix, naming the thing which was previously nameless.

Conclusion

The present paper aimed to shed light on a common organizing force of Auster's work, that is, the depiction of trauma and the yielding of narratives of crises. The concluding piece of Auster's work chronicles the ordinary life of Sy Baumgartner, who has been suffering from traumatic neuroses since witnessing the death of his wife. The human condition is presented through Baumgartner's struggle to remain an active participant in his life and find a solution to overcoming the grief that seems to shatter him time and time again.

After introducing the central terms of Freudian (fixation, repression, suppression, obsession, and compulsion) and of Lacanian psychoanalysis (unconscious, repetition, transference, and drive) the discussion illustrated the use of these notions in the context of traumatic neuroses. The present paper lists the various ways Baumgartner's trauma manifests in conscious and unconscious actions. On the one hand, it was shown that Baumgartner is disoriented, absent-minded, and becomes easily disrupted which are symptoms of repression: the unconscious thoughts are censored, repressed from entering the conscious mind. On the other hand, Baumgartner consciously suppresses traumatic memories and engages in obsessive-compulsive behaviors. The obsessive, recurring, fixated thoughts give rise to compulsive and repetitive behaviors. These symptoms, however, do not wither until the primary traumatic event is completely realized. For Baumgartner, the secondary stimulus, the amputation of Mr. Flores' fingers,

served as a catalyst which, firstly drew his attention to the primary traumatic event, secondly, provided him a linguistic frame to verbalize his feelings as a catachretic trope in order to overcome his trauma. Finally, through the notion of transference, the argument emphasized the change in his behavior which could lead to a more poised and liberated way of living.

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UNSENTIMENTAL HISTORICIZING IN BARBARA NEELY'S CRIME NOVEL *BLANCHE PASSES GO* (2000)

Ágnes Zsófia Kovács and Réka Szarvas

1. Introduction

In the wake of the Civil Rights movement in the 1970s many African American authors chose to write novels about the African American slave past. The stakes were high: a chance to rewrite US history from the perspective of those oppressed, primarily on account of race but possibly on account of other aspects like class, gender, and age as well. Before the seventies, the experience of enslaved people from the past had mostly escaped representation, save for carefully censored slave narratives from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the seventies, the outmoded antebellum genre of the US slave narrative presented itself as a useful starting point for exploring the subject of the US past afresh, attempting to represent history through uncensored perspectives of enslaved people.

Instead of the claim for authenticity and documentary value, late twentieth-century African American authors presented self-reflexively fictionalized versions of possible slave past/s in novels that came to be known as neo-slave narratives (Rushdy 1992 and 1999) or contemporary narratives of slavery (Keizer 2004). Ashraf H. Rushdy wrote the first book-length analysis of the root causes and versions of the neo-slave narrative in 1999, using the name devised by Ishmael Reed to one variant of the various African American novels overviewed by Bernard Bell (1987). In his *The Neo-slave Narrative*, Rushdy defined the neo-slave narrative as fiction that "assume the forms, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person singular narration of antebellum slave narratives" (6). In 2004 Arlene Keizer came up with a descriptive name that indicated a broader sense of the phenomenon. She introduced the term "contemporary novels of slavery" for fictional stories that "theorize about the nature and formation of black subjects, under the slave system and the present, by utilizing slave characters and the conditions of slavery as the focal point" (11). As a logical extension, Yogita Goyal (2019) traced the global appearance of the slave narrative tradition in contemporary stories about social injustice (12).

Toni Morrison (1995) wrote her flagship essay "The Site of Memory" as a summary of the literary interest in African American history. Morrison envisioned the task of rewriting both narratives of African American history and the slave narrative as a genre. Morrison highlighted two key issues through which she thought these political/aesthetic aims could be achieved. First, she pointed out the need to "rip that veil" (91) from the most painful and terrible grievances of the slave past old slave narratives never revealed: scenes of agonizing pain and horror that had been kept off the pages designed to be read by decent white readers. Second, Morrison targeted the imaginative representation of the psychological content of the experience of slavery, the "interior life" of characters (91). Most often this refers to the representation of trauma-processing tied to the personal experience of horror under slavery.

In addition, Morrison's fiction displayed specific interest in the interior lives of female slaves: her novels chart feminine bodily grievances and psychological consequences of the experience of slavery and racism with an aim to provide a chance for reflection and a chance for the procession or healing wounds of slavery or racism for characters whose stories she expands on (Morrison 1995, 99). Readers are drawn into the representation of psychological processing through strategic symbolic, polyphonic, and ambiguous patterns of narration. Most notably, her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) relates the story of how an eleven-year-old black girl is raped by her father, gives birth, and is driven mad by the experience. Another key example is her *Beloved* (1987), in which the ghost of a child murdered under slavery returns after abolition to take revenge on those implicated in the act, primarily her mother.

Scores of African American authors followed Morrison's call for rewriting racist narratives of slavery in the 1990s and wrote fictional accounts of historical events that decolonized previous normalizing (or even absent) historical accounts of racial prejudice and injustice. Contemporary novels of slavery often link narratives of slaves' lives to other genres like sci-fi or fantasy. Representatives of this hybridizing trend are Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1976) and Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in my Pocket like Grains of Sand* (1984) which mix sci-fi elements with neo-slave narrative features and this novelistic outpouring has been steady since the 1990s. (You can find non-definitive chronological lists of contemporary novels related to the neo-slave narrative tradition in the Appendix.)

Instead of venturing to track the legacy of the neo-slave narrative tradition across decades and genres in full, this essay takes up the task of linking one author to the pattern above. It looks at Barbara Neely's last hard-boiled detective story as part of the neo-slave narrative tradition of the 1990s. Barbara Neely is an African American author of detective stories, who published four novels between 1994 and 2000 which reconstruct solutions for cases connected to racially invested crime. Barbara Neely published

detective novels featuring the African American professional maid and amateur detective Blanche White, "inspired most by Toni Morrison in celebrating the lives of ordinary black women in fiction" (Bell 2004, 370). These novels survey specific issues and locations of African American history in the framework of the African American female hard-boiled detective story (Babb 2017, 244). In his book on the contemporary American crime novel, Andrew Pepper writes that "Neely's books celebrate a particular kind of black, female, working-class identity rarely seen in print" (Pepper 2000, 86).

Neely's four detective novels about detective Blanche White tackle a range of racial issues across the US. *Blanche on the Lam* (1992) addresses white supremacy in the rural South. *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994) investigates interracial racism in the North-East in the 1980s, while *Blanche Cleans Up* (1998) focuses on environmental racism in metropolitan areas. *Blanche Passes Go* (2000) is the final volume of the series which explores the personal case of űthe protagonist detective. The protagonist of these novels, Blanche, uses her double position as a domestic servant *cum* detective to find out about decade-long stories of racial oppression and criminal malpractice she gets involved in involuntarily.

The paper explores the representation of trauma processing in the last volume of Neely's series, *Blanche Passes Go*. Bernard W. Bell put the novel off as neither as suspenseful not as ambitious as her earlier novel(s) (Bell 2004, 373). Andrew Pepper had no chance to reflect on it specifically in his overview that appeared the same year when the book did, but it is strongly related to his idea that the racial politics of Neely's novels "question and subvert the hierarchies which underpin this orderliness [of the resolutions of Neely's first two novels]" (87), while Valerie Babb leaves the problem of physical abuse in the book unpacked with the comment "[f]or Neely the detective form couch ideas some might find difficult" (Babb 2017, 245). In *Blanche Passes Go,* Blanche White confronts the traumatic memory of her own rape by a white man eight years before and her memory of rape and the emotional baggage this memory carries get center stage. We learn that Blanche's earlier cases in the North meant an escape: she returns to the South to face her rapist and to break the silence about her sexual assault. The book traces how Blanche moves from the initial total psychic erasure of the painful event through small steps as she articulates her anger, takes revenge, accepts the hurt, and even attempts to integrate the experience.

The discussion focuses on the ways in which Neely's last novel relies on Morrison's notions of rewriting narratives of the slave past. Morrison emphasized the need to represent painful and traumatic elements of the racial past through the interiority of the characters, weighting chances and ways of processing these experiences that eventually also involve the responses of other characters and even readers. In turn, Neely stated that Morrison's representation of black characters influenced her (Carroll 1994, 182). In

addition, she claimed that she wrote character driven books (Herbert 1993, 111). Therefore, the question this essay asks is how Neely's novel puts to use Morrison-related aesthetic/political aims of the neo-slave narrative in the framework of African American hard-boiled detective fiction, in a hard-boiled crime story about the female detective's rape by a white man. The discussion starts by looking into the problem of how historicizing can be performed in sentimental and unsentimental ways in neo-slave narratives. An overview of the un/sentimental elements of the novel follows through the analysis of the language use, the representation of the interiority of the main character, and ways of engaging sympathy and empathy in the text.

Historicizing in Neo-Slave Narratives: Sentimental and Unsentimental Modes

In 2021 Gabriella Friedman proposed the idea of an alternative neo-slave narrative tradition alongside Toni Morrison's neo-slave narrative literary trail. In particular, Friedman focused on modes of writing history in neo-slave narratives through an analysis of the critical debate around how Colson Whitehead National Book Award winning novel, *The Underground Railroad* (2016), which relies on the neo-slave narrative tradition.

Stephanie Li (2019) articulated a devastating critique of Whitehead's novel as a failed neo-slave narrative. According to Li, the neo-slave narrative is defined by its aesthetic project that represents historical pain and suffering through the interiority of its characters, thereby triggering the sympathy and empathy of the readers (9). In direct opposition to this, Whitehead's story represents scenes of suffering in a matter-of-fact fashion, so the interiority of the characters remains opaque. In addition, the fantastic literalization of the underground railroad makes readers alienated rather than involved, "mak[ing] history a curious fiction" Li writes (10). Moreover, the main character develops an ethical stance despite all the impulses to the contrary, and this unmotivated ethical stance serves only to capture the sympathy of the readers (17). Indeed, an unmotivated happy ending is provided despite all the previous textual signs of the impossibility of a happy ending for a narrative about slavery (18).

Therefore, for Li (2019) Whitehead's novel reads less like a neo-slave narrative and more like a 'Southern Novel of Black Misery' as he had defined it in a satirical article titled "What to Write Next" (2009). In 2009, Whitehead wrote that the "Southern Novel of Black Misery" "investigate[s] the legacy of slavery that still reverberates to this day, the legacy of Reconstruction that still reverberates to this day, and crackers." (n. p.). Also, the protagonist's ethical stance towards others does not do justice to Whitehead's statements about the psychology of slavery in his commentaries. For instance, Whitehead states that people subjected to brutality act in brutal ways (see

Whitehead 2018 quoted in Li 15). He even explains his realistic psychology or understanding of human nature in the context of brutalizing plantation life (15). Li draws the conclusion that Whitehead produced his novel of black misery not so much to develop his representation of the psychology of slavery but rather to satisfy readers' expectations (18).

Gabriella Friedman (2021) provides a less critical reading of how *The Underground Railroad* relies on the neo-slave narrative tradition. Friedman distinguishes sentimental historicizing from unsentimental historicizing as parallel representational modes of narrativizing history. In her reading, Morrison's emphasis on revealing sordid details and the interiority of characters in neo-slave narratives represents a sentimental mode of historicizing, one that presupposes an affective approach to literature, eventually wanting to impress readers through their emotional reactions to what they read (115-6, 124-5). At the same time, Friedman makes the case for a simultaneous unsentimental tradition of neo-slave narratives. She claims that Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and Edward P. Jones' *The Known World* (2003) all depict anti-Black brutality with a surprising matter-of-fact tone (117-8). She points out that even Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) writes against the grain when it conceals the interiority of its protagonist (2021, 118 and see 2018, 322). Friedman (2021) reads *The Underground Railroad* as part of this alternative unsentimental way of representing slavery, one in which anti-Black brutality is the everyday modus operandi of the US national infrastructure (120).

The critical discussion of *The Underground Railroad* has been represented at length here as a possible theoretical context to Neely's crime novel on trauma detection. If there are two traditions of narrating the slave past in contemporary historical novels, then the distinction can arguably relate to Neely's hard boiled trauma narrative of the domestic servant in which the rape case is investigated through a matter-of-fact hard-boiled formula. I argue that the crime novel/neo-slave narrative hybrid *Blanche Passes Go* can be understood as an unsentimental approach to narrating history.

Blanche Passes Go and the Hard-Boiled Background of Historicizing

The hard-boiled or realist detective novel focuses on its protagonist, the mostly working-class detective, who gets involved in the action of detection personally, even romantically; the plot usually takes place in run-down settings and the convoluted not-only-rational detection is conducted in the gutter talk of the crime locations (Chandler 1988, 13-7). Because of the novel's core interest in social injustice, minority authors like to use the genre to explore specific pockets of localized social injustice, for instance the impact of racism in African American neighborhoods (English 2006, 774).

As McCann (2000) explains, for African American crime authors, the hard-boiled crime novel offered "a perfect means to dramatize the intimate relations between racism and American democracy" (252). Therefore, it is not a surprise that after Stephen F. Soitos' (1996) formalist and impressionistic overview of the history of African American crime fiction, in 2015 a full-fledged social history of the African American crime novel was published by Robert E. Crafton.

Blanche Passes Go displays four key features of the hard-boiled crime novel. First, it has a detective protagonist with private ethics who struggles to maintain a delicate balance between the world of law and the world of crime. Blanche's day job is combined with a job of detection when she becomes dissatisfied with the work of the police. Second, the detective gets involved in the crime physically and emotionally. Blanche starts the case because of her personal emotional involvement in her own rape case. As events unfold, she must defend her own life from the criminal. Third, the text relies on a simple, slangy language use, dotted with Blanche's ironic comments. Fourth, it is set in desolate rural North Carolina spaces, where some houses of wealthy white people still stand as they stood in the 1860s at the time of slavery and reconstruction.

There are several interrelated cases Blanche gets involved in. First and foremost, the case is about her revenge for her own rape that the justice system had no chance to punish. Eight years before, Blanche the poor, middle-aged, jet-black domestic help was working for Ms. Palmer, a respected member of a local rich old white family. David Palmer, her brother, a single man in his late twenties, found Blanche naked in his sister's bathtub, and raped her there, threatening to cut her with a knife if she resists. Blanche never told anyone about the assault because she was afraid that she would never get a job opportunity in the region again if details became known. Eventually, she quit her job and left for the North. It took her eight years to return, now with the intention of taking revenge on David Palmer privately. Her investigation into the life of David Palmer aims to find something incriminating about him through which she can humiliate him publicly and take revenge for his assault indirectly.

The second mystery is the death of a local poor white girl, which Blanche wishes to connect to David Palmer. Thirdly, she is asked to investigate the affairs of Karen Palmer, David's younger sister, for money. She accepts the task hoping to find evidence against the brother. Finally, she also finds out about her mother's married life before she separated from Blanche's father, a phase she had had no information about. The mysteries become tangled up with each other. Blanche's need for revenge connects David Palmer with the death of the poor white woman, his sister's unpopularity with his cheapness.

Blanche turns out to be a prejudiced detective. Her need for revenge overpowers the need for impartial observation. "Somewhere there is

something I can use against him. I know it. I can feel it. And I know I can find it, too" she declares. (Lok 12222) As part of her revenge, she disregards evidence that works against her aim: she puts aside any positive statement she collects about David Palmer, the rapist. Instead, she looks for incriminating evidence to be linked to him. In addition, she formulates the incorrect hypothesis that David Palmer killed the poor white woman, although she is unable to verify her theory. Moreover, she feeds this incorrect theory to a key accomplice who passes it on as a fact, which causes the death of two more men, indirectly. One of the men is David Palmer.

So, Blanche's private justice is achieved even if by way of an incorrect theory; yet Palmer is not punished publicly as a rapist but is rather killed by mistake for the wrong reason, as it were. At the end of the story, Blanche eventually finds the solution for the death of the woman and Palmer by chance. The police do not investigate the three death cases any further, so there is no official solution provided.

In the closing scenes of the novel, Blanche reflects on the limitations of her powers of detection. She deeply regrets her inability to detect impartially. She can also see how the police defend Palmer even in his death – no investigation is started against him, when they believe they find that he was the secret lover of the dead girl, whom he possibly murdered. So, despite Blanche's acknowledgement of and remorse for her flawed detection, she also feels free: because of her investigation, because of Palmer's death, and because of her newfound ability to talk about her rape to others.

Processing the Shameful Past: The Interiority of African American Characters

The processing of a shameful racial past plays a central role in Neely's *Blanche Passes Go*. The narrative processing of past trauma happens in the consciousness of characters: it leads to new feelings, primarily the feeling of being "freer." The interior life of Blanche, the black help turned detective, gets center stage as she breaks her silence about her hurt and starts to talk about her interior life parallel to her detection. The task is to explicate the gap of Blanche's rape: The experience of rape and its emotional aftermath are being reconceptualized or processed as the detection evolves.

Blanche remembers the rape through her body. Early in the narrative she visualizes herself "curled up like a broken child on the bathroom floor" (Lok 11487). When she meets her rapist, David Palmer, for the first time after eight years, she performs an instinctive bodily reaction: she throws up. She curls up in her chair instinctively when she talks about Palmer having hurt her to Miz Minnie, the wise local elder. At this point she does not identify the nature of the hurt to Miz Minnie. The old woman is quick to note Blanche's

defensive curled up body position and she knows instantly what kind of crime Palmer committed.

The emotional remnant of Blanche's traumatic bodily experience is fear (Lok 11977). Blanche is afraid "of every sound and movement" (Lok 15554) a result. Years after it her fear is still present, only on a more general level: she reexperiences her fear as a fear of the white world in general: "echoes of that awful, heartbreaking instant of fear that was part of every trip to the white world. A fear of being refused or given poor service because she was black. and it wasn't simply her fear: it was so much a part of what it meant to be black in America, it mostly no longer showed itself as fear—it showed up as stress, asthma, tuberculosis, heart disease, and cancer." (Lok 15373-15375). She is also afraid of the actual social consequences of being identified as a rape victim.

Blanche's fear and shame begin to transform as she reflects on her rape as a crime that has different sets of stereotypical associations in different racial contexts. On the one hand, she reflects, whites' view of rape is often connected to their fear of black males' "desire to defile white womanhood" (Lok 11966). On the other hand, blacks' view of rape is usually connected to their view of white males as "rabid dogs" "full of base desire" (Lok 11966). Blanche's own experience has taught her to be afraid of white men. When she is silent about her hurt, she can identify with "all the black women who had stood as she was standing, looking at their rapist, the raper of their daughters, black women who had to smile and "continue to serve in order to eat and feed their children" (Lok 13410).

She breaks her silence only when her fear dissolves (Lok 15554). After telling Miz Minnie how Palmer hurt her, and telling Mary Lee that Palmer raped somebody, she involuntarily blurts out to an old friend that she was Palmer's victim. Breaking her silence brings about a realization about the power of saying things out loud as well: "what she hadn't understood until now was that saying what had happened to her out loud changed her rape – changed it from being her secret problem to being the crime against her that it really was" (Lok 15259-61).

Sympathy and Empathy: Involving Others

Blanche receives help for her transformation through her self-fashioned Ancestor worship and helping sisterhood of African American women. She is praying to her ancestors regularly and is asking for advice from hoodoo priestesses. In a more practical fashion, she is also helped by the sisterhood solidarity of fellow African American women, mostly domestic workers as well, who share information with her or help her search for evidence. In the final section of the story – The wife beating husband next door is – exorcised by Blanche banging her pot and shouting STOP! for the wife, the kid, herself,

and all the assaulted women. When many women from the neighborhood join in, the assaulting husband drives away, and his wife eventually calls the helpline.

Blanche's ability to communicate her hurt changes the nature of Blanche's relation to her mother, Miz Cora, too. Miz Cora hears about Palmer's crime from Miz Minnie. As a result, the usually opinionated but close-mouthed Miz Cora tells Blanche about how she was regularly beaten by her husband, Blanche's father when her two daughters were small. Cora tells Blanche how she tried to conceal the fact for years before she decided to leave the man and try to support her two daughters alone. Blanche had heard nothing about this before. Now she learns she is the spitting image of her father she does not remember. The mutual guardedness between mother and daughter dissolves for once, temporarily. By the end of the story, Blanche processes her own past by telling who hurt her. Telling dissolves fear and opens communication, even about family history, and serves as the basis of communal action.

Conclusion

In Neely's book series Blanche moves from the South to North towards freedom, a move compared to which the protagonist's return to South in the final volume might appear as a regression. Yet in *Blanche Passes Go* it is the return to the South that brings interior freedom for the protagonist. The South becomes the place where she can face the past and handle its memories, revisit her past. This psychological processing of the past is a slow interior experience in which verbalizing grievances has an important role because sharing experience opens paths to others. For instance, Blanche's mother shares her experience in return for Blanche's information, an unprecedented occurrence. Obviously, saying things out loud does not change the way things are – it changes the relation to things by the speaker. Not only is the speaker's fear dispelled by speaking but the sense of community and solidarity is also strengthened by enunciation for ephemeral moments. In *Blanche Passes Go* there is a gradual movement toward healing through words and communal action despite the lack of larger legal justice.

The representation of Blanche's pain and interior life marks a dual mode of historicizing that happens during the detection process. First, an unsentimental matter-of-fact hard-boiled language is used to track events, whilst the interiority of characters is also sentimentally transparent. Second, psychological revelations are articulated to the extent it is needed for the detective plot to go on: more and more interior details emerge as the solution comes near. Third, the sympathy of others and of readers' is also gained temporarily in the plot and while reading. These features mean a combination of unsentimental language use and sentimental ways of characterization and

an affective way of sympathy. These features represent a unique blend of the sentimental/unsentimental modes of historicizing Gabriella Friedman distinguished in the case of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*.

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Whitehead, Colson. 2018. "In Conversation with Colson Whitehead." interview by Boris Kachka. *Vulture* Aug. 2018 https://www.vulture.com/2016/08/colson-whitehead-author-of-the-underground-railroad-c-v-r.html

Appendix – non-definitive lists of neo-slave narratives and contemporary novels of slavery

i. A chronological list of neo-slave narratives and contemporary novels of slavery as identified by Ashraf H. Rushdy (1999) and Arlene R. Keizer (2004)

Walker, Margaret. *Jubilee*. 1966.
Marshall, Paule. *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*. 1969.
Walcott, Derek. *The Dream on Monkey Mountain*. 1970.
Gaines, Ernest. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. 1971.
Haley, Alex. *Roots*. 1976.
Reed, Ishmael. *Flight to Canada*. 1976.
Butler, Octavia A. *Kindred*. 1976.
Bradley, David. *The Chaynesville Incident*. 1981.
Johnson, Charles. *Oxherding Tale*. 1982.
Williams, Sherley Anne. *Dessa Rose*. 1986.
Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987.
Johnson, Charles. *Middle Passage*. 1990.

Herron, Carolivia. *Thereafter Johnnie*. 1991.

i. Some additions by Kovács

Bell, Madison Smartt. 1995. *All Souls' Rising*. 1995.
Danticat, Edwidge. *The Farming of Bones*. 1998.
D'Augiar, Fred. *Feeding the Ghosts*. 1997.
Herbstein, Manu. *Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade*. 2001.
Durham, David Anthony. *Walk Through Darkness*. 2002.
Jones, Edward P. *The Known World*. 2003.
Trouillot, Évelyne. *The Infamous Rosalie*. 2003.
Trethewey, Nathasa. *Native Guard*. 2006.
Hill, Lawrence. *The Book of Negroes*. 2007.
NourbeSe, Philip M. *Zong!* 2008.
Carter, Noni. 2010. *Good Fortune*.
Herbstein, Manu. *Brave Music of a Distant Drum*. 2011.
Gyasi, Yaa. *Homegoing*. 2016.
Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*. 2016.
Edugyan, Esi. *Washington Black*. 2018.
Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *The Water Dancer*. 2019.
Harris, Nathan. *The Sweetness of Water*. 2021.
Ward, Jesmyn. *Let Us Descend*. 2023.

ii. The unsentimental tradition as highlighted by Friedman

Reed, Ishmael. *Flight to Canada*. 1976.
Johnson, Charles. *Oxherding Tale*. 1982.
Delany, Samuel R. *Stars in my Pocket like Grains of Sand*. 1984.
Gomez, Jewelle. *The Gilde Stories*. 1991.
Jones, Edward P. *The Known World*. 2003.
Morrison, Toni. *A Mercy*. 2008.
Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*. 2016.

iii. Neo-slave narratives in Babb, in the order of appearance

Gaines, Ernest. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. 1971.
Bradley, David. *The Chaneysville Incident*. 1981.
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COLONIAL ABJECTION IN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S *WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE*: EXPELLING SELF AND OTHER USING THE MASTER'S TOOLS

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1. Introduction

Shirley Jackson's contribution to the American Gothic tradition is significant, and books of literary criticism on her works like Darryl Hattenhauer's *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic* 2003, Burnice Murphy's *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy* 2005, and most recently Joan Passey and Robert Lloyd's *Shirley Jackson's Dark Tales* 2024 show that interest in her literary merit is only on the rise. Jackson remains an inspiration for many a contemporary writer like Joyce Carol Oats, Stephen King, Neil Gaiman, and Mark Z. Danielewski, among others (Anderson and Kroger 2016, 3). Unlike Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, which dramatizes the Salem witch trials to critique McCarthyism, or Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, which delves into the moral and psychological consequences of ancestral sins, Jackson's work exposes the possibility of insidiousness in domestic and social spaces. Set in New England, We *Have Always Lived in the Castle* echoes the Puritan colonial influence, reflecting a region historically marked by witch hunts. Jackson's retelling of *The Witchcraft of Salem Village* informs her depiction of Mary Katherine Blackwood (referred to as Merricat hereafter) and her sister, Constance, as modern-day witches ostracized by their community, where they are acquitted of major crimes because of a system choosing to pardon the rich their indiscretions. Her narrative situates the witchcraft metaphor within mid-twentieth-century American suburbia, expanding the Gothic genre to interrogate contemporary anxieties around the intersection of gender roles, cultural conflicts, and the historical mutation of class struggle.

Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, published in 1962, reflects the return to traditionalism following the aftermath of World War II and a general sense of settling and being bound to the domestic sphere and housewifery (Anderson and Kröger 2016, 4). As Jackson's last complete novel, it communicates a profound sense of terror. It delves into the psyche

of Merricat, the 18-year-old narrator subverting prescribed gender roles, as she navigates a world steeped in privilege, fear, and isolation. This research paper explores the themes of rage and abjection in the novel by examining their functions and origins through the protagonist's experiences. Merricat confronts the complexities incurred by wealth, paranoia, and exclusion within the subtext of a *civilizational feminism*, which Françoise Vergès maintains is counter-revolutionary (Vergès 2021, Pref. para. 2.) and is formulated to fit within broader societal issues such as White supremacy, patriarchy, and the legalized violent legacy of colonialism.

The narrator, Merricat Blackwood, is an eighteen-year-old who seems to be much younger due to a traumatic event she experienced at twelve—the murder of her parents, brother, and aunt. She lives with her sister, Constance, and their ailing Uncle Julian in a large, decrepit house on the outskirts of a village. Her life is one of rigid routine and extreme reclusiveness. Six years prior to the current events of the novel taking place, the Blackwood family was poisoned, and although Constance was acquitted of the crime, the villagers remain convinced of her guilt, cultivating hostility. The sister's father, John Blackwood had constructed a fence around their property at the bidding of his wife, intensifying the family's isolation and making the villagers' lives harder. As a result of that, along with a trial clearing Constance of the charge, she develops agoraphobia and withdraws to a domestic life due to relentless accusations and constant bullying.

Merricat, who ventures into the village only when necessary, uses rituals and protective charms to create a sense of control over a loathsome world of which she is fearful. Her psychological state, characterized by a blend of childlike simplicity and latent malevolence, intensifies the novel's gothic atmosphere. Helen Clark pays the sisters a visit and tries to convince Constance to rejoin society, which proves to be an omen. The fragile stability of their lives is disrupted by the arrival of their manipulative and greedy cousin, Charles. Merricat perceives him as a direct threat to their insular life and takes increasingly desperate measures to get rid of him. Unwittingly, Merricat causes a fire that destroys much of the Blackwood house and leads to the death of Uncle Julian. This event triggers a violent outburst from the villagers, who ransack the remains of the house. Paradoxically, this communal aggression solidifies the sisters' bond and their resolve to retreat further into their isolated existence. Despite their isolation, the villagers periodically leave food for the sisters, creating a myth around them as dangerous, haunting figures.

The novel concludes with Merricat and Constance adapting to their reduced circumstances, reinforcing their mutual co-dependence and detachment from the outside world. Jackson's prose inspires a sense of claustrophobia and creeping dread, with Merricat's unreliable narration adding layers of ambiguity to the narrative. The story becomes a local legend,

highlighting societal fascination with and an impending sense of terror regarding the mysterious dangerous haunting sisters.

Theoretical framework: abjection and whiteness

The theoretical framework used to the exploration of the research hypothesis establishes a connection between Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject and the perception of the colonial subject of the space they occupy as well as its connection to the construction of their sense of self, employing spatial studies, whiteness studies, and a decolonial approach. I argue that *colonial abjection* arises from a process of othering, wherein colonial subjects reinforce spatial separation between themselves and colonial objects by way of viewing colonial objects as abject to consolidate their own prescribed identities. My focus will be on the deconstruction of this dynamic of colonial abjection within White feminism that is an extension to colonial structures.

Hatred, whether disguised through legal means as Carol Anerson argues in *White Rage* (Anderson 2016, ch. 4)or overtly expressed in actions and speech, is a product of *colonial abjection* (a concept I will develop further later in this chapter) that dehumanizes the colonial object to justify the exploitation thereof. It is paramount to my argument that I begin with defining the colonial subject, so that I can use it as a springboard to elaborate how the dynamic I describe comes full circle.

My conception of the colonial subject extends beyond the physical or spatial presence of the colonized. Once capitalistic ideologies—characterized by the replacement of communal bonds, mutual aid, and sharing with individualism, alienation, and division—are embedded in society, both the mind and body become colonized spaces. The functions of the colonized vary between being tokenized and used as a stratum of a *nationalist bourgeoisie* as Fanon proposes in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 2004, 24), and being neutralized in their pursuit for bread and butter. In both cases, the minds of the colonizers, while colonizing and always imposing, are ideologically plagued as well in their belief of their superiority. Their bodies remain largely untouched by the same forms of exploitation and immobility that are inflicted on the colonial subjects that are objectified and reduced to their production value. The colonial subject is further marginalized through systemic poverty, privatization, inequitable resource distribution, and a rigid social order. The narrative of emigration, as any imperialist narrative, becomes a palimpsest when reading into the history of the settler colony that is the United States (Shetty and Bellamy 2000, 30). It is a narrative where language constantly adapts and changes using euphemisms to distract from the violent structure it aims to maintain. The nature of stratification within the lives of the lower strata of the colonial subjects is where the most blurring in this dynamic is evident, as they deal with similar forms of marginalization precisely because

the foundation of the form of the colonial venture in the States is rooted in Capitalism (Koshy et. al. 2022, 7).

A mutual aspect colonial subjects face here is the violence inherent in the politics of invisibility. The process of rendering certain peoples invisible is a violent one, tied closely to an opposite that requires maintaining it—privilege. Privilege often assumes easy access to goods and services, ignoring the alienated labor that makes such access possible. This invisibility of labor, and of the kinds of jobs made available for precarious workers themselves, is a prerequisite of privilege, allowing the stratum benefiting most from the system to feel entitled to these privileges. Colonial abjection operates under the pretense that the context enabling this privilege does not exist. Through this presumptuous imposition, colonial abjection violently silences the exploited.

In the same way, second-wave White feminism is a "civilizational feminism" that guards against discomfort and any possibility of it losing parts or the sum of presumed privileges through the dismissal of the marginalized and going as far as to view them as abject (Vergès 2021, Pref. para. 2). This dynamic of dependence renders it bereft. It remains hungry and unreciprocating as it is willing to turn a blind eye to the structural imbalances whereby it benefits. Its motivation is always exhaustive, expecting more, and can be rationalized using capitalistic terms. It weaponizes stratification and racialization among other things to maintain itself. It finds itself at odds, however, wanting to empower women by the same structures that fail it when it comes to gender, and ends up catering to the system and bartering to better its circumstances (Lorde 1997, 284).

For agents of White feminism who suffer a degree of precarity as a result of gender dynamics in the capitalistic system, employing the same system that inferiorizes them is problematic. Those whom Capitalism renders invisible develop a sense of community, and a sharpened eye for spotting structural failings to help them overcome these failings. I contend that this is the very reason White feminism that is shielded from the same type of economic strife turns to the abjection of poorer communities to maintain a privileged standing. Being breadcrumbed by a destructive system that gnaws at the well-being of all that are involved or risks those crumbs, the face of the Other for white middle class women becomes offensive when it is a reminder of a being implicated, and abjection creates a distance, a cognitive dissonance, wide enough to mask any incurred guilt. The Other is seen as abject not only because it is a reminder of complicity, but also because it threatens exposing being in a similar vulnerability. Thus, White feminism, and similar divisive ideologies operating within Capitalism, assume that liberation can be a case-by-case project where women of color and poor white women are violently left behind for others to advance. Contradictorily, this is completely dismissive of the fact that it ends up a tool weaponized and subjugated in

other ways to preserve the system whose only concern is profit in perpetuity in a world where resources are finite.

Kristeva argues that "abjection is the 'degree zero' of hatred." It involves a blurred distinction between subject and object, where external objects provoke disgust and threaten the subject's sense of identity, leading to a profound "loss of self, abjection is a recognition of loss: the basic lack of all being, sense, language, and desire" (Kristeva 2010, 185). Abjection is a statement emphasizing separation and is rather pacifying.

In much the same way that Kristeva offers the famous example of how a corpse stirs disgust and thus abjection because it is a reminder of mortality (Kristeva 1982, 4), noticing those who are invisible can function similarly, driven by the fear of losing access to what their subjugation facilitates of a better life. Fanon's idea that "The oppressor…creates the spiral, the spiral of domination, exploitation and looting" (Fanon 2004, 15) emphasizes the economic and material reality that requires those who benefit from the system to toe the line. When confronted with the realities of this material privilege, discomfort turns into disgust for White feminism, and abjection demands the tearing of the self away. Otherwise, the self would be no more than the object of its abjection because it is subject to patriarchal oppression from the same capitalistic system. For the Other to become a border, a distance is maintained for the constant imposition to procure privilege as it becomes the defining aspect of a life and what makes for its meaning. I am becomes I have (Fromm 1976, 5). Knowing how it is I acquire, through whom, causes confusion and a "collapse" in meaning-making and the sense of self (Kristeva 2010, 184).

White feminism's reluctance to confront its own complicity in systems of exploitation reflects this very problem—it cannot dismantle the privilege it is invested in maintaining. Using this framework, I will analyze Mary Katherine's relationship with hatred and abjection, and how she identifies with the space she inhabits, particularly how these emotions serve to protect her privilege rather than challenge it.

Interrelational and Spatial Expellings

Using a framework that combines Julia Kristeva's notion of the Abject, Whiteness studies and Spatial studies, I examine the impending sense of terror and the paradoxical sense of identification with Mary Katherine Blackwood that may stirr in the reader. I argue that Mary Katherine's hatred and anger towards the villagers, coupled with her family history, including influences from Constance, her parents, and their teachings about poisons, disgust, blackmail, and exploitation—are but symptoms of what I will be calling colonial abjection. Its utility lies in creating and maintaining the

distance between the colonial subject and the colonial object to protect from structural collapse.

Abjection

When breaking abjection down to its constituent parts, the *border* for Merricat is whenever she confronts the Other. Her coming face to face with the Other, due to her lack of self-insight, shakes her to her core. As Julia Kristeva maintains, "the abject excludes me and pulls me to where meaning collapses. 'Something' I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of nonsense that has nothing significant about it and yet crushes me. Fascinating and unsettling, it solicits desire, but desire is not seduced: *frightened*, it turns away; *disgusted*, it *rejects*. Not that!" (Kristeva 2012, 184; emphasis mine). Merricat is incapable of defining herself except through negation, in opposition to others, a legacy passed onto her through the name Blackwood —being taught to deride the people of the village, "living in their *dirty* little houses," whom "[her] father said...were trash." This results in her feelings of disgust, hatred, fear, and accusations of "uncleanliness and impropriety" which Kristeva maintains are evoked when facing the abject (Kristeva 2024, 2). Merricat omits the fact that she "dislike[s] washing [her]self," and that she "run[s] wild" (Jackson 1962; 5, 12, 2, 83; emphasis mine). Her fear of the townspeople and the disgust they evoke in her are rather akin to a phobia, prompting panic and dissociation. Kristeva writes that:

> The phobic has no other object than the abject. But that word, "fear"- a fluid haze an elusive clamminess- no sooner has it cropped up than it shades off like a mirage and permeates all words of the language with *nonexistence*, with a hallucinatory, ghostly glimmer. Thus, fear having been bracketed, discourse will seem tenable only if it ceaselessly confronts that otherness, a burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject. (Kristeva 1982, 6; emphasis mine)

Merricat projects her inadequacies disabling her from fitting into society onto the townspeople, and her consistent reasoning of why she views them as lesser is purely because they are not as well off as her family is. She constantly wishes them harm: "[Thinks] of them rotting away and curling in pain and crying out loud" (Jackson 1962, 18). She sees them wanting what she and her sister have. A capitalistic colonial mindset is fundamentally preoccupied with possession. This preoccupation manifests not only in the form of economic disparities, but also extends into ideological, existential, and dogmatic realms. It becomes unapologetically violent as it finds justification for its continuation. The obsession with claiming, inventorying, mapping, guarding, and securing territory reflects deep-seated fears of the Other, perceived as a threat to this state of possession by which one comes to identify the self

(Fromm 1976, 59). The terror lies in facing what is left of the self *sans* possession. The question, then, is rendered what it means to be instead of to have, and the failure to provide an answer is left to echo whether it be within walls of a chamber or a castle for that matter.

This paranoia is perpetuated across generations of Blackwoods, escalating into a frenzy that loses any sense of self beyond its opposition to the Other, be it with John Blackwood's notebook of extortion, Lucy Blackwood's insistence to fencing the estate for "'The highway's built for common people…and [her] front door is private'" or Merricat's fantasies about "walking on [the townspeople's] bodies" (Jackson 1962, 58, 20, 12). The settler colonial identity is hauntological, visited by defensive aggression, as "The past keeps coming back because the present cannot be remembered" (Fisher 2014, ch.2 sub.ch.4 para.4) and is shaped by the need to "differentiate" on basis of race and class among other things (Koshy et. al. 2022, 2). Violence becomes seen as necessary to maintain existence, either through relentless expansion or impulsive defensiveness against any perceived infringement. This state of constant vigilance and fear underscores the nature of colonial abjection within this exhaustive capitalistic system upon which the colonial context is predicated.

The second element is her aversion to traditional gender roles, particularly in the post-World War II New England setting of the novella. During this period, suburban women were expected to conform to the feminine mystique and abandon the sense of empowerment they had gained from being integrated into the workforce while men were at war (Downey 2013, 292). This process of re-domestication proved to be a recurring theme in literature, depicting women losing their connection with the broader world as they were confined to the domestic sphere.

In contrast, Constance's character appears fully docile and contained as she almost exclusively moves between the kitchen and the garden, taking care of domestic chores, seeking to maintain peace at her own expense. However, this analysis suggests that Constance uses Merricat to carry out her own covert actions, highlighting the complexity of their relationship and the dynamics of power and control within their family. While it is difficult for readers to place the entire blame for the mass murder and the disabling of Uncle Julian on a 12-year-old who may not have fully understood her actions, it is far more challenging to excuse her arson and the death that is a result of it at the age of eighteen.

White Rage

My argument hinges on what Carol Anderson (2016) offers in her book *White Rage*. She argues that racism has adapted and shifted form historically and is now embedded in a system that has historically maintained most of the wealth and power in white hands and made it "legal," insidiously making its

way into a constitution that has enabled WASP to maintain their power.

White rage reacts violently to any challenge to its unjust dynamics, as Anderson chronicles, "white Southern resistance to *Brown* has been captured by the visual images of violence that followed the Supreme Court decision: the horribly mutilated body of Emmett Till; the angry mob of housewives surrounding traumatized Elizabeth Eckford on the first day of school at Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas; and the disturbing Norman Rockwell painting of little, pigtailed six-year-old Ruby Bridges surrounded by towering National Guardsmen and racial epithets scrawled on the wall as she walked up the steps to desegregate her elementary school in New Orleans" (Anderson 2016, Ch.3 para.20). This violence exists to protect and perpetuate privilege without consideration for the harm it entails. The manifestation of wealth in ways that inconvenience, infringe upon, and impede the progress of the Other is violent. A legalized example of this in the novel is the trial of Constance. Despite her explicit admission that their family "deserved to die" (Jackson 1962, 40) and her suspicious actions in cleaning the bowl of cyanide-laced sugar, she is acquitted, underscoring how privilege and wealth manipulate the legal system. The outcome demonstrates how power and money can exempt individuals from taking accountability, facilitated by expensive lawyers who navigate the legal system adeptly and the leniency of the judge and jury involved. This scenario highlights the bias and inequities within the legal framework, particularly in favor of the privileged.

According to Audre Lorde in her essay "The Uses of Anger," "Anger is the grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change" that calls for ratifications to be made (Lorde 1997, 282). On the other hand, the anger that is motivated by an imaginary incursion on "rights" rooted in entitlement of benefitting off of the backs of others is rather a product of racism, classism, and colonialism. Such is Merricat's anger. It is motivated by hatred as she makes it clear repeatedly over the course of the novel. It results in the abjection of the Other and turns into a form of hateful paranoia, destructive of its periphery and of itself.

The constant rejection of the other, especially from a very young age by way of indoctrination, coupled by a kind of violent trauma, in Merricat's case, has halted the development of the sense of self in a way that renders her dangerous, self-destructive, and I daresay haunting. A haunting is, in a way, an expression of arrestedness which I will explore more later over the course of my analysis.

Rejecting Patriarchal Prescriptions

In Merricat's world, the expulsion of others is a means to deflect; it reflects an expulsion of the self, revealing her inner conflicts and lack of self-understanding. She views others as abject due to their financial insufficiency and lower social standing. Charles exemplifies this as he leeches onto her and

her sister, claiming a paternal role and asserting entitlement. Mary Katherine rejects his involvement, having already expelled the patriarchal figure that sought to discipline and define them in relation to its power. Her abjection of Charles mirrors the violent treatment from her abusive father, who also treated them as inferior.

In contrast, Uncle Julian, being invalid and unable to impose his will, is not an object of hatred. Instead, Merricat makes a rule for herself to be kind to him (Jackson 1962, 15), as his dependency is seen as pathetic rather than entitled. And so over the course of the novel she reminds herself on multiple occasions of the said rule; "I thought, remembering that I was to be kinder to Uncle Julian," "I wanted to be kinder to Uncle Julian," "I wanted to be kinder to him," "I told myself that long thin things would remind me to be kinder to Uncle Julian"…etc (Jackson 1963; 29, 47, 53, 56). The sisters' inherited wealth and Constance's care for Uncle Julian create a dynamic where they have the power and choice to serve, unlike the unnegotiable demands of Charles. Not only that, but also the fact that over the course of the novel Merricat does not interact with him, and he on the other hand reveals that he is convinced that "[his] niece Mary Katherine died in an orphanage, of neglect, during her sister's trial for murder. But she is of very little consequence to my book, and so we will have done with her" (Jackson 1962, 97). Perhaps it is because he does not constitute a kind of imposition on Merricat that she finds it within herself to keep reminding herself that she ought to be kinder to him. And on the other hand, she sees a victim of hers, unaware of how it was she, the one to perpetrate that violence onto the family, and dismisses her from his storyline as he attempts to document the tragedy that incapacitated him.

Conceptualizing the Self and Space

In Merricat's case, isolation leads to a state of arrested development, resulting in desperate attempts to stop time, guard space, and prevent any intrusion or change. These attempts function as a reaction to the traumatic event of mass murder in which she played a pivotal role. A young child of twelve, she could not have been fully aware of the consequences of her actions, and she ends up identifying with various forms of borders, such as fences both natural and man-made, the moon, frontier wilderness, locks, and barricades. She narrates the following:

> Our father had put up the signs and the gates and the locks when he closed off the path; before, everyone used the path as a short-cut from the village to the highway four-corners where the bus stopped; it saved them perhaps a quarter of a mile to use our path and walk past our front door. Our mother disliked the sight of anyone who wanted to walk past our front door, and when our father brought her to live in the Blackwood house, one of the first

> things he had to do was close off the path and fence in the entire Blackwood property, from the highway to the creek. There was another gate at the other end of the path, although I rarely went that way, and that gate too had a padlock and a sign saying private no trespassing. "The highway's built for common people," our mother said, "and my front door is private." (Jackson 1962, 20)

Mary Katherine's understanding of the world is framed by metaphorical fences. The castle and fences symbolize her failed attempts to create meaning and protect herself from the pervasive threats of her environment. This failure is not solely her own but is deeply rooted in the systemic and historical forces that shaped her reality.

The narrative's awareness of the surrounding space is extraordinary. Merricat knows the ins and outs of the house and the surrounding woods intimately, even though her narrative suggests that areas beyond her sister's garden are unkempt, reflecting her own wild nature. This wildness allows her to navigate without conventional trails, using personal markers that seem nonsensical to others but serve as her safeguards. These artifacts are not meant to guide others but to protect her hidden sanctuary, which she calls the "moon." Additionally, she refers to the house as a *castle* only when it is at its weakest and most desolate; "Our house was a castle, turreted and open to the sky" (Jackson 1962, 125).

Merricat references the "moon" repeatedly as a safe haven whenever she feels unsafe in the company of others. She dissociates from her surroundings and escapes into a make-believe world. The only exception is when she is with her sister, seeking to transfer both of them to this imagined safer space. Her knowledge of the woods and the safe space she creates there highlight its inaccessibility to those she views as dangerous.

Mary Katherine's presence "imposes a schema on space" (Tuan 2001, 36). The moon, typically a vertical symbol, is placed horizontally in the novel, reflecting how Merricat perceives her standing and how she manifests her imagined world in her environment. The house itself serves as a marker of stratification, appearing out of place, much like a few other homes in the area. This stratification is further emphasized by elements like the highway, creek, and fence, which delineate and segregate spaces both physically and socially.

The village is portrayed as a desolate, ugly place, where the fine houses — including the Rochester and Blackwood houses — appear like foreign entities in decay, as though they are trapped and slowly corroding in the environment,

> All of the village was of a piece, a time, and a style; it was as though the people needed the ugliness of the village, and fed on it. The houses and the stores seemed to have been set up in contemptuous haste to provide shelter for the drab and the unpleasant, and the Rochester house and the Blackwood house and even the town hall had been brought here perhaps

> accidentally from some far lovely country where people lived with grace. Perhaps the fine houses had been captured — perhaps as punishment for the Rochesters and the Blackwoods and their secret bad hearts? — and were held prisoner in the village; perhaps their slow rot was a sign of the ugliness of the villagers. (Jackson 1962, 7)

The metaphor of the houses being "captured" and "held prisoner" suggests Merricat's sense of entrapment. She thinks that beauty and grace have been taken hostage by the assumed moral decay of the villagers. In relation to Merricat's sense of being excluded and her defensive and accusatory projections as a result thereof, it is appropriate to invoke Kristeva's concept of "the deject," who "never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject—constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a stray." (Kristeva 1982, 8). She is lost, her sense of self and space dislocated. Merricat's refusal to move forward or change is not simply a resistance to becoming, but a deeper indication of her being alienated, unable to even conceptualize a path forward, instead and as a means of protection she castles herself and what she knows and defends them completely.

Constance functions as a foil to Merricat, representing docility and domesticity, while Merricat evades falling into the prescribed gender roles. Constance's repression and obsessive-compulsive tendencies to maintain a perfect household starkly contrast with Merricat's cartography of her own world through dissociative actions such as nailing John Blackwood's notebook to a tree as a talisman to keep others out. This notebook, used for blackmail and keeping track of debts, symbolizes the exploitative and manipulative aspects of their familial and societal interactions. Privilege here protects itself by concealing its financial transactions, investments, and gains alongside its expenditures. Stripping this object of the power it once held leaves a lacuna filled by abjection. Merricat's use of the notebook is not null; it signals her demarcation of the Blackwood estate.

Physical and Temporal Incarceration

When Charles arrives, he represents a potential means for Constance to reintegrate into society. His presence offers "safety" conforming to a patriarchal structure. However, Merricat fears Charles, not only because he disrupts the dynamic between her and Constance, but also because he embodies patriarchal oppression. Her fear is masked behind her perception of his malice, which becomes evident when considering Constance's well-being and future prospects.

Merricat lashes out whenever there is a hint that she has to take responsibility, leaving Constance to bear the weight of their actions, trapping

both sisters in a state of arrested development. Mary Katherine's enjoyment of her sister's peacekeeping efforts highlights her codependence. Although Constance may seem to embody the patriarchal woman, her sister's rebellion fails for the same reason: both are trapped within the system they seek to navigate. This entrapment prevents either from achieving true freedom or growth.

Merricat's stunted growth and arrested development are evident. Merricat is physically and mentally confined by the fences and deterrents ordered by her mother. These barriers, meant to protect her from the villagers, fragment her reality and prevent her from mingling with people her age or from other social strata. This physical isolation manifests itself as a mental limitation, preventing her from appropriately presenting herself as an eighteen-year-old. Constance acknowledges this, wishing Merricat had boyfriends, probably because it was what she wanted for herself when she was her sister's age. She took care of the house's affairs in her mother's stead, even though she was present, at that age.

Merricat's narrative shows her desire to maintain the static dynamic established after the poisoning act six years earlier. By abdicating responsibility and forcing Constance into the caretaker role, she deprives her sister of a normal life and reinforces their mutual confinement. Their solitary existence, dictated by Mary Katherine's need for control and safety, ultimately arrests them in both time and place, illustrating the destructive power of abjection and the limitations of internal rebellion.

Merricat's understanding of herself is deeply intertwined with her conceptualization of space (Pascal 2005, 84). She remains in the same location, desiring a static existence while the world around her changes. Her attempt to maintain this does not make sense to others and underscores her sense of "stuckness." This dichotomy between inside and outside mirrors Jean Hyppolite's notion of alienation, which hinges on the opposition between these two realms. As Hyppolite explains, "Beyond what is expressed in their formal opposition lie alienation and hostility between the two" (Bachelard 1994, 212). Merricat's alienation is evident in her resistance to change and her efforts to impose a sense of permanence in a world characterized by impermanence. This reflects a significant aspect of Merricat's identity: her inability to recognize that identity constantly evolves. Despite her efforts, she cannot escape the inevitable passage of time and the dynamic nature of both her internal and external worlds. As Bachelard notes, "[b]eing does not see itself. Perhaps it listens to itself" (Bachelard 1994, 212,5). Merricat's fixed self-perception contrasts with the constant flux of reality, illustrating the dissonance between her internal experience and the external world.

Mary Katherine's understanding of her world is fundamentally shaped by her family's social status and the sense of entitlement it instills. These

attributes, however, lack intrinsic value and are sustained by the constructed mythology of Capitalism. The value of a name, for instance, is not inherent but is derived from the societal and economic structures that support it. This mirrors the broader narrative of capitalistic mythology, which adapts to preserve its existence. Neoliberalism, an extension of capitalism, cloaks itself in terms like "liberty" and "freedom," omitting its foundation in colonial exploitation. As George Monbiot and Peter Hutchinson elucidate in *Invisible Doctrine*, "all exploitative systems require justifying fairy tales" to maintain their dominance (Monbiot and Hutchinson 2024, ch3. Para21).

Merricat constructs an empowering personal narrative that protects her from the dangers her family's privileged narrative perpetuates. This personal narrative also allows for the introjection of the lack of safety she felt at home, suggested in the novel through her father's abusive and authoritarian behavior towards his daughters. Even years after his death, Merricat frequently quotes her father, using his words to define what it means to be a Blackwood: to disdain and look down upon others. She rejects the imposition of Charles as the new patriarch after eliminating her father and escaping accountability, true to the Blackwood legacy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* stands as a haunting exploration of the human condition, represented through the lens of colonialism, rage, and isolation. Through the experiences of Mary Katherine Blackwood, Shirley Jackson invites readers to confront the complexities of privilege and power, and the ways in which they intersect with identity and agency. It offers an example of colonial abjection used by middle class white women as a defense mechanism rooted in fear of loss of status wherein they reject viewing themselves in a place of vulnerability class-wise while creating a complete break, a *border* where they may project feelings of helplessness through disgust to create a clean cut separation in what makes them themselves as opposed to the object of their abjection. They enforce these feelings through projecting their personal narratives onto the space they occupy and seek to ultimately control. This is a reminder of the enduring relevance of Jackson's work and its ability to shed light on the darker aspects of human nature. In a world rife with injustice and inequality, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* serves as a timely critical eye to how the function of space is in constant play with its history and its occupants that shape it as it simultaneously helps shape them. An isolated space is reflective of the affect that is resonant within its walls and that can look like phobia, hatred, paranoia and ultimately where is become caged —abjection.

The narrative of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* can be seen as the genesis story of a haunted house. By the end of the novel, the house is shrouded in mythology, with villagers spreading tales of the sisters who "eat

young children." While the murder of a wealthy family by two conspiring sisters is one way to inspire terror, this analysis seeks to uncover deeper reasons for the pervasive sense of impending doom that haunts the "castle." This haunting emerges as a logical consequence of a fundamentally flawed system. The story illustrates that white rage afflicts not only people of color but also those marginalized by a system deeply intertwined with capitalism and legal structures that enable the wealthy to preserve their privilege at the expense of others. This includes issues such as land ownership, education, voting rights, mass incarceration, and the housing crisis.

Merricat's rebellion ultimately fails because her attempts to resist the oppressive system are entrenched within it, limiting her capacity to bring about real change. As Audre Lorde powerfully asserts, it is impossible to dismantle systems of oppression using the tools of the oppressors. Lorde's observation that "[Survival] is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde 1984, 113) highlights the futility of Merricat's efforts. Although Merricat employs witchcraft as a form of rebellion, this witchcraft remains symbolic rather than transformative, failing to actualize her desires or render her an active agent of liberation. Her rebellion remains a metaphor, unable to disrupt the oppressive forces she faces in any meaningful way. In this sense, Merricat's failure exemplifies the broader dilemma of relying on symbolic or internalized resistance without addressing the fundamental structures of power that sustain oppression. Lorde's insight reinforces that genuine transformation requires more than temporary subversion, it demands an entirely new framework beyond the master's backyard.

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A Comparison of Radványi's Translation of Looking Backward with the Original Text(s)

Alíz Csilla Smitnya

1. Introduction

Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (1888) stands among the most seminal utopian fictions of the late nineteenth century (Bowman, 1979, 115). Written during the shadow of the Gilded Age, when extremes of wealth and poverty were starkly visible, the novel imagined an American future where private profit and cutthroat competition had been replaced by a planned, egalitarian society built on mutual aid and state-run industry. Bellamy deliberately adopted the label "nationalism" rather than socialism, so as to assuage American misgivings, yet its motifs (economic fairness, collective welfare, and the eradication of class barriers etc.) struck a chord far beyond the continent (Nordstrom, 2007, 198). The text galvanized political formations, most prominently the Nationalist Clubs throughout the U.S., and elicited a wide range of counterfactual literature across the European continent (Berkove, 1989, 80-86). The novel sold more than any book on American shelves, aside from Uncle Tom's Cabin (Sadler, 1944, 530). Due to its success in America and abroad, even minor alterations or translational choices in the typescript could decisively recalibrate the apprehension of Bellamy's envisioned commonwealth in a vast number of readers.

The book did not emerge in isolation. Bellamy was responding to concrete social tensions: the rise of industrial monopolies, strikes and labor unrest, and widespread fears that the American republic was failing to uphold its democratic ideals (Berkove, 80-86). His utopia provided a "dream of order" in an era of perceived chaos, promising not revolution but evolution: a smooth transition into a cooperative commonwealth. Bellamy's vision was deliberately American in form but universal in aspiration. This tension between the national and the global also carried over into its reception abroad, where translations had to adapt an American-centered future to very different cultural contexts.

The novel quickly reached an international audience and was translated into numerous languages (Guarneri, 2008, 147), including Hungarian. The

Hungarian translation by Dániel Radványi appeared in 1892 in the "Olcsó könyvtár" series of Franklin Társulat, which aimed to make world literature accessible to a wide readership (Krónika, 1978, n. p.). By that time, both the first edition (1888) and the slightly revised second edition (1889) were in circulation (Roemer, 1983, 205). My study argues that Radványi did not rely on a single edition but alternated between the two, and that his translation contains a mixture of deliberate cultural adaptations and simple mistranslations. The following analysis offers selected examples, which are representative of the broader patterns of divergence. Rather than attempting an exhaustive comparison, I highlight illustrative cases and assess their significance for understanding Bellamy's utopia.

2. Bellamy's Utopian Vision in Context

Before turning to textual comparison, it is important to outline the intellectual and political backdrop of Bellamy's work. Unlike the radical socialism of Karl Marx, Bellamy's utopia emphasized harmony rather than class struggle. He rejected violent revolution and imagined a future achieved through rational planning, technological progress, and moral development. As he himself formulated in a letter concerning his nationalist movement: "We are the true conservative party, because we are devoted to the maintenance of republican institutions against the revolution now being effected [sic!] by the money power" (Bellamy, Edward Bellamy Speaks Again, 1937, 59). Industry would be nationalized, but not in the sense of state authoritarianism; rather, it would be organized as a single cooperative enterprise serving all citizens. Labor would be compulsory but fair, education universal, and inequality eliminated (Gilman, 1889, 50-76).

This vision resonated because it blended familiar American values (efficiency, patriotism, technological optimism etc.) (Kumar, 1987, 132–167) with a critique of capitalism. Readers could see themselves in Bellamy's Boston of the year 2000, where stores had been replaced by public distribution centers, money by credit cards, and competition by solidarity. It was both startlingly radical and comfortingly familiar.

For Hungarian readers of the 1890s, the text entered a context of its own: a country still marked by the failed revolution of 1848, rapid industrialization in Budapest, and debates over capitalism versus social reform. Translating Bellamy meant not only rendering English words into Hungarian, but also making American utopianism legible within a Central European milieu.

3. Comparing the First and Second English Editions

Bellamy's revisions between the first and second editions were generally modest, yet even small differences reveal subtle shifts in framing and

emphasis. They also illuminate the version of the text that Radványi would have consulted when preparing his Hungarian translation.

One of the first changes appears in the preface. The book encourages the reader to imagine themselves as a citizen of the future utopian society described in the book, holding a book published in the future. Whereas the first edition simply titles said preface as "Preface," the second specifies it as "Author's Preface." This seemingly minor adjustment asserts the imagined author's personal authorship, reinforcing the validity of the thought experiment Bellamy invites the reader to take part in, instead of presenting it as a neutral editorial introduction. In a novel that blurs the line between fiction and social prophecy, the clarification strengthens the sense that a citizen of the utopian society himself is guiding the reader into the imagined future.

Even the novel's imaginary publication date shifts slightly between editions: the first edition cites December 28, 2000, while the second lists December 26. The reasoning behind this change remains uncertain; if anything, the first date seems more plausible, as December 26 is a public holiday and therefore an unlikely choice for a book release. Yet the revision underscores how even minor details contribute to the immersive frame of the novel, inviting readers to hold in their hands a book from a distant utopian time.

Substantive changes appear in the body of the text as well. In Chapter Five, the first edition situates industrial development in the United States within a transatlantic context, noting that industrial concentration occurred "later in the United States than in Europe." The second edition omits this comparative perspective, narrowing the scope and making the discussion more self-contained and nationally focused. Similarly, the second edition introduces a sentence in the discussion of trusts: "The epoch of the trusts had ended in the Great Trust." This explicit reference to monopolies and corporate consolidation sharpens Bellamy's critique of late nineteenth-century capitalism. Its absence in the first edition makes the transition seem more understated, whereas its inclusion in the second emphasizes the inevitability of total economic unification.

Changes in Chapter Six deepen the moral argument of the novel. The second edition expands considerably on the problem of corruption, explaining why dishonesty thrived in the old society but could not exist in the new. The longer passage clarifies and reinforces Bellamy's vision: the utopian system is constructed to eliminate even the possibility of corrupt motives, whereas the first edition conveys this idea in a more muted way.

In Chapter Seven, the maximum age for professional training is adjusted downward from thirty-five to thirty. This alteration suggests that Bellamy reconsidered the plausibility of prolonged education, with the reduced age limit lending the utopian system a greater sense of efficiency and realism.

Across these revisions, Bellamy's refinements serve a consistent purpose: they clarify authorship, sharpen moral contrasts, and tighten plausibility. Though often subtle, these changes shape how readers perceive the balance between idealism and realism, subtly guiding their understanding of the utopian vision.

4. Analyzing Radványi's Translation

Radványi's Hungarian translation exhibits an uneven engagement with the two English editions, revealing both translation challenges and interpretive choices. These decisions can be grouped into several types, each illustrating a different mode of divergence from Bellamy's original.

Some of the most consequential issues are simple literal errors. For example, Bellamy's line, "The social system no longer offers a premium on dishonesty," is rendered by Radványi as "our social system no longer sets prizes for honesty." This inversion fundamentally alters the ethical logic of the utopia: rather than eliminating corruption, the society depicted in the translation appears to cease rewarding honesty, turning Bellamy's carefully constructed moral economy on its head. Such mistakes are far from trivial, as they risk misleading Hungarian readers about the very foundation of the utopian society.

At other times, Radványi appears to have consciously adapted concepts for a Hungarian audience. Bellamy's "trusts," referring to large corporate monopolies, are translated as "districts" ("körzetek"). Given that Hungarian readers of the period may have been unfamiliar with the American legal-economic concept of a trust, Radványi's choice seems intended to domesticate the text. Yet this adaptation comes at a cost: it obscures Bellamy's critique of monopoly capitalism. A more precise approach might have been a paraphrase such as "alliance of companies," or the introduction of a borrowed term like "tröszt," even if the latter was not widely recognized at the time. This example shows how cultural adaptation, while potentially increasing accessibility, can simultaneously dilute the text's specifically American critique.

Radványi also tends to simplify or over-interpret certain passages. Where Bellamy writes, "if a man cannot at first win entrance into the business he prefers," Radványi substitutes "an ifjú (youth)," narrowing the scope and introducing connotations of inexperience absent from the original. In another instance, he reduces a nuanced discussion of alternative career paths to the assertion that the youth "does not despair" because he knows another trade. Here, the translator adds the notion of "despair," which Bellamy had not implied, and omits the crucial detail that the secondary skills were of lower aptitude. Such interventions smooth over the complexity of Bellamy's carefully balanced social system and risk sentimentalizing the narrative.

Finally, Radványi occasionally introduces material not found in either English edition. At the end of the Preface, he appends the signature "Bellamy Edvárd," which appears in neither edition. By attributing the fictional scholarly preface directly to Bellamy, the translation confuses the narrative frame and undermines the original layering of voices. These additions alter the novel's paratexts and influence how Hungarian readers perceived its authorship.

5. Significance of the Divergences

The divergences in Radványi's translation matter because Looking Backward is not merely a work of fiction; it is a carefully constructed, programmatic utopia. Its power and credibility rest on precise details of framing, terminology, and logical consistency, and even minor shifts can have outsized effects on how readers perceive the vision Bellamy sought to present.

Consider the simple but profound inversion of "dishonesty" into "honesty." This is more than a lexical slip: it undermines the moral foundation of the entire utopia. Bellamy's narrative depends on a society in which corrupt incentives have been eliminated, where honesty is no longer optional but structurally embedded. To suggest instead that the system no longer rewards honesty collapses this moral architecture, presenting a society that ceases to recognize virtue rather than one that has restructured itself to eliminate vice. Hungarian readers encountering this error would receive a fundamentally distorted picture of Bellamy's ethical logic.

Similarly, the translation of "trusts" as "districts" erases the pointed critique of corporate capitalism that Bellamy wove into the text. Trusts, as concentrated monopolies, symbolized the social and economic problems of the late nineteenth century; their transformation into neutral administrative units removes the novel's commentary on concentrated power and leaves readers without a clear understanding of the social evils Bellamy intended to confront. By obscuring these connections, the translation risks turning a politically charged narrative into a more generic and less instructive story about society.

Even subtler shifts, such as changing "a man" to "a youth," carry significant consequences. Bellamy's discussion of vocational flexibility was meant to apply broadly across adult life, emphasizing the adaptability and inclusiveness of the utopian labor system. Limiting this principle to young people narrows the scope unnecessarily and diminishes the universality of the model, inadvertently implying that the system is only relevant to a certain stage of life. Such simplifications may seem minor, but they reshape the reader's perception of the utopia's coherence and ambition.

Finally, the confusion of Bellamy's voice with that of a fictional commentator, as when Radványi appends "Bellamy Edvárd" to the Preface,

flattens the novel's complex layering of narrative perspectives. Bellamy carefully manipulates the interplay between fictional and authorial voices to guide the reader through both critique and speculation; to collapse these layers is to lose an essential dimension of the work's rhetorical strategy.

Taken together, these divergences are far from incidental. They influence how Hungarian readers encountered and understood Looking Backward, sometimes softening its critique, sometimes distorting its moral and economic logic, and sometimes making its utopian vision less comprehensible. Each alteration (whether lexical, cultural, or structural) shapes the lens through which Bellamy's carefully calibrated ideal society is perceived, highlighting the critical role of translation fidelity in transmitting both content and ethos across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

6. Broader Implications for Translation Studies

The case of Radványi's translation of Looking Backward offers insights that extend well beyond the particularities of Bellamy's text, shedding light on the challenges and responsibilities inherent in translating utopian literature more generally. One clear lesson concerns the importance of terminological precision. Utopias are constructed on intricate systemic details: economic structures, social norms, and moral mechanisms are all interdependent. Misrendering a key term (such as Bellamy's "trusts," which signify monopolistic corporate concentrations) can erode the conceptual scaffolding of the imagined society. When a translator alters or misinterprets these terms, even slightly, the very logic of the utopia is at risk of collapsing or being fundamentally misrepresented.

At the same time, the case illustrates the double-edged nature of cultural transfer. Translators often adapt foreign concepts to make them more comprehensible to a target audience, but in doing so they may inadvertently strip the text of its critical edge. Radványi's rendering of "trusts" as "districts" made the notion intelligible to Hungarian readers of the 1890s, who were likely unfamiliar with the American legal-economic framework. Yet this domesticating move obscured Bellamy's pointed critique of corporate capitalism, demonstrating that accessibility and fidelity are often in tension. Translation, particularly of utopian works, is thus a delicate balancing act: the translator must navigate between comprehensibility and conceptual integrity.

Another crucial insight concerns the handling of narrative frames. Utopian texts frequently employ layered or complex narratorial structures, blending authorial and fictional voices to guide the reader's understanding of social critique and speculative imagination. Radványi's addition of "Bellamy Edvárd" as a signature, or the occasional flattening of Bellamy's subtle narrative distinctions, illustrates how over-simplification or misattribution can collapse these carefully calibrated structures, altering the text's rhetorical

strategies and its engagement with the reader. In utopian literature, where narrative form is often inseparable from ideological function, such interventions are particularly consequential.

Finally, the translation demonstrates that even apparently minor errors are interpretive acts. Every lexical choice, every shift in scope or emphasis, reshapes the utopia in the target language, sometimes in profound and unexpected ways. A single misreading can invert a moral principle, limit the applicability of a social mechanism, or obscure a critique that was central to the original vision. Translation, far from being a neutral conduit, actively participates in the reception and transformation of the text.

In this light, Radványi's version should be read not merely as a flawed rendering of Bellamy's work, but as a document of reception in its own right. It provides a window into how Hungarian readers of the 1890s may have encountered, interpreted, and reshaped Bellamy's utopian dream. By tracing these divergences, scholars can better understand not only the challenges of translation but also the ways in which utopian ideas migrate across linguistic and cultural boundaries, sometimes emerging transformed in the process.

7. Conclusion

Bellamy's Looking Backward is a text in which even minor editorial or translational changes can have disproportionate effects on meaning. The comparison of the first and second English editions shows how Bellamy himself refined his vision: clarifying authorship, emphasizing moral reform, and enhancing plausibility. Radványi's Hungarian translation, meanwhile, illustrates the challenges of transmitting utopian ideas across languages and cultures. His text oscillates between the two English editions, introduces cultural adaptations (sometimes necessary, sometimes misleading), and occasionally inverts the original sense through simple errors.

Ultimately, these divergences demonstrate how utopian literature depends on precision. Bellamy's vision of a cooperative commonwealth was powerful enough to inspire movements worldwide, yet in translation, its meaning could shift dramatically. By examining these examples, we see not only how Looking Backward was read in Hungary, but also how translation itself mediates and reshapes utopian imagination. In this way, the translation becomes part of the utopia's history, showing how ideas travel, transform, and sometimes falter when crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The study of such divergences also prompts a methodological reflection: when analyzing translations of utopian texts, one must always keep in mind both the historical readership and the ideological stakes of small textual choices. Translation is not merely the transfer of words but the negotiation of values, cultural frames, and worldviews. In the case of Looking Backward, Radványi's translation stands as both a window into Bellamy's utopia and a

mirror of Hungarian intellectual life in the 1890s. It demonstrates that utopias are not only written but continually rewritten: by authors, editors, translators, and readers alike.

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"SHE'S NOT TECHNICALLY THEIR GRANDMA. INDIAN WAY SHE IS:" INDIGENOUS IDENTITY FORMATION ACROSS PHYSICAL AND VIRTUAL SPACES

Éva Urbán

Introduction

Tommy Orange's debut novel, *There There* (2018) features a wide variety of topics, such as the consequences of relocation policies, the concepts of family, and embracing Indigenous identity in a metropolitan environment. The book's polyphonic structure is created by the seemingly separate storylines of twelve narrators. The novel has four main parts—"Remain," "Reclaim," "Return," and "Powwow"—with two additional chapters, "Prologue" and "Interlude" that describe the historical and cultural context of Indigenous existence since colonization. The titles of the sections reflect the narrators' relationship with their indigeneity, because they all (re)construct their Native American identity while they prepare for the Big Oakland Powwow, the main event of the story. The narrators' relations to one another and the powwow are gradually revealed, thus, eventually, their plotlines intertwine. In the "Interlude," Orange describes how Native American resilience has ensured survival after colonization, while he also alludes to the structure of the story:

> The messy, dangling *strands of our lives got pulled into a braid*—tied to the back of everything we'd been doing all along to get us here. We've been coming from miles. And we've been coming for years, generations, lifetimes, layered in prayer and handwoven regalia, *beaded* and *sewn* together, feathered, *braided*, *blessed, and cursed.* (2018, 135; emphasis mine)

The first-person plural point of view emphasizes the shared experiences of urban Indians, and the symbols—regalia, beads, and feathers—are associated with the visual representation of Native American identity. Blessed and cursed refer to the positive and negative aspects of embracing indigeneity, which the characters struggle with throughout the story.

The narrators lack a connection to their biological family and to the American Indian community, as they are directly or indirectly affected by adoption and moreover by the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). Although it is a milestone in Indigenous child welfare legislation that made significant and positive changes in keeping children in their cultural environment, ICWA has been challenged several times, even recently. The latest development is a Supreme Court decision upholding ICWA on 15 June 2023, after three non-Indigenous couples claimed that in the adoption process of Native American children, prioritizing Indigenous caretakers is unconstitutional, because it is based on racial preference (Marimow and Barnes, 2023). They also argued that ICWA displaced the states' responsibilities in family law cases (Totenberg and Gupta, 2023). The recent legal case makes *There There* relevant research material, since it raised questions about the current state of child welfare regulations concerning Indigenous families.

In the last section of the book, the powwow—where the narrators all inhabit the same physical space—becomes chaotic when a robbery takes place and a shooting breaks out injuring and killing several of the attendees of the event, which is the climactic ending of the novel. While preparing for the powwow, all the characters try to construct their Native American ethnic identity in the urban setting, which inevitably affects their personal- and cultural self-determination. The identity formation process of three narrators—Blue, Edwin Black, and Orvil Red Feather— is shaped by their interaction with three crucial spaces: the Indian Center in Oakland, the powwow, and various online platforms. The Indigenous community and virtual spaces compensate for their lack of biological kinship and serve as vital sources of cultural connection, since they have no connections to indigeneity—partly due to adoption.

Blue has only limited information about her biological relatives as she was adopted by a white family when she was a newborn. Despite acknowledging her Indigenous appearance, she identifies as white, which results in her conflicted self-image. She becomes a member of a reservation community when she marries a Cheyenne man, but returns to Oakland after leaving her abusive husband. Blue gets a job at the Indian Center to join the local urban Indian community, where she organizes the family reunion of American Indians in the area, the Big Oakland Powwow. Although she feels accepted in Oakland's urban Indian community, she restlessly wants to find her biological family. Blue eventually meets her relatives, which is revealed to the reader, but the characters are unaware of family ties. Blue's half-brother, Edwin, starts to work with her on the organizing committee. They become friends, and she helps him calm down before he meets his father, Harvey, at the powwow. They are introduced to Harvey's companion, Jacquie Red Feather, which Blue immediately recognizes as the name of her birth mother,

but out of shock, she does not say anything to her. She only realizes that Harvey is possibly her father in the hospital waiting room after she gets help for Edwin, who is shot during the robbery. In Orange's second novel—*Wandering Stars* (2024) which continues Jacquie's storyline—it is revealed that they exchange numbers and text for only a short period of time after the incident at the powwow, before they stop communicating with one another.

Edwin Black is raised by his white mother, Karen, and has no contact with his Indigenous father, he only knows his first name, Harvey. Edwin is well-educated in Native American studies, but the lack of knowledge about his tribe and cultural background plagues his life with anxiety and self-consciousness about the validity of his Indigenous identity. He spends his years desperately trying to find information online that could help him determine which tribe he belongs in, based on physical features. He is also addicted to the online simulation game *Second Life*, in which he creates an avatar with the complete opposite circumstances than his real life and upbringing. The virtual version of Edwin lost his mother during childbirth, lives with his father on a reservation, and has everything that the real-life Edwin dreams of, such as a job, a house, and a girlfriend. Karen finds an internship position for her son at her workplace, the Indian Center, where Edwin can help organize the Big Oakland Powwow after four years of unemployment and complete isolation from the outside world. Due to his perseverance, Edwin finds Harvey on Facebook—spending years trying to contact him—where they start a conversation and agree to meet for the first time at the powwow, which they both attend. At the event, Edwin and Harvey find one another, but their happiness is short-lived when the shooting breaks out and Edwin is severely injured. The cliffhanger ending does not imply whether he survives or not, in the last scene he is rushed to the hospital.

The Big Oakland Powwow is also a life-changing event for Orvil Red Feather, a fourteen-year-old boy, who participates at the event as a dancer. Although Orvil—together with his younger brothers, Loother and Lony Red Feather—is raised by a distant relative, Opal, he is discouraged from learning about and practicing in Cheyenne tribal traditions. His interest in his cultural background is sparked when he finds an old regalia hidden in Opal's house. Orvil, after Opal continuously refuses to teach him about his Indigenous roots, turns to online sources and starts to educate himself—just as Edwin does. He learns powwow dancing from YouTube videos, and he follows the Indian Center on Facebook to find out about the events they organize. He is insecure about the way he looks in the regalia, which makes him question whether he is "Native enough." When he realizes that he is accepted in the urban Indian community where he can proudly embrace his Cheyenne roots, he is also shot by the robbers. He is found collapsed on the ground by his biological grandmother, Jacquie Red Feather, whom he never met before. His storyline continues in *Wandering Stars*, but due to his injuries he becomes

dependent on painkillers, ultimately resulting in severe substance abuse issues.

Native American cultural identity cannot be described by a comprehensive definition, because various aspects of an individual's environment—such as racial attitudes, political status, or personal views on who can be considered American Indian—contribute to its formation (Horse 2005, 61). Blue, Edwin, and Orvil all struggle with embracing their Native American identity, due to the multifaceted nature of indigeneity that leads to more complex self-identification, as Lawrence contends: "[c]ontemporary Native identity […] exists in an uneasy balance between concepts of generic 'Indianness' as a racial identity and of specific 'tribal' identity as Indigenous *nationhood*" (2003, 5).

Historical context of urban Indigeneity: relocation and adoption policies

In the 1950s, the US federal government introduced relocation policies that lead to the emergence of urban indigeneity, resulting in radically different lifestyles for Native Americans who resided on reservations and urban Indians. The aim of the new approach was to provide better employment and living conditions than what reservations offered, but the long-term goal was to assimilate Native Americans into the majority of the American population (Fixico 2009, 107). In the "Prologue" Orange reflects on the intentions behind introducing the relocation policies: "*Getting us to cities* was supposed to be the final, necessary step in our assimilation, absorption, erasure, *the completion of a five-hundred-year-old genocidal campaign*. But *the city made us new, and we made it ours*" (2018, 8; emphasis mine). Although the US government's ultimate goal was to make the Indigenous population vanish by applying the "melting pot" theory of assimilation, the resilience of urban Indians paired with their ability to adapt to the new circumstances of the metropolitan space ensured the survival of indigeneity in cities.

The 1952 Voluntary Relocation Program and the 1957 Adult Vocational Training Program were to provide job opportunities and education in major cities, for example Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and Oakland, among many others (Kent-Stoll 2022, 6). The relocates—leaving the reservation where they were supported by their tribe and family—had to adapt to the new environment, which ultimately affected their self-perception, personal-, and cultural identities. In the already multicultural cities, it was important for urban Indians to ensure the survival of Indigenous cultures, as Gibson writes: "[t]he urban experience […] necessitated a binding together of people from all tribal backgrounds in an effort to preserve American Indian culture as a whole, thereby establishing a sense of Pan-Indian identity" (2016, 15). Pan-Indianism created a supra-tribal identity that unites Indigenous peoples in

metropolitan spaces, enabling American Indians with no information about their tribal affiliation to embrace their indigeneity. This collective identity is particularly significant as approximately 75-80 percent of Native Americans in the contemporary United States live in urban areas, meaning the majority of the Indigenous population is urban Indian (Ortiz 2017, 108).

In Blue's storyline relocation appears, although its direction is reversed, which signifies that it is not only connected to displacement or identity loss, but it can also be important for reclaiming indigeneity and cultural resilience. Blue is adopted and raised by a white family—which is also a form of removal from her cultural environment—without any connection to her Indigenous background. Through her marriage to a Cheyenne man, she becomes a member of a reservation community in Oklahoma. Blue leaves her husband when he starts to physically abuse her, and she moves back to Oakland.

Blue's relocation to Oakland does not only imply a change in physical space but it also occurs in Blue's name and, consequently, in her identity construction. "I was adopted by white people. *I needed an Indian name*. In Cheyenne it's Otá'tavo'ome, but I don't know how to say it right. It means: *Blue Vapor of Life* […] Up until then I'd been Crystal" (Orange 2018, 197; emphasis mine). Even though she has very limited information about her Indigenous background, she finds it necessary to have a Cheyenne name, as it is a significant step towards embracing her American Indian identity. Both of her names are symbolic, with an apparent contrast between crystal and blue vapor, because it demonstrates the change from a transparent, solid mass into an opaque substance that represents how Blue's discovery of her Native American background makes her identity more complex and multi-dimensional than it was before she is (re)connected with the Cheyenne tribe.

After returning to Oakland, Blue fails to collect more information about her biological family than she already had known before she left the city; hence, she is not completely satisfied with her experiences in the reservation community. Although Blue is disappointed, she still starts to use her new name that undoubtedly strengthens her Native American identity, and which she can embrace confidently. Since learning about her ethnic background, Blue's white and Indigenous selves exist simultaneously but somewhat separately, and they are both integral parts of her identity: "Blue tilts the rearview down and looks at herself. She sees *a version of herself she thought was long gone*, someone she'd left behind, ditched for her real Indian life on the rez. *Crystal*. From Oakland. She's not gone. *She's somewhere behind Blue's eyes* in the rearview" (Orange 2018, 236; emphasis mine). With the two names, Blue differentiates her life before and after her initiation into the Indigenous community and creates a boundary between her white and Native American self. She reevaluates her self-perception, literally by looking at herself in the mirror, and figuratively by discovering her cultural heritage and embracing her Indigenous roots. Blue accepts that her coexisting—and seemingly

conflicted—identities make her who she is while preparing for the powwow, but when she meets her biological parents, it evokes yet another drastic change in her life. Her identity construction process is aided by the Indian Center, a social space in the metropolitan environment that facilitates urban Indians' (re)connection with indigeneity.

Adoption policies concerning Native American children created two different but inseparable concepts of family that appear in *There There*. The first is the biological sense, which is present in all the storylines and establishes multiple relations between major and minor characters. The second interpretation is the urban Indian community figuratively functioning as a family. These two concepts are intertwined in child welfare legislation which, directly or indirectly, affect the relation(ship)s and identity formation of the analyzed characters.

The most important law regulating the adoption of Indigenous children is the 1978 ICWA that aimed to prioritize the cultural environment of adopted Indigenous children. In the 1960s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) deemed many Native American caretakers and families unfit for parenting, taking their children away from them at an alarming rate, claiming that they do not have the necessary skills and resources for childrearing (Jacobs 2013, 137). Statistics show that between the 1950s and 1970s—coinciding with the relocation period—more than 85 percent of children, who in many cases were removed from their family forcibly, were placed in the foster care system or were adopted by non-Indigenous people (Gallegos and Fort 2017, 2). ICWA was introduced to make sure Native American children maintain their connection to their cultural heritage and they are not placed in non-Indigenous foster homes (Lucero and Bussey 2012, 92). It includes a placement preference that prioritizes the care of Native American children by their immediate or extended family member. If that is not possible, the child is placed with Indigenous foster parents before non-Native individuals are considered for adoption (Zug 2020, 57). This is a crucial piece of legislation, since it is the first child welfare law that takes the role of kinship into consideration in its placement guidelines (Day et al. 2019, 14). ICWA prioritizes cultural continuity, which is essential for American Indian communities, and for the identity formation process of Native American children.

The extended family's active participation in bringing up children is a common feature of many Indigenous cultures (Byers 2010, 308). ICWA integrates the traditional aspect of parenting by emphasizing the importance of kinship in childrearing and ensures that children maintain their cultural and familial ties in the urban environment. Blue and Orvil are directly impacted by adoption, while Edwin is indirectly affected by it. Blue is the representative of the pre-ICWA generations, Orvil is one of the children adopted post-ICWA, and Edwin is positioned between Blue and Orvil by his

age and because he personally was not adopted, although the law affected his life, as he does not know that Blue is his half-sister. They are all part of the same extended biological family, but due to dramatic irony, their family relations are only apparent to the reader and remain hidden from the narrators until the end of the story.

When Jacquie Red Feather is seventeen years old in the early 1970s—preceding the introduction of ICWA in 1978—she gives birth to Blue, but she is unable to provide for her baby due to her financial difficulties and the lack of support, thus she gives Blue up for adoption. Without the protection of ICWA, Blue is completely removed from her family and the urban Indian cultural environment. On her eighteenth birthday Blue learns her biological mother's name and that she lived in Oakland when she was born. Although she tries to find out more about Jacquie, or the Red Feather family, she is unsuccessful. It is only by coincidence that she organizes the powwow with her half-brother and is introduced to Jacquie and Harvey, at the event, emphasizing the consequences of the lack of protection in pre-ICWA adoptions with respect to family ties.

Edwin is not directly affected by adoption, but he also experiences self-doubt about embracing his Native American heritage. He is raised by his white mother, Karen, and the absence of his Indigenous father leaves Edwin desperate to find out which tribe he belongs in and how he could express his indigeneity. He blames his mother for not knowing the Native American side of his family:

> I've always hated when [Karen] says "Native American Indian," this weird politically correct catchall you only hear from white people who've never known *a real Native person*. And it reminds me of *how removed I am* because of her. Not only because she is white, and me therefore half white, but because of how she never did a single thing to try to connect me with my dad. (Orange 2018, 69; emphasis mine)

Edwin's insecurity about the authenticity of his ethnic identity is triggered by Karen, when she uses a collective term that does not refer to specific tribal affiliation. Edwin's frustration starts to fade away when he finds Harvey on Facebook and learns from him that they are Cheyenne. Edwin has no idea that he was not only isolated from his father, but also from his half-sister, Blue.

Orvil Red Feather and his brothers are removed from their home when Orvil is five years old—because their mother, Jamie, has severe substance abuse issues—and following ICWA's placement preference guidelines, they are placed with an immediate family member. The closest relative of the boys is their grandmother, Jacquie, who is also unable to fend for Orvil and his brothers on account of her alcoholism. Jacquie's half-sister, Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield, is the closest relative of the boys in the extended family,

thus, she adopts them. The relation of Opal and the Red Feather boys is summarized from Orvil's point of view as: "*She's not technically their grandma. Indian way she is*. That's what she told them when she explained why she was a Bear Shield and they were Red Feathers. She is actually their great-aunt" (Orange 2018, 119; emphasis mine). Although Opal is an extended family member, the boys call her their grandmother, highlighting the importance of kinship in Indigenous culture. Orvil is placed in Opal's care because he is under the protection of ICWA, thus, he is not removed from his cultural environment.

Opal has negative childhood experiences about being Indigenous, and she wants to prevent the boys from learning about their Cheyenne roots or embracing their indigeneity in any way. Her avoidant attitude towards anything Native American is described in one of Orvil's chapters: "Ever since they were in her care, *Opal had been openly against any of them doing anything Indian*. She treated it all like it was something they could decide for themselves when they were old enough. *Like drinking or driving or smoking or voting. Indianing*" (Orange 118; emphasis mine). Opal treats Indigenous identity as a matter of choice, which contrasts the notion of cultural continuity, a fundamental part of identity formation. The Big Oakland Powwow is a great opportunity for Orvil to learn about himself, his cultural roots, and to become a member of the Indigenous community as a powwow dancer.

Spaces of identity construction: The community-building role of Indian Centers

To overcome the lack of support and connections in the cities, relocatees created Indian Centers, which became the backbones of local Indigenous communities (Sage 2016, 59). Native Americans regardless of tribal affiliation—or the lack of it—can rely on the centers if they seek acceptance, especially if they are disconnected from their cultural roots, such as people in similar situations as Blue, Edwin, or Orvil. In the centers Indigenous people can explore their American Indian heritage that they could not do growing up, and as Jacobs and Merolla write: "in this setting it is possible for individuals to feel authentic as Indians while simultaneously acknowledging their unfamiliarity with Indian teachings and traditions" (2017, 77). The institutions are mostly managed by women, who provide stability in the urban environment as they recreate the social structure of reservation communities, and help relocatees with education, networking, or preserving traditions (Sage 2016, 60). In *There There* multiple characters work at the Oakland Indian Center, including Blue, Edwin, and his mother, Karen. Others also visit the center at least once prior to the powwow, for example, Orvil Red Feather, who needs financial support. The characters' connection to the Indian Center shows that the institution does not only provide essential resources but also

serves as a vital space of identity formation, where individuals like Blue, Edwin, and Orvil can strengthen their ties both to their cultural heritage and the urban Indian community.

Blue explains what motivated her to seek employment at the Indian Center. She writes: "I got the job in Oakland at the Indian Center, and that *helped me to feel more like I belonged somewhere*" (Orange 2018, 198; emphasis mine). Although the job becomes a vital part of Blue's identity formation, providing her with a place where she is accepted, she still considers herself an outcast in both mainstream and Native American society. Although she is self-conscious about the authenticity of her ethnic- and cultural heritage, by working at the powwow, Blue indirectly impacts the lives of the attendees who, similar to her, might be insecure about embracing their indigeneity.

Working at the Indian Center is a life-changing experience for Edwin too, since it is an opportunity for him to join the Indigenous community in his real life after spending years online searching for a connection to Native American culture and people. The paid internship at the center is an important milestone in his life for multiple reasons, and the significance of his and Blue's work is described from Edwin's point of view as: "If it doesn't go well, the powwow won't happen again next year. And they'll be out of a job. But this means *more than a job* for Edwin at this point. *This is a new life.*" (Orange 2018, 243; emphasis mine). At the Indian Center Edwin makes significant progress in his identity construction process; he finds work in an environment where he can learn about his cultural heritage, while he can also help others do the same, as by organizing the powwow he actively contributes to the community building of urban Indians in Oakland.

Orvil finds an advertisement on Facebook about a storytelling project for a documentary at the Indian Center, where they give two hundred dollars for every participant. Orvil is not interested in the storytelling itself, although the creator of the project, Dene Oxendene—also one of the twelve narrators in *There There*—explains his goals with the documentary to Orvil:

> I'm here to *collect stories in order to have them available online* for people from our community and other communities like ours to hear and see. When you hear stories from people like you, you feel less alone. *When you feel less alone*, and like *you have a community of people behind you*, alongside you, I believe *you can live a better life*. Does that make sense?
> Sure. (Orange 2018, 122; emphasis mine)

Orvil acknowledges Dene's reasons for filming Native American people sharing stories about their lives but does not think about its potential impact on others' identity construction. Dene emphasizes that the project contributes not only to the well-being of the storyteller, but also those who watch these videos, since mutual experiences mitigate the sense of loneliness

and create strong bonds within the Indigenous community. Orvil recounts a childhood memory about the day when he and his brothers were removed from their mother's care by child protective services. "Even though the story had been sad to remember, Orvil feels okay about having told it. He feels even better about the two-hundred-dollar gift card in his back pocket" (Orange 2018, 124). Orvil also shares that the social worker knew he is Indigenous just by looking at him, which surprised Orvil, because this was the first instance somebody called him "Indian." The experience makes Orvil insecure about the way he looks, he worries that he is not Native "enough." It is a relief for Orvil to tell his story, and since the videos are available online, he becomes a member of the urban Indian community in the online space. Thus, he can indirectly influence the identity construction of those Native Americans who watch the documentary to learn about their cultural heritage and to find solace in stories that they can relate to. By participating in the storytelling project and joining Oakland's Indigenous community, Orvil finds a substitute family, where he is supported in his identity construction process.

Spaces of identity construction 2: The powwow as family reunion

All the storylines of *There There* lead up to the Big Oakland Powwow, the main event that the twelve narrators prepare for throughout the novel. The powwow is important for the characters for personal reasons—Blue organizes it, Edwin meets his father there, and Orvil dances in regalia for the first time—and it is also vital for social networking within the Indigenous community of Oakland. The powwow also has a crucial community-building role in metropolitan spaces due to its inclusivity, as Sage defines: "the powwow [is] an intertribal gathering where Native people could share tribal culture with each other and learn about other groups' tribal dances, dresses, and songs while *reinforcing the idea that they were all* to some extent *urban Indians*." (2016, 74, emphasis mine)

In *There There*, the powwow functions as a family reunion in two senses: it is a gathering for the urban Indian community, and the characters meet their biological family members by chance. The narrative structure of the novel—with the parallel storylines that slowly intertwine—resemble how people from all over the country come together to celebrate Native American cultures at powwows, (re)building relationships with one another and Indigenous communities.

The family reunion starts before the powwow takes place, because some of the related narrators, such as Blue and Edwin, get in touch with one another months preceding the event. As they work together in the Indian Center's powwow organizing committee, they become friends and Blue feels a sense of familiarity around Edwin—as they are both part of the urban

Indian community—which is described from her perspective: "She likes him. *There's something about him that feels like family*" (Orange 2018, 237; emphasis mine). On the day of the Big Oakland Powwow Blue encourages Edwin to go up to Harvey and the woman who accompanies him. Blue is shocked to learn that the woman's name is Jacquie Red Feather, thus, she is her biological mother. This scene is missing from Blue's narrative, but Edwin describes the moment of Blue's realization: "*Blue's face goes white*. She reaches out her hand and goes for a smile, but it looks more like she's trying not to throw up" (Orange 2018, 260; emphasis mine). The color symbolism appears again, because white alludes to Blue's upbringing in a white family due to her pre-ICWA adoption and it makes her resemble a ghost, which is a reference to Jacquie's younger daughter, Jamie, who committed suicide. A contrast that appears between the evoked blue, red and white colors can also represent the US flag, which alludes to the federal government's role in the removal of Indigenous children from their families before ICWA's introduction.

Shortly after meeting Jacquie and Harvey, the shooting breaks out and Edwin is shot in the stomach. Blue takes him to the hospital, where she once again finds herself next to her biological mother in the waiting room: "Blue wants to say something to Jacquie. But what? Blue looks at Harvey. He really does look like Edwin. And if Harvey and Jacquie are together, then does that mean. . .? No. Blue doesn't allow that thought to finish" (Orange 2018, 283). This scene is described from an omniscient narrator's point of view, instead of Blue's perspective, which suggests that she is shocked when she meets both of her parents, blocking her own narrative voice in this section. As she examines Jacquie and Harvey, she suspects that Harvey might be her father, too. Blue is still waiting for the doctors to inform her of Edwin's condition, so she does not let her mind wander, but the reader is aware that she is, indeed, in the company of both of her biological parents, thus the powwow is a family reunion for her in every sense, even if it is a tragic event that brings them together fully. The day of the powwow is important to Edwin because he does not want to disappoint his extended family, and/or his biological one by making a negative first impression. The event is a family reunion in both senses, because he not only works with his half-sister and meets his father, but also, he joins Oakland's urban Indian community, where he can embrace his indigeneity.

Although Orvil is not on the organizing committee, he also prepares diligently for the Big Oakland Powwow as a dancer. He needs the opportunity to join the Indigenous community, because his caretaker, Opal, refuses to teach him about his Native American roots, and inhibits him from participating in anything that is connected to indigeneity. Years prior to his application to the dance contest, Orvil found a regalia—a traditional Indigenous dancing attire—hidden in Opal's house and since then, he occasionally tries it on to observe his reflection: "Orvil stands in front of

Opal's bedroom mirror with his regalia on all wrong. It isn't backward, and actually *he doesn't know what he did wrong, but it's off*" (Orange 2018, 118; emphasis mine). He feels uncomfortable about how he looks in the regalia because he is also insecure about the authenticity of his Native American identity, although he struggles to discern his emotions about it.

The quote also represents how Orvil tries to create a connection to his Cheyenne heritage; however, lacking personal experiences about embracing his indigeneity makes his identity construction incomplete. Furthermore, his discomfort in the regalia can be caused by his guilt, because he knows Opal's disapproval of his connection to Native American traditions. Since a social worker recognized that Orvil is Indigenous just by looking at him, his appearance has been an integral part of experiencing and expressing his indigeneity. When Orvil prepares for the competition at the venue, his opinion about the importance of appearance changes. He starts to hear the drums and see the other dancers around him; he realizes that being Indigenous is not a matter of clothing or behaving a certain way, but it is an instinctive sense of self that does not require validation from anyone to be authentic. A stray bullet hits Orvil, who is dancing in the middle of the stadium. The first person who runs up to him is Jacquie Red Feather—his biological grandmother whom he has never met before—because she recognized Orvil from pictures she has seen of him, thus the event turns into a family reunion for both Orvil and Jacquie.

Spaces of identity construction 3: Virtual spaces of identity formation

With the emergence of the internet, it became possible to build social networks in a new, virtual space. Eventually social media platforms were created where Native Americans can extend and develop tribal communities (Byrd 2014, 57). Blue, Edwin and Orvil all use online platforms to try to establish connections with Indigenous people. Edwin frequently sends friend requests to Facebook users whom he believes to be Indigenous based on their appearance in order to make it seem like he has an active social life. Edwin plays a simulation game called *Second Life* that resembles real life, and he can design a virtual avatar based on himself. In *Second Life* Edwin lives with his father on a reservation because his white mother died during childbirth. He has a job, a girlfriend, and a father, everything he wants in reality; thus, he uses the online platform to compensate for his self-consciousness about his Native American identity. He thinks he is stuck in his life, so he makes his online persona a productive and successful person to make up for the time he spends aimlessly in front of the computer. He attempts to create an environment in the game where his Indigenous identity would be validated due to his close relationship with his Native American father, his reservation

and, consequently, the tribe as an extended family. Edwin finds his father on Facebook; they start messaging and before they agree on meeting at the Big Oakland Powwow. The virtual space is crucial for Edwin, because he starts his identity formation process there. Social media platforms enable him to connect with his father, and with the information about his tribal affiliation, he can start looking for resources online to learn about Cheyenne traditions.

Facebook is also important to Blue, who ponders about creating a second profile to find out more about her biological family: "On that other Facebook, she'd find the information and media she'd always been looking for. On that other Facebook feed, *she'd find true connection.* That is where she'd always wanted to be. *Is what she'd always hoped Facebook would turn out to be*" (Orange 2018, 238; emphasis mine). Blue wants to have a secondary profile to help her identity construction process, and to become a member of the urban Indian community, which—in Blue's opinion—would fulfil the ultimate goal of the site; to create and to maintain connections between people based on kinship and shared interests. The possibility of two separate accounts reflects how Blue differentiates her life before and after she returned to Oakland. Blue works at the Indian Center, thus she is a member of Oakland's urban Indian community, nevertheless, she is frustrated about missing the information concerning her biological family, which makes her consider looking for her family online.

Orvil also uses online resources to learn about his cultural background, since Opal refuses to teach him about indigeneity and traditions. Opal justifies her decision by stating: "Don't ever let anyone tell you what being Indian means. […] *You're Indian because you're Indian because you're Indian*" [1] (Orange 2018, 119; emphasis mine). Opal knows that embracing his indigeneity would require Orvil to gain personal experiences, although she discourages him to do so for the fear of the possible negative consequences. The second part of the quote expresses that Native American identity cannot be further explained other than mentioning its name, because it encompasses various aspects of identities all at once. The repetition also alludes to how generations of Native Americans succeed one another representing that indigeneity is based on ancestry and lineage, as opposed to Orvil's views that he has to represent his ethno-cultural identity with his appearance and behavior. Orvil uses Facebook to find out about the storytelling project and the Big Oakland Powwow, which both contribute to his identity construction. Just like Edwin, Orvil also utilizes the virtual space to discover his Indigenous with documentaries and YouTube videos. The online resources substitute for Opal's help, ensure cultural continuity, and enable

[1] The second sentence is also a reference to one of Gertrude Stein's most famous quotes "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" from her poem "Sacred Emily." Another famous line by Stein "There is no there there" inspired the title of Orange's novel ("Q&A: Tommy Orange," 2023)

Orvil to participate in the urban Indian community's event before he can experience embracing his indigeneity at the powwow.

Conclusion

In *There There* Orange thematizes topics that concern urban Indian communities, including the long-term effects of relocation policies, disrupted families, and embracing Indigenous identity in a metropolitan environment. The three narrators all go through their Indigenous identity construction process—since they lack a connection to the American Indian community for different reasons—which is influenced by the Indian Center, the powwow, and the online space; three places that are vital in urban Indian life.

Blue tries to find her place both on a reservation and the urban environment as she goes through a reverse relocation journey. Due to her pre-ICWA adoption she has to establish connections with the Indigenous community in her adulthood, thus, she starts to work at the Oakland Indian Center. She is not only the main organizer of the powwow, the family reunion of urban Indians, but also finds her biological relatives by chance. Blue struggles to embrace her indigeneity, and the duality of her white and Native American self-image is reflected in her name change as well as in her idea about creating two separate Facebook accounts for her seemingly conflicting identities.

Blue's half-brother, Edwin is also disconnected from his American Indian cultural roots, because he is indirectly affected by ICWA and he grew up without his Cheyenne father, Harvey. Edwin uses the virtual space to make an avatar of himself, where he can manage everything he dreams of in his real life. He desperately wants to find his father and his tribe; thus, he is constantly online, trying to get the answers from online sources. For him, the Indian Center is also more than a workplace, since he can join the Indigenous community in person as he prepares the Big Oakland Powwow alongside Blue.

Orvil, although protected by the placement preference guidelines of ICWA, is insecure about embracing his indigeneity due to Opal's negative attitude towards Native American traditions. He knows about the events at the Indian Center—such as Dene Oxendene's storytelling project from social media, and he seeks online sources to learn powwow dancing. He signs up for the Big Oakland Powwow as a dancer.

Blue, Edwin and Orvil go through identity construction with different circumstances and backgrounds, but for the same reason: to find a place they can feel accepted and supported as they learn what it means for them to embrace their cultural roots. The Indian Center, the powwow organization process and the event itself along with the resources that are available online all contribute to the complex sense of self they have due to their indigeneity.

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AUTO(BIO)GRAPHY(STORY): THE NECESSARY ACT?

Hend Ayari

Introduction

For Foucault, power and knowledge are inextricably linked (Christensen 2024, n.p.). Discourses are a means through which power operates as they define and control the production of knowledge. Power is productive; it produces reality, domains of objects, and rituals of truth. By controlling discourse, those in power can shape what is known and how it is understood. Recently, despite the traumatic experiences of Native American peoples being given modest attention, especially with the ascendency of the memoir as an offshoot of the life writing genre that is concerned with trauma, their stories are still viewed from the prism of victimry.[1] By this token, American Indian autobiography is a discourse, not a mere genre, whereby the "ontology of victimry" and "native absence" in White Earth Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor's terms become a discursive formation,[2] and Western autobiographical writing served as a discursive production to perpetuate the "Indigenous deficiency" rhetoric (Justice 2018, 3). In this context, Raheja and Fitzgerald contend that autobiography, when appropriated and signified by Native American authors, becomes a site of resistance in: "the processes of nation building and the reconfiguration of tribal intellectual and cultural

[1] While the terminology surrounding the Indigenous Populations is evolving in academia, "Native American"—as a reaction to American Indian and Aboriginal—emerged in the late eighties. Generally, Indigenous peoples within the boundaries of the United States and Canada are referred to as Indigenous, in its capitalized and adjectival form (Younging 2018), replacing, thus, the stereotyped term "Aboriginal." In the pre-contact period, Indigenous Peoples had employed their tribal nations to identify themselves. These designations, however, were soon replaced by terms coined by European settlers, generally derived from the anglicization (or French and Spanish variations) of the Indigenous names. Indigenous is a racist category, but it is also a collectivized political identity, particularly in settler colonial nation-states in the CANZUS area. Therefore, I will use the terms Indigenous and Native American peoples interchangeably with references to the tribal affiliations of the authors and theoreticians I quote using the spellings that comply with the preferences of the authors in question.

[2] The concept was used by non-Indigenous scholars Krupat, Brumble, Bataille, and Sands to refer to texts composed about Native American people.

sovereignty through the recovery of Native voice and agency in mediated texts. (2006, 1)

Presently, as editorial doors are increasingly embracing the subversive creativity of the twenty-first century, Native American women writers not only control self-representation but also unwrite the conventions of non-tribal literary form—autobiography—that have held their voices and stories captive within this tradition. In this study, I argue that the texts I analyze are Native American women-authored memoirs that subvert the discourse of trauma and ethnography by adopting a form of storying that defies Western literary conventions. I propose to read them as biostories—an alternative to the overly trauma-informed and Western-centric memoir—where women authors control choices regarding self-representation, literary aesthetics, and contemporary topics. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that renewed autobiographical expressions can open textual sites for healing on Native American terms by affirming "survivance in the face of trauma" rather than "survival of trauma." (Madsen 2008, 1)

Toward this objective, I analyze copious passages from contemporary memoirs by Native American women, as they advance survivance—poetics and aesthetics—by reclaiming their voice and a tradition in a traditionally white-male-dominated autobiographical discourse. Additionally, their embrace of self-narration allows for articulating and transcending traumatic experiences using storying rooted in Indigenous strategies. Women's autobiographical writings serve as a counternarrative to the "colonial unknowing" (Vimalassery et al. 2017, 1) and provide a renewed paradigm for reading and understanding the Native American experience in the United States.

My undertaking of this discussion is buoyed by the Indigenous feminist paradigm, especially Tanana Athabascan scholar Dian Million's *felt analysis* and the hermeneutics of survivance, the contours of which are delineated by Vizenor and his scholars. I employ these theoretical frameworks as tools to explore women's engagement with the discourses of trauma and autobiography. On the intersections between survivance and writing through trauma, I employ insights from Western autobiography studies scholars for their contextualization of the emergence of the genre and conceptualizations of life writing, testimony, as well as the distinctive features of autobiographical writings as tools for analyzing biostories.

1. (De)Historicizing The Genre: The Euro-Hetero-Centric Origins Of Autobiography

In their genealogical endeavor into the American Indian autobiography in *Telling Their Lives*, Gretchen Bataille and Kathleen Sands establish Eurocentric heteropatriarchal individualism as the nub of the genre and its sundry

avatars—captivity narratives and Western hero narratives. Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, for example, has been acknowledged as the archetype for the American autobiography as it relates the idea of achievement with property and individualism. An important detail that I discarded from the above-quoted prediction points out to the stages of development of American Indian autobiography, also noted by Krupat's witty use of preposition *of/by*, "many cases eliminating the role of recorder-editor from the narrative process" (1985; 1994). This watershed signaled a major shift in the autobiographical expression on various levels. Since its early theorizations, the long-standing templates of Western autobiography have rested on the celebration of the autonomous individual.

Recent developments in autobiography studies signaled, to my sense, by the reedition of two of the most foundational books by Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith, on the one hand, and Leigh Gilmore, on the other hand, take issue with the anachronistic assumptions about the genre. Particularly, they seem to be more inclusive of the Indigenous perspective and diverse muti-modal writings as they acknowledge the existence of "[t]he oral performance of self-narration" long before the Western understanding of literacy, conspicuous in "the naming songs of Native American cultures, the oral narratives of genealogy and descent among Africans, the communal self-locating of the "song lines" of indigenous Australians, and others" (Smith and Watson 2000, 103). In a reactionary stance, the inclination of contemporary Indigenous studies towards decolonizing research is foremost concerned with shaking the very grounds that created and disseminated the epistemicide that attended settler colonialism.

The Western inconspicuousness of Indigenous peoples' autobiographical traditions is adumbrative of their contribution to the field. This contention informed the work of Hertha Dawn Sweet Wong, who paved the way for reclaiming a Native American autobiographical tradition. Her critique of Krupat and his ilk was soon followed by the groundbreaking work of Cree-Métis scholar Deanna Reder. Her book *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition: Cree and Métis âcimisowina* is generative in this endeavor as she proposes the concept of *âcimisowina* as a space for: "telling our stories from our own perspectives" as an intrinsic component of decolonizing knowledge (qtd. in Foreword). The Nêhiyaw term of *âcimisowina*, to start with, might come across as yet another ostentatious Indigenous-inspired term. However, by locating it at the center of the argument of her book, Reder carves a legitimate space for autobiography in her storytelling traditions, claiming that it has always been "the preferred genre" (2022, introduction) by the speakers of her language. In Reder's words, autobiography is deeply ingrained in most Native American/First Peoples traditions. However, she reckons the unfailing efforts of Western lack of recognition of Native American voices in the genre, as she asserts: "Native American autobiography studies and

autobiography theory have been severely limited by the lack of Indigenous perspectives" (2022, introduction). Indeed, settler colonialism attempted to eliminate Native American people either by excluding their voices or by including them in such a way that strips their authority as texts in the "as-told-to" tradition display. Presently, as editorial doors are increasingly embracing the subversive creativity of the twenty-first century, American Indian women writers not only control self-representation but also rewrite the generic rules that have held their voices and stories captive within the staid conventions of the American autobiographical tradition. Reder's contention that "autobiographies–âcimisowina–best allow us to assert control over our identities, histories, and knowledge systems," only reaffirms the previously stated acknowledgment by Raheja of the capacity of autobiography as a counter discursive formation. (2022, introduction)

Bataille and Sands predicted that American Indian women's autobiography would validate the genre as a cogent avenue of inquiry into ways of healing from transhistorical trauma by redefining Native presence in both literary and public discourses:

> It is likely that the narratives to come will reflect on the growing self-consciousness Indian women have about their roles in contemporary society. … Sophistication and complexity will be heightened. It is also likely [that women] will experiment more with style and structure, and will take fuller control of their narratives. (1984, 134-35)

Not only does this prescient proclamation reposition Native Americans in the present, it also gives them significant access to the erstwhile select club of autobiography as a literary practice as well as a discursive one. Essentially born into the volition of Western academia to salvage what remains from what they saw as a dying race, autobiography about Native Americans finds roots in the ethos of imperial anthropological studies whose person of interest, Native Americans, were "studied and romanced as evidence of the other, or the double other, in an 'authentic' culture" (Vizenor 1994*,* 45).

2. My Voice, Our Stories

Kathleen Donovan declared: "[p]erhaps the most fundamental issue raised by Native American literature is, particularly that by women, and feminist theories is the issue of voice: *Who* can speak? And *how*? And under *what circumstances*? *What* can be said ?" (1998, 7-8; emphasis added). My contention is, thereby, to reorient reading women's memoirs as trauma narratives from mere survival of trauma to survivance in the face of trauma, which would be salient answers to Donovan's questions. Reading Indigenous women's first-person writing as "political acts in themselves," argues Dian Million, would have an effect upon (white) scholarship. In and through these narratives,

Indigenous women do not only create individual narratives to eschew the ethnographic methodology, Million suggests, but also to participate:

> In creating a new language for communities to address the real multi-layered facets of their histories and concerns by insisting on the inclusion of our lived experience, rich with emotional knowledges, what pain and grief and hope meant or mean now in our pasts and futures. (2009, 54)

This starts with identifying whose voice is apt for doing so. Autobiography from the "as-told-to" tradition is static and complies with the "ontology of victimization" (Emberley 2002, 2). In his discussion of American Indian autobiography with regards to federal Indian law, Cheyfitz advances the concept of "collaborative dissembling" (2023, 3) The term collaboration in the earliest examples of "as-told-to" autobiographies were based in collaboration between the teller and the amanuensis, where collaboration would be understood "in the nuanced range of its meanings from cooperation to coercion" and in the context of ethnographic discourse of salvage theory it seems to highlight extraction." (Cheyfitz 2023, 3) Furthermore, the Western autobiographer who worked within the tradition of "as-told-to" narratives would write the story of Indians that corroborated the Western romance of the vanishing Indian[3]. Native American writers, specifically women, turn towards a discourse that defies the Western impulse to read Native American literature as "ethnographic reportage" (Washuta and Warburton 2019, introduction). Their embrace of an indigenized self-presentative stance reinforces their autobiographical expressions as a relational one because it defies Western notions of individualism by proposing alternatives to self-definition and identity-construction models through deconstructing and endorsing diverse positionings.

The choice of the life writing genre by Native American writers gives prominence to self-determination through a self-representative stance by "speaking in a voice that is decolonized or at least in the process of being decolonized," a process that enables the individual "to reinvent themselves in a manner that is within their control" (Duran 2019, introduction). As I understand it, assuming a decolonized voice allows women to re-center Indigenous experiences as they lived and felt them. Women authors break with the conventional poetics of Western autobiography. As Grover makes it abundantly clear in *Gichigami Hearts*: "the stories and what is real are larger, stronger, and more permanent than our frail chain of human existence," she

[3] In his book *The Colonial Construction of Indian Country: Native American Literatures and Federal Indian Law,* Cheyfitz criticizes the rhetoric of the vanishing race that was disseminated through the ethnographic discourse. He points to Neihardt's rendition of Black Elk's biography as the perfect exemplification of this practice.

adds, "Stories that have been passed down as legend and mythology are "*debwe*, this is the truth," an expression repeated seven times over the course of the biostory (15- 116- 125- 127). Because stories are archives of Indigenous knowledge, they also convey Indigenous truths. Incorporating their tribal stories as nodal points in their life writings and establishing them as influential in the choices they make or any other development in their lives is how women recenter tribal stories as truths, not mere folklore, as Western thought would have it.

Self-representative texts also allow women to "become navigator[s] of their self-image not as reflected back to them through the ethnographic gaze" (Louis 2019, 54). Unpacking the power dynamics of colonialism and how they shape Native Americans' experiences that contributed to trauma is required to clear up space to tell "our stories, [as] we have lived them" (Whitebear qtd. in Younging 2018, chapter 1). As I read it, and drawing on Oji-Cree scholar Joshua Whitehead's personal ruminations on his work that he deftly calls biostory, storytelling—*otâcimow*—constitutes the site and the means of vocalizing one's story, and women authors make it abundantly clear in their biostories which are premised on prioritizing Native American perspectives and recentering their truths by: "telling a different story . . . [rather than] telling the story differently" (Gilmore 2023, 16).

As much as memoir is a slippery term used to categorize a range of narrative forms, it signals the focus on a particular time period in the autobiographical narrator's life rather than the entire life span up to the time of telling (Watson and Smith 2000, 3-4).[4] In many ways, Indigenous-authored autobiographies combine elements and forms of no less than twelve subcategories of autobiographical expressions, where the boundaries between the different realms are easily permeable. The texts I study, however, bear the hallmark of memoirs to varying degrees. Additionally, memoir as a genre evolved in tandem with "trauma as a sensational trope" (Gilmore 2023, xiii), reinforcing the idea that readers' avocation towards sensationalism has

[4] While autobiography and the life writing tend to be used interchangeably in the course of the paper, it is important to note that the latter is a form of resistance to the former whereby autobiography is less inclusive and narrower in definition. In their discussion of autobiography as a genre and its developments since the first personal accounts of a person's life, Smith and Watson point to the difference between "life writing" and "life narrative," making the argument that these two concepts are mistakenly used synonymously (4). Indeed, while life writing encompasses exclusively written accounts of self-narration, life narrative comprises various media formats, such as paintings, music, or social media posts. Consequently, the ubiquity of life narratives that come in new forms of self-representation challenge the traditional definition of western autobiography by virtue of their hybridity. The texts I selected for this research are memoirs, which, relying on Smith and Watson's conceptualizations, can be described as life writing. Throughout this essay, the terms life writing, autobiographical writing, memoir will be employed up to the point where I introduce the term "biostory," which, I claim, is more fitting for reading Native American women-authored memoirs as survivance narratives.

ensured the currency of this genre. I do not attempt to dismiss this contention as irrelevant, but I suggest that even though Native American women's memoirs are written within the framework of this narrow definition, their aesthetics render their accounts of trauma more inclined towards enacting survivance than towards victimization. I argue that the selected texts are most fruitfully read as biostories because of their thematics, rhetorics, and aesthetics. In what follows, I analyze the defining elements of biostory and explore how they are registered in the texts in such a way as to convey survivance. However, lest this terminological choice replace outdated and irrelevant Western vocabularies, I caution against using it as a panacea for all Native American self-representational texts. I simply propose it as one among other possibilities that Indigenous and Native American autobiographical writings can be interpreted as.

Whitehead opts for biostory instead of any other term to define his work because he wants it to be "an outlaw to genre" (Welch 2022). Therefore, the term genre appears in this study with no other theoretical aim than varying word choice and to refer to biostories. Hence, its framing between inverted commas. Whitehead maintains that this telling of a different story that gives affordances for expressing the writer's felt experience is possible is possible in this "genre" as he states: "I would argue that words, orality, sound itself are kin to us since we not only breathe animation into language, but we also enliven stories through the deployment of our voices, senses, bodies.[5] This sentiment also highlights the "genre's" embroilment with orality. The act of speaking summons words into being through an entanglement of experience, memory, and recognition. And stories become communal through a schematic of ethics that holds us accountable to our relations; here, our words themselves become these animate kin" (90). Story involves voice and telling: "[W]e also enliven stories through the deployment of our voices, senses, bodies. The act of speaking summons words into being through an entanglement of experience, memory, and recognition" (Whitehead 2022, 90). A decolonized voice gives allowance to practice one's identity politics where the speaking subject is: "accountable to and implicated in a set of kinship and community relations that includes, but also extends to, beyond the individual self" (Emberley 2002, 40). This resonates with Alicia Elliott's

[5] Concerning the issue of orality, it is worth noting that various Native American writers contend with this dichotomy undergirding Indigenous literatures. Joy Harjo, for example, articulates this issue in her book. Her choice of poetry speaks volumes about her celebration of the oral. To abide by the requirements of present-day impulse for the written, however, orality is still vouched for Native American artists, and this crystallizes in their embrace of literary forms and strategies that impress orality through the written word. To illustrate this point, Harjo writes in the acknowledgement section of *Poet Warrior* that during the process of publication of her text, she felt the need to literally vocalize her life story before print as she discloses: "I appreciate those who helped this manuscript … who listened as I read [it] aloud and provided insight and assistance" (Harjo 2021, 221).

slamming of the white society's construction of Native American identities as the title of the essay forebodes "Not Your Noble Savage:"[6]

> But these same settlers will not listen to the voices of real-life Indigenous people and, further, seem unable to realize that by expecting us to be their Ideal Indian Caricatures, they're adding another layer of colonial trauma to our already overburdened peoples. Within the past few decades, there's been a surge of Indigenous voices in the literary community writing against these harmful histories and images. … Yet even those successful writers have been subject to what I'll call "literary colonialism": insidious criticisms—almost always from non-Indigenous people—that not only reflect but reinforce troubling attitudes of colonial ownership over Indigenous people within the literary community. These include policing what Native writers can write about, and even whether they count as Native at all. (2019, chapter 12)

This passage delineates the power of Native American reclamation of their voices through their personal narratives as a reaction to the harmful depictions of Native American peoples by settler societies. Lest they subvert the image that white people had made of Indigenous individuals, they prefer to rely on the images they constructed about them. This had a huge impact on the literary productions of the most influential Indigenous writers. In this passage, where facts are intertwined with personal interpretation, Elliott reflects on the injustices Native American writers have endured by the publishing industry.

3. Biostory: On the Borderland of Memoir and Otâcimowin

The popularization of the term biotext is credited to Joanne Saul's analysis of Canadian authors' autobiographical writings. Whitehead takes his cues from Saul's biotext, only his is indigenized as it reinvents Western understanding of text with story. Indeed, he affirms that biostory is: "a new work of storying" (2022, 76), a text that is hybrid in form, an active process of telling stories—as the *-ing* form seems to suggest— that "ached to be: prosaic, poetic, theoretic, autobiographic, philosophic, futuristic" (Welch 2022). This string of adjuncts testifies to the wide scope of biostory as it encompasses a variety of expressive modes. The common thread between these remains *story*. "Biostory," Whitehead adds, "came to me as a way to pay homage to the oral stories of the peoples I come from" (Welch 2022). The contours of biostory are redolent of storytelling traditions and point to a

[6] This essay features only in the e-book editions of Alicia Elliott's book (Penguin Random House: Doubleday Canada). The physical version of the biostory I used for my analysis does not contain this essay. For this reason, I rely on the electronic version of the book which does not have a specific page number.

significant question: the story as a living being that demands to be disclosed and shared. While this bent of biostories roots this "genre" in Native American worldviews, it also estranges it from the Western memoir and its appeal for voyeurism. Indeed, the prefix "bio" here does not merely refer to the life story of the author, but to the story as a ceremony that keeps the fire alive and reminds that Native peoples are and "will be here when they are done (laws), and when the earth and waters are renewed" (2022, 14).

Further into his disclosure of the meaning of biostory, Whitehead states:

> [It is] a way of letting me become an *outlaw to genre*. If I was to be decolonial on the land, I needed to do it on the page too. Often, I've found, Indigenous narratives are characterized by either: testimony (a synonym, perhaps, for residential school stories or a synecdoche for stoic historical accounts) and/or pulp (since when our stories are not about what they're called "simple," "mystical," or "magic realism"). Surely our stories can be these forms, but they're rich with allusion and metaphor—of riotous joy and complex constellations of creation. (Welch 2022).

Concerning form, thus, the biostories I study embrace the memoir-in-essay structure to convey their alienation from the rigid form of Western autobiographical writing and restate their "out lawlessness" to genre. In their collection of essays by Native American writers, Elissa Washuta and Theresa Warburton give prominence to Native nonfiction as they compare it to an "exquisite vessel." Their metaphor, borrowed from the Indigenous art of basket weaving, is transposed to the artistic mode of expression that is nonfiction, including autobiography. Their argument rests on the assumption that the form is as important as the message. Recent forms of autobiographical acts manifest a Native American identity that refuses being the subject of extractive practices and chooses self-presentation as resilient, not a victim. What distinguishes these two forms of autobiography recalls once again Gretchen and Bataille's foretelling the importance of the contemporariness topic and the sophistication in form, succinctly noted by Washuta and Warburton: "This attention to form (the telling) and how it shapes the content (the material) enables a move away from a focus on a static idea of "Native information" and, instead, emphasizes the dynamic process of "Native in formation." (18) Therefore, Washuta and Warburton not only question the Western determination to catalog facts about Native American peoples with its impetus to salvage information about a dying race, but they also emphasize the power of Native American nonfiction in impugning the narrative of latency. Through nonfiction—biostories in particular—bespeaks the Vizenorian repudiation of "manifest manners" and that is manifested in their reclaiming of agency to write about their personal lives. Washuta herself provides a case in point when she writes: "I'm best as a *protagonist*. I can make anything meaningful." (2021, 26; emphasis added).

She further discloses her other biostory: "I write essays; I'm writing a memoir in essays. My stuff is kind of bold. Maybe you can read it when I get to know you better[73]" (2014, 161).[7] As she proclaims, this kind of writing is transformative in that she not only becomes master of her narrative but invites the reader into her world when she wants to. Washuta reflects further on her practice of self-representational writing and how close it is to an act of creation:

> Fiction writers make plot; in nonfiction, writers make insights. We shape the recollected by how the remembering changes us. The mind wants to understand what's *done but not settled*. The past is boring because it's over. There is another way. You can make up plot points in nonfiction, and you can do it without lying. You just have to make your life a book . . . Look at all these motifs I made for you, this rejection pain I transformed into epic heartbreak. See what a powerful witch I am? I make narratives to make sense of what happened to me. … I think what follows would be called a stand-alone *essay*. Fine. Or you could think of it as a dossier, the evidence of my attempts (2021, 26; emphasis added)

This passage explores the concept of storytelling and meaning making, particularly in the context of nonfiction, particularly biostory. The biostoryteller contrasts the roles of fiction and nonfiction, suggesting that while fiction relies on creating plots, nonfiction focuses on generating insights. In nonfiction, the writer's task is to shape and give meaning to their experiences through the act of remembering. The process of recollection is transformative; as one remembers, one's understanding of past events changes, and through this lens, the writer creates a narrative that offers deeper insights into those experiences. These lines articulate two significant topics pertinent to this essay. First, it pinpoints the necessity of the mind's need to make sense of unresolved or unsettling past events. Washuta acknowledges that the past, when viewed as simply a sequence of events, can be mundane or "boring" because it is unchangeable. However, the writer proposes an alternative approach: creating "plot points" in nonfiction, which doesn't involve fabricating events but rather reinterpreting them, arranging them in a way that brings new meaning and significance.

The idea of turning life into a book is both metaphorical and literal. This act of translating one's life into words highlights the power of life writing to shape how Indigenous peoples understand themselves and their past. Washuta claims that as a protagonist in her own story using her own voice, she can give meaning to her experiences, transforming even painful or

[7] The note is in the original. In *My Body*, and particularly in the essay entitled "I Will Perfect Every Line Until My Profile Is Flawless," Washuta employs notes profusely as an aside to give the subtext or the context of her story.

traumatic events into something purposeful and evincive of her survivance. The reference to "motifs" and "rejection pain transformed into epic heartbreak" illustrates how narrative techniques, typically associated with fiction, can be used in nonfiction to craft a compelling, insightful story out of real-life experiences. Washuta refers to herself as a "powerful witch" in the closing lines, which points to the transformative power of self-writing. She is able to make sense of what happened to her, imposing balance and meaning onto what is otherwise painful. This act of creation through writing her biostory is depicted as a sort of magic, a way of reclaiming agency and control over one's past.

Structurally, Native American women authors implement multi-vocality by crisscrossing various stories and voices. This is bound to muddle up the clear-cut and fixed borders of the text and, symbolically, the material borders drawn for the sake of territorialization by settler states. The six books vacillate between different textual discourses, which is indicative of their authors' intentions in relying on this technique. The borders demarcating the various modes of expression within a text are deliberately made porous to affirm fixedness. There is no clear-cut demarcation between distinct types of textual discourse in the texts, such as fact and fiction, history, and myth. Jumping from one period to another, from the spiritual world to the physical one, and from one genre to another is ad hoc and arbitrary. Washuta, for example, expresses her uneasiness with the colonial alienation of Indigenous individuals from their ancestral heritage, and this is reflected in the biostory *My Body Is A Book of Rules*, particularly in the structure of the book. Her aesthetic choices are eloquent. Despite the implied autobiographical inclination of her story, she chooses to add essays entitled "A Cascade Autobiography." Interestingly, this "autobiography" is told in bits and pieces that go off on a tangent since they do not feature in the table of contents and interpose between each essay of her biostory. Told uninterruptedly, they are no longer than a page—except for parts nine, eleven, and thirteen. Part eight, however, stretches up and eats up space from other essays, which testifies to their struggle for recognition in the face of established essays. Their presence in the overall work mirrors the uneasiness of Washuta with being fixed in one identity, being herself in a liminal space. The play on the word "cascade" by itself is compelling. Cascade does not merely refer to the Indigenous affiliation of the author but also to the movement of a waterfall, mirroring thus, the porosity of indigenized autobiographical writing and challenging generic determinacy. The repetitive use of the title of these sections could also be read as the "active presence" of her people, a symbol of their survivance. With this gesture, she creates a connection between past and present, further entrenching her 'biography' in Whitehead's tribal rather than the Western understanding of the "auto". She styles her Cascade autobiography using the justified alignment on the page, which emulates the

movement of water falling from a cascade.

The experimentation with the uniformity of the text is visually achieved to stimulate women's attempt to create a continuum between past and present to further "justify" their literary and political sovereignty. These different strands constitute both a challenge to the genre and a simulation of polyvocality. Each type of discourse stands for a distinct voice whose narratives and personas move smoothly between different dimensions, which creates: "A polyphonic version of … historiography that questions traditional divisions between fact and fiction, history and myth" (Brígido 2023, 113-4). Incidentally, this polyvocality anchors the act of self-narration into Native American traditional storytelling but also breaks, once again, both the textual boundaries and the symbolic ones. The reader takes on an active role in deciding the significance of each generic choice.

The process of making art is a metaphor for composing an essay, a text, or a piece of literature. Recasting Washuta's metaphor of essay compositions, Grover's description of how a piece of art sees the light echoes that of any Native American creation. The mixing of old and new, different materials, etched with the spirit and the lived experience of the person who touched or manipulated it, combine to make a piece of art, a piece of writing. Heeding from Washuta and Warburton's types of essay, notably a type of text that contains elements from different sources, but the result is a coherent and harmonious one. "No matter what the materials and where they came from, as Uncle Barney said … everything at the Indian Stand was authentic; it was the genuine thing, made by real Indians." (Grover 2021, 78) As long as it originates from Native American experiences and is produced, voiced out, or composed by Native Americans, it is authentic.

Similar to the oratory style of an Elder speaking in ceremonial contexts or a storytelling style, the texts jump between different storylines that reflect and magnify each other. These contributions take the form of storytelling identifiable in a written text in the writers' use of dialogue with other members of the tribe and intertextual references.[8] In *Gichigami Hearts*, for example, Grover re-enlivens past generations' stories by registering various knowledges of time. In a palimpsestuous move, she sets parts of her biostory in the fictional setting of her earlier book *The Dance Boots: Stories,* while the part entitled "Rabbits in Wintertime" invites the readers into the metaphysical realm with the Ojibwe creation story of Naanabozhoo.[9] This

[8] While intertextuality is recognized as being a postmodern literary strategy as maintained by Julia Kristeva, Deanna Reder mentions the term *âniskwâcimopicikêwin* that she defines in her book as "the process or act of interconnecting stories together, similar to inter-textuality but not limited to text only" (xi).

[9] In this 2010 book, Grover interconnects short stories of the Anishinaabe people with a focus on the experiences of women and their families in Northern Minnesota. These stories explore various themes such as identity, resilience, the significance of community, and cultural

strategy is consistent with Indigenous storytelling styles, where cyclical time and the features of the natural environment replace Western notions of time and place. Various other methods, including surveys, Q&As, and sharing circles, are employed in the biostories when attempting to tell their and others' lived experiences, without running the risk of shaming them or disclosing their identity. Consider the essay "Women in the Fracklands: On Water, Land, Bodies, and Standing Rock," which opens Jensen's book. The author's recourse to a survey-like Q&A engages with a major theme in Native American circles: gender-based violence. The epigraph that reads: "Who is responsible for and to this woman, her safety, her body, her memory?" (2020, 7) suggests that the author invites her audience into a discussion around gender-based violence. Though the questions, once written down, sound rhetorical, they recast storytelling strategies that are meant to involve the audience through their active listening to make meaning of them.

4. "Writing as a rupture:" Political Poetics of Biostories[10]

4.1 Testimony through Biostory: The Necessary Act?

The twenty-first century has strengthened the position of the memoir in the autobiographical mode of expression which has reached a singular notoriety. This development has worked in cahoots with the realization of the existence of "a gravitational pull between life writing and trauma," in Gilmore's words. She adds: "As the memoir boom lengthens, trauma remains central to its ongoing popularity and continues to shape the texts that define it" (2023, xi). The upturn in the publication of autobiographies is related to the proclamation that trauma is a major signifier of this age. Indeed, our context, that is, according to the linguistic pragmatic rules that inform our social beings about what can be said, to whom, when, and how it can be said. The major development of the life writing genre in the Native American context helped buttress their efforts in the decolonization of research.

Gilmore contends: "Texts that are concerned with self-representation and trauma offer a strong case for seeing that in the very condition of autobiography … Part of what we must call healing lies in the assertion of creativity. The ability to write beyond the silencing meted out by trauma is an achievement I want to recognize here" (2023, 24). Understanding life writing

preservation and revitalization.

[10] Sub-title inspired by Joshua Whitehead's sixth chapter from his book *Making Love with the Land* (2022) where he theorizes about biostory. In this manifesto, his choice to write his life in the form of biostory is political because, as he asserts, Native American and Indigenous writers cannot simply write "of aesthetics" (2022, 73). They "can never write a poem about the shapeliness of a teacup for the sake of the teacup. . . such cuppings are always bound by political poetics because … [their] existence has and will always be a radical act of political livelihood" (2022, 73).

in general and memoir in particular as therapeutic in this capacity—re-enactment as "return[ing] to the site of the crime"—allows, thus, an attempt at self-healing. As much as Henke's neologism is appealing, I employ it purely for its semantic value because, to my understanding, it fails to fully describe the life writings under discussion.[11] In her biostory *Poet Warrior*, Harjo vouches for the therapeutic nature of writing through bearing witness and speaking out about the traumatic experiences that stirred her people:

> Writing was my portal to grace, an opening in which I could hear my ancestors speaking, in which I knew we were cared for no matter my inadequacies or failures. "Eagle Poem" was given to me after I emerged from a sweat lodge on a nearby reservation. When I say "given," I mean that after the four eagles circled over the lodge when we emerged, attracted by prayer and singing, the poem came to me in a kind of spiral circling, like an eagle in a wind drift. The poem would go on to bring eagle grace to those who read or listened. … it would be passed to my children, and their children. (Harjo 2021, 134)[12]

The association of writing with grace is particularly engaging and points us towards the redemptive power of writing. Though Christian in undertone, grace can be understood in its universal meaning in relation to scriptotherapy. Through the plural pronoun "we," Harjo emphasizes the communal nature of healing. While it is believed to be performed individually, the presence of her ancestors, spiritual though it is, the outcome has a wider outreach as the healing is ultimately visible on the collective. The passive "cared for" not only retrieves the essence of biostories, which care for the betterment of our communities as Whitehead conveyed, but it also points to the fact that therapeutic writing, or scriptotherapy, is collective, even though it is channeled through the individual/ sharing is care for oneself and others. Sharing does not stop at the stage of talking about one's experiences; it is also an invitation to "visit together" (Reder 2022, introduction) and enlighten the path for others to follow. While Harjo confesses her unreliability because of "inadequacies or failures," she points to the act of re-membering, in Indigenous epistemologies, care for story goes through repeating and transmitting a story as accurately as one could, which does not exclude the

[11] Not to dwell on the polysemic meaning of the root "scripto" with its religious connotation as in "scripto" for scripture, but this sub-genre is, like other forms of autobiographical writing, exclusive of Indigenous epistemologies. For one, it certainly highlights healing through writing, but the fact remains that it is individual healing. Hence, it is individual-centric. Second, though it can be adapted to various traumatic experiences, it still is concerned with sexual abuse, which refers back to the Caruthian single- event model. Finally, its insistence on making one whole again by writing through "the broken pieces" reiterates the Western healing model that seeks the reintegration of the traumatized individual to society.

[12] "Eagle Poem" by Joy Harjo was first published in her 1990 collection of poems *Mad Love and War*.

possibility of alterations, but this adds to the value of memory.

After emerging from a sweat lodge, the poem came to Harjo. The image of the poem descending upon her in a circular way emulates the motion of the eagles circling over the sweat lodge. This image brings to mind the sacred circle in most Indigenous ontologies and impresses the image of the circle of trust, circle of sharing, especially story. The same sentiment is echoed in the other biostories. Washuta, for example, ponders the power of writing in articulating one's traumatic experiences and offers it as a powerful tool to navigate through it as she writes: "Harvill and Hendrix's self-help book for wounded singles says there is a riddle wrapped around my heart. I have a highlighter, a composition book, and a pen. I have time. I do not have any better ideas" (2021, 269). When self-help books fail to help Washuta overcome her pain, she finds solace— "portal to grace"—in writing.

The co-dependency of the form of self-expression that is the memoir and trauma is irrefutable even in the case of Native American contexts. The biostories I analyze address their authors' grappling with trauma-related ailments: PTSD, (misdiagnosed) bipolar disorder, or depression, their own or their relatives', and suicide. At the onset of the healing process is a review of concepts. Mental health issues related to transhistorical trauma, depression, and ongoing injustices, according to ethnographic discourse, prey on the Indigenous peoples' deficiency and "lack of mental fitness," absolving, thus, ongoing colonial oppressive and racist social structures (Justice 2018, 3). The connection between the circular structure of the biostories is pivotal in conveying Indigenous worldviews, and no longer merely a defiance of traditional Western narrative forms. However, in this paper, the elucidation of the circularity of time directs towards the potentiality of the "genre" for healing on Indigenous terms. In other words, the intention here is to explore how, similarly to their content, the form of biostories proves effectual for healing. In his poetic definition of biostory, Whitehead employs the metaphor of the ouroboros to refer to the genre's curative potential. Healing in the biostories is not depicted as linear and finite, because it would otherwise establish it as mere survival and ensconce it in the past. Instead, healing is visualized as an ongoing process, thus defying the linear process of healing in Western trauma paradigms.

In their seminal and timely article "What To Do When You're Raped," Wieskamp and Smith consider how challenging Western views of the linear temporality of trauma and the American linear temporality of trauma and its assumed traumatological timeline (2020, 80) are exhibitive of survivance. Moving away from the Freudian/ Caruthian models stresses the significance of enacting survivance in its reflection of "infinitive temporality," which allows past, present, and future to intermingle and "embraces the role of one's past to influence one's present and future" (2020, 81). Agin the Western traumatological timeline, survivance in the face of trauma understands

resistance as a persistent process that "presupposes surviving as a constant action" (Wieskamp and Smith 2000, 81). The biostories capture the non-linear and continuous process of healing, presenting itself as a narrative of survivance both formally and aesthetically. A remarkable example of this distinction is registered in *Carry*. Jensen addresses the difference between survival and survivance in *Carry*. While the subtitle of the biostory, "a memoir of survival on stolen land," says otherwise, Jensen implicitly categorizes her work as pertaining to survivance more than survival. In an interview with The South Carolina Review, Jensen maintains: "Survivance is a term coined by Ojibwe writer Gerald Vizenor. … But that word of Gerald's is one so many of us have picked up. I think [survivance] is different from survival because survival implies that it's in the past. It implies that you've gone through this process and you're done, and survivance implies the process, the continuation. It's ongoing. And I think survivance better describes the circumstance so many people are in right now" (The South Carolina Review 2020). Jensen's statement further couches her collection of essays in the vernacular of survivance and reinforces its reading as a biostory, not a simple memoir.

4.2 Sharing Story: Healing by Visiting Together

The biostories incorporate among their major cultural and political concerns a preoccupation with healing on Indigenous terms as a natural outcome of decolonization and working towards resurgence. Whitehead ingeminates the significance of the communal component in any attempt at healing through their writing, claiming that:

> It's sometimes through our *shared* pain that we find connectivity and political mobilization. If pain is a closed circuit that love forgot, then to unlatch its closed door is to make it *ouroboric: collaborative, communicative, and cyclical as we eat pain*. … [T]o *eat pain is really to share story*. Narration beautifies it, beatific, and its passing lightens our kin if we so choose to enact this form of community care—it's our role [knowing] how to dispose of it … ethically. (Welch 2022; emphasis in original)

Therefore, to "eat pain" is akin to sharing story. Whitehead wants it to be a site where the writer transcends the synecdochic nature of self—as authorized by Krupat—and indulges in a kind of writing that is therapeutic through sharing story. This is implicative of Reder's idea of sharing as responsibility. Indeed, she maintains that: "[t]o be the holder of one's story, is not, therefore, an act of individuation, but an impetus to community engagement as an expression of responsibility: "Including one's story is … to share and visit together" (2022, introduction). The same goes for trauma and pain. Sharing one's story is necessarily thought of in concert with

listening, which foregrounds the role of relationship and trust. In her biostory, Jensen implores her sister to "tell it to me, again,' I say. 'Tell the story to me again, I am listening" (2020, 37), whereas Harjo and Grover reprise this principle of responsibility as they highlight sharing and listening of story as a major premise of their biostories.

Sharing stories can take various forms, including life writing. When asked to reveal the conation behind wanting to write his work, Whitehead maintains: "[m]y penultimate goal in writing is for the *betterment* of my *communities*. … [To] bloodlet and cauterize simultaneously. … I hope in showcasing myself, my body, my history, and my joy, that I'm *making space and allowance for others* as well" (Welch 2022). Narrating the self is unmoored from the act of co-creation within a web of relations. Various moments in the biostories reiterate the principle of responsibility through sharing one's story. Elliott, for example, when mulling over the reasons that impelled her to write her self-representational accounts, she states the transformative experience of reading the work of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's collection of short stories:

> Then came *Islands of Decolonial Love*. Everything changed. Reading stories of Indigenous women who had good sex and bad boyfriends, who dealt with both underhanded and overt racism, who spoke their language and loved their families, gave me hope. … I felt there was space for me to breathe inside the claustrophobic world of Canadian literature. Reading Simpson's stories ultimately gave me permission to write my own. (2019, 31)

This revelatory testimony consolidates Whitehead's desire to "make space and allowance for others" (Welch 2022) and recognizes the role of Indigenous scholars in inciting other voices to emerge despite the bellicose nature of white publishers. It also estranges the premise that memoirs by Native American women are not entirely driven by the overdetermination of trauma as much as the identification of Native American women with beauty and survivance. Through the prism of *felt analysis*, they explore how their experience of trauma is emotionally and bodily felt and experienced. Sharing one's story, however, not only validates their experiences but also empowers them to speak their truths. Hearing stories of others is equally empowering in that it mends—even virtually—the severed relationships between members of the community to reclaim agency through their narratives. This has certainly had bearings on how Elliott chose to end her biostory. Indeed, the last essay entitled "Extraction Mentalities" comes in the form of a participatory essay where, by sharing her own violent and triggering memories, Elliott prompts the reader to follow in her footsteps. Filling in the "not so" blank spaces that, in her words, "speak volumes" (2019, 195), her biostory allows her to disclose deeply personal and visceral memories of abuse and its attending trauma, but also helps the reader to journal theirs.

Going beyond sharing these experiences, Elliott illuminates–but does not excuse–that her father was a survivor of his father, and how their behaviour was tactics to survive colonialism (2019, 203). Her ability to return to these events as an Indigenous woman creates a seemingly fragile but actually empowering conclusion to the book. Her healing journey starts with her sharing of her story but not just that. Her intimate chapters can be interpreted as a monologue for readers to begin their own healing journeys. In the same way Elliott's remembering of these events from the perspective of survivance, her prompts encourage readers to recall similar events so that they can navigate in a space that is at once inviting and safe. Elliott concludes "Extraction Mentalities" by carefully examining extraction and dehumanization, which are products of colonialism. Indigenous traditional resource extraction, she says, is "a cornerstone of capitalism, colonialism, and settler colonialism" (2019, 213). Here Elliott strongly connects the justification of colonialism with the dehumanisation of Indigenous peoples and compares this to the demonization of her father as an abusive man who is surviving colonialism (2019, 217).

In her attempt to transcend the rhetoric of victimry, Elliot's re-enactment of these memories of abuse is her way to pinpoint the root cause of his affliction, claiming that her father was a survivor of the transmission of violence engendered by colonialism and that their actions were reactionary to colonialism (2019, 203). By highlighting her ability to revisit these experiences as a Haudenosaunee woman, she impresses an inspiring denouement to her grief despite the devastating effects of her experience. I see this chapter as a monologue for readers to start their own recovery journeys, as part of her healing process. Her suggestions and questions urge readers to recollect comparable experiences and behaviors that they may traverse in a space that is simultaneously wonderfully transparent and anonymously safe, much as her own memory removed negative behaviors and occurrences. Pondering on her experience with attempting to enter Western literary circles and the vagaries of the publishing industry, Elliott, for example, unpacks the power dynamics responsible for the injustices women face in settler states as she recounts: "[t]he idea that the colonialism, racism and sexism that had systematically kept Indigenous women out of the literary community could somehow be leveraged to benefit me as an Indigenous woman through some half-assed literary affirmative action was absurd" (2019, 30). While acknowledging traumatic experiences by women as deeply embodied and felt in their biostories, the assertion of creativity through the rich imagery, evocative language, and layered symbolism constitutes a twist on the overdetermination of trauma.

Conclusion

American Indian women's personal narratives play a significant role in redefining Native presence through re-establishing their place in this tradition, controlling self-presentation, and defying the conventions of the genre by infusing it with Indigenous storytelling. Women's texts testify to their engagement in the act of an active sense of presence, or survivance. It is a testimony to their resistance to the hegemonic structures of language that held them captive in a distorted mode of being. "Reinventing" the very language that constructed and sustained the "simulations" becomes not only an act of literary creation, greater than that, it is transmotion through creation, where the authors are postindians who "outwit, reverse, and overturn the wiles of dominance, and they contradict the simulations of natives" (Vizenor 2009, 24) that is, the ironic simulations of victimry. Survivance, the union of active survival and resistance to cultural dominance, is an obvious spirit of native sovereignty" (Vizenor 2009, 24) that sets the process of decolonization in motion.

Back to *Making Love with the Land*, Whitehead recasts this metaphor as he likens his biostory to Washuta and Warburton's "exquisite vessels." In lieu of opting for the Western generic determinism of autobiography that he identifies as the embodiment of heteropatriarchy, Whitehead considers works by racialized writers as conceivably biostories because of their subversive nature in terms of form and themes. They are vessels that not only hold transgenerational knowledge through stories, but are essentially exquisite because of their form that does not adhere to the hegemony of Western "linguistic systems" and their aesthetics found in the orality of Indigenous storytelling.

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SURVIVAL IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD: RECONSTRUCTING SOCIETY IN STEPHEN KING'S *THE STAND*

Korinna Csetényi

Stephen King's *The Stand* has a curious publication history. The first edition appeared in 1978, but in 1990, a new, uncut version came out to the delight of the reading public. It restored close to 400 pages which had been cut from the original manuscript for financial reasons (to keep the retail price down). In a preface to the new edition, the author offers his readers insight into the complex world of book publishing and details the changes (most of them amplify the backstories of characters, but the story has also been moved to the year 1990, a decision which entailed the updating of several cultural references). I will be relying upon this expanded edition during the course of my analysis, which will focus primarily upon the novel's generic hybridity, its philosophical issues and its sad topicality in the wake of Covid-19's devastation all around the world.

The Curious Attraction of Horror

The name of Stephen King, the master of horror, rings familiar to most people. He has penned more than 60 books, including novels, short stories, novellas, a memoir (*On Writing*, 2000), and a nonfiction analysis of the horror genre (*Danse Macabre*, 1981). Countless film adaptations have been made from his works, many of them highly successful: Frank Darabont's *Shawshank Redemption* (1994) takes the pride of place as the highest ranking film on IMDb's 250 list (most people are unaware that it is based on a King novella, from the collection *Different Seasons*, 1982), Rob Reiner's *Stand by Me* (1986) is one of the most heart achingly beautiful coming-of-age films ever made (from a heavily autobiographical story entitled *The Body,* 1982), and Andy Muschietti's *It* (2017), based on the 1986 novel of the same title, is the highest-grossing horror film of all time in the U.S. (Lang, 2017). As proof of his continued popularity, it is enough to take a look at the latest film output: *The Institute* (2019) has just been turned into a TV series, a new version of *The Running Man* (1982) will hit movie theaters in November (the original was

made in 1987, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger), while the long-awaited adaptation of the dystopian novella *The Long Walk* (1979) will premiere in September (these two works were published under the pseudonym Richard Bachman). Interest in King is not diminishing, and hopefully these films will direct at least some of the audience to the source material or to check out his other books.

Horror writers and theoreticians are often defensive when questioned about their chosen genre, which is still frowned upon by the literary establishment. According to Douglas E. Winter, "horror fiction is a means of escape, sublimating the very real and often overpowering horrors of everyday life in favor of surreal, exotic and visionary realms" (1989, 3). However, he hastens to add that the truths to be found in this genre are "judged not by the real fulfillment of its promises, but by the relevance of its fantasies to those of the reader or viewer" (1989, 4). He attaches not just cathartic but also cognitive value to such fiction, claiming that they probe our "existential situation" and help readers understand themselves (1989, 6).

King concurs, adding that "the tale of horror and the supernatural *is* an escape, but the reader must never believe that it is only an escape outward, into a kind of never-never land …; the tale of terror and the supernatural is also an escape *inward*, toward the very center of our perceived humanity" (Winter 1982, 225). Such questions regarding our humanity, our place in the grand scheme of things, our social structures and our existential fears are also confronted in *The Stand*. However, before proceeding with the analysis proper, I would like to define the horror genre, whose boundaries are notoriously fuzzy[1], as it shares common features with such overlapping genres as science fiction, thriller or fantasy.

Linda J. Holland-Toll, in her book on community construction in contemporary horror fiction, lists three criteria a book should meet in order to qualify as belonging to this genre: the presence of extreme emotions (terror, horror, revulsion), some kind of a supernatural phenomenon (this could take the form of people with strange, uncanny abilities) and finally, the ability of the text to provoke a feeling of dis/ease in the reader (2001, 6). The term "dis/ease" is a neologism of Holland-Toll: it denotes a heightened level of discomfort and an all-pervading sense of unease generated by these texts (2001, 6). Even after having finished a book, a reader might be "haunted" by a lingering feeling of unease (2001, 10). This is especially the case when a book has an open ending (hence, no resolution) or does not reaffirm the status quo, thereby challenging our views regarding the world, society or people. This might disturb readers to such an extent that they cannot

[1] As I have noted elsewhere, in her comparative research into the genre of fantasy, Farah Mendlesohn utilizes a similar term when characterizing the various critical definitions surrounding the object of her study: she describes them as a "fuzzy set" (Cseténi 2021, 16; see Mendelsohn 2008, xiii).

disconnect themselves from the fictional world. Indeed, this is one of the primary functions of horror fiction: it confronts readers with unpleasant realities, unpalatable truths; it shows things from a different perspective, prompting people to question beliefs they have previously taken for granted (belief in the decency of man, in governments which place the welfare of their citizens above all, or in the idea that families will always protect their members).

As pointed out by director George Romero, the creator of the modern zombie films, "[h]orror is radical. It can take you into a completely new world, new place, and just rattle your cage and say, wait a minute – look at things differently. That shock of horror is what horror's all about", adding that what writers and filmmakers are trying to do is to "shock you into an alternative place" (Jones 1997, 245). Throughout her analysis, Holland-Toll carefully distinguishes affirmative texts from disaffirmative ones (2001, 20). In the previous category she places stories which end with a full resolution, with the monster/threat eliminated and order reestablished (these works could be described as conservative because of their thrust towards reaffirmation – the societal norms and order are upset only for a short period). Mid-spectrum texts are placed between the two extreme poles: here, the resolution is of a compromised nature, "victory is temporary" (2001, 21), and although the forces of darkness were defeated, they might erupt again (most of King's stories are placed in this class). At the other end of the spectrum, we find disaffirmative texts, where "nothing is positively reaffirmed" (2001, 21). These texts usually offer no closure, no assurance to the reader, who is placed in a discomfort zone.[2] The complexity of *The Stand* is also shown by the fact that scholars often differ in their final judgment regarding its message: while "generally considered an affirmative work" (2001, 214), Holland-Toll challenges this notion and places it among mid-spectrum dystopian horror fiction (2001, 199). While such texts do not offer unrelieved darkness and a pessimistic outlook, they still show the "impossibility of an affirmative dystopia" (2001, 199).

Generic Hybridity

The majority of King's output falls squarely within "the category of supernatural horror fiction, but he has also made forays into the genres of dystopia, science fiction, and mainstream literature" (Cseténi 2021, 85). There is a certain "generic indecisiveness" in connection with some of his

[2] Postmodern horror fiction often fits Holland-Toll's category of disaffirmative texts, as illustrated by the articles on solar eco-ustopia, apocalyptic vampire fantasy, and cannibal romance in HJEAS 2025/ 1 special issue on "Transformative Monstrosity in the Anthropocene." (Hódosy 2025, Limpár 2025, Kérchy 2025)

works, "an unwillingness or inability to be confined to singular generic categories" (Sears 2011, 5)[3]. Stephen J. Spignesi claims that

> Stephen King created his own hybrid of literary genres (the genre of "Stephen King") when he began writing, smoothly assimilating into one seamless (and occasionally indefinable) genre the trappings and characteristics of several narrative styles, including fantasy, horror, westerns, the coming-of-age tale, science fiction, crime fiction, epic poetry, the quest novel, and contemporary mainstream fiction. (1998, x)

This is clearly the case with *The Stand*, which has been variously labeled as either horror, science fiction, fantasy, dystopia or an epic quest novel (Beahm 1989, 409; Casebeer 1992, 47; Collings 1995, 206; Russell 1996, 64; Schweitzer 1988, 205; Spignesi 2001, 19). Following the narrow focus of King's previous novels (*Carrie,* 1974*, 'Salem's Lot,* 1975*, The Shining,* 1977 – either small town communities or a nuclear family in harrowing circumstances), *The Stand* employs a huge cast of characters and covers enormous territory. Tony Magistrale compares the shape of the narrative to a funnel, which gradually diminishes in its focus, concentrating in the end only on a handful of characters (2003, 190). In the novel, almost the entire human race is wiped out when a superflu is accidentally released from a secret military testing site, which is engaged in germ warfare research. For reasons unknown, 0,6 % of humanity is immune to this deadly disease, and the book details in a highly realistic way the struggles of the survivors in the aftermath of this cataclysm. The prologue depicts the sheer panic and frantic escape from the military base of an army security guard, who leaves the site taking his family along with him (unaware that he is already infected). In a way, he dooms the entire planet because he effectively thwarts the efforts of the army and the government to contain the disease. Since his flight is not discovered immediately, he is able to infect several people outside the military compound before succumbing to the virus together with his family. Due to its high communicability, the superflu (nicknamed Captain Trips) rapidly spreads through the entire country, a process King sardonically compares to chain letters, which notoriously do not work, remarking that "[t]his one, the Captain Trips chain letter, worked very well" (1991, 70).

Readers never learn the real aim of Project Blue. Since the researchers succeeded in developing a highly deadly strain of influenza, with a continually mutating base (thus making it impossible for the body to defend itself against it), a plausible conjecture would be that the powers that be wanted to increase

[3] One of the best examples of this hybridization of genres is his *Dark Tower* series (1982-2012), which combined horror with the Western, the action-adventure thriller, the epic quest, heroic saga, apocalyptic fantasy and the alternate universe with touches of the romance (Collings 1995, 234).

the military might of the U.S. When recounting the circumstances of the birth of *The Stand*, King first mentions the strained period the U.S. was experiencing back in those days:

> Its writing came during a troubled period for the world in general and America in particular; we were suffering from our first gas pains in history, we had just witnessed the sorry end of the Nixon administration and the first presidential resignation in history, we had been resoundingly defeated in Southeast Asia, and we were grappling with a host of domestic problems, from the troubling question of abortion-on-demand to an inflation rate that was beginning to spiral upward in a positively scary way. (King 1981, 400)

These problems shook the faith of people in the government and these anxieties made their way into the novel as well. At one point someone bitterly remarks that the authorities "solved the depressed economy, pollution, the oil shortage, and the cold war, all at a stroke. Yeah, they put things in order, all right. They solved everything the same way Alexander solved the Gordian knot—by cutting it in two with his sword" (King 1991, 243). Most of the problems of the world seemed to have been resolved with the decimation of the superflu (albeit a bit radically). However, King is quick to add that "[m]y own lesson in writing *The Stand* was that cutting the Gordian Knot simply destroys the riddle instead of solving it, and the book's last line is an admission that the riddle still remains" (1981, 403).

As for specific inspiration, King recounts a news story about "an accidental CBW [chemical biological warfare] spill in Utah. All the bad nasty bugs got out of their cannister and killed a bunch of sheep" (1981, 398). However, real tragedy was averted only by fluke: had the direction of the wind been different, "the good people of Salt Lake City might have gotten a very nasty surprise" (1981, 398). Lethal biochemical agents are a reality, not fiction, and this is part of the reason why the first part of the novel is usually categorized as belonging to the genre of sci-fi, since it presents in a highly realistic way the consequences of a deadly accident. That King is wary of technology (especially when it is joined with the military and governmental bureaucracies in an "unholy tryst" [Magistrale 2003, 171]) can be seen in several of his works, which could be best described as belonging to the genre of techno-horror. In these stories, he "maps the relationship of humans and machines, exploring the dire consequences of irresponsible tampering with science" (Cseténi 2021, 99) and voices his fear that "[o]ur technology has outraced our morality" (Winter 1990, 308). Sometimes this takes the form of actual machines turning against their makers: for example, in the short story "Trucks" (1978), a small group of people, stuck in a diner, is besieged by enormous flat-beds and eighteen-wheelers, which mysteriously acquire mass consciousness and attack people, forcing them in the end to serve them at

gas stations, thus effectively reversing the previous master-servant power dynamics.

However, for the purposes of the present discussion, King's other preferred scenario is more relevant: the portrayal of the unforeseen consequences of irresponsible, careless experimentation. The figure of the mad scientist and the notion of forbidden knowledge have been the staples of Gothic literature almost from the beginning; it is enough to recall Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), rightly considered the urtext of such fiction. Technological skill without moral responsibility is the crux of the matter, and while Victor Frankenstein might be said to entertain lofty ambitions, wishing to promote the welfare of mankind (after all, originally he wants to "banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death" [Shelley 1994, 39]), contemporary scientists seem to pursue more selfish goals, often motivated by materialistic concerns. The researchers working at Project Blue in *The Stand* are not trying to find the cure for an incurable disease, or to expand humanity's knowledge of the universe (Russell 1996, 74) (also a dangerous enterprise since they might stumble upon something which had better be left alone – a favorite scenario of weird fiction writer H. P. Lovecraft). As I have already alluded to it, while it is never made explicit, the strengthening of the military powers of the U.S. might be the reason behind the research. In an ironic reflection upon the futility of such endeavors, the commanding officer of Project Blue discovers a corpse inside the research facility with the following sign tied around his neck: "NOW YOU KNOW IT WORKS, the sign said. ANY QUESTIONS?" (King 1991, 170).

In addition to the secrecy surrounding the research, another problematic aspect tied to it is accountability. Once the accident happens and the authorities fail to contain the disease, desperate measures are implemented. Denial is the first tactic employed during the massive cover-up. News presenters are sometimes forced at gunpoint to read falsities to people, claiming there is no reason to panic and a vaccine will soon be available. People need reassurances; they crave order and stability and they look up to trusted institutions and power structures to provide these.

In an early chapter, readers are introduced to twenty-one-year-old Frannie Goldsmith, who becomes one of the central characters. In her hometown, Ogunquit, Maine, she is the only survivor along with Harold Lauder, the brother of one of her friends, 5 years her junior. Frannie is in an extremely vulnerable position since she has just discovered that she is pregnant. In an indirect way, King already here hints at the possible danger inherent in a blind trust in technology, how easily it can betray us. When the soon-to-be-dead young father questions Frannie how she could be pregnant, she answers "[w]ell, what I figure is one, somebody in the quality control department of the jolly old Ovril factory was asleep at the switch when my batch of pills

went by on the conveyor belt, or […] I forgot to take a pill and have since forgotten that I forgot" (King 1991, 16). Although she is already suffering through the consequences of a possible technological slip-up, she is naïve enough to continue to put her trust in the authorities. In the middle of the epidemic, she voices her belief that "[s]omeone will come […] somebody in authority" who will "put things back in order" (1991, 243). It is Harold, the unpopular, unattractive, but very bright boy who confronts her with the unpleasant reality: "it was the people in authority who *did* this" (1991, 243). This is such a major foul-up that the government won't admit any part in it. Some doctors suspect the truth that "[s]omebody made a mistake […] and they're trying to cover it up" (1991, 143), but if anyone contradicts the official narrative, they are radically silenced (in a gruesome episode, a radio host is executed by soldiers during his live broadcast in which he is taking calls from his listeners, who reveal that there is no vaccine in the making and bodies are "being removed from […] hospitals by the truckload [1991, 208]). Following a completely crazy masterplan, the powers that be decide to spread the disease all over the world, thus making it sure the U.S. cannot be blamed: "it is imperative—*imperative*—that the other side never sees this as an artificial situation created in America" (1991, 166). Agents, unaware of their deadly mission, carry vials to China and the U.S.S.R., for example, to infect those countries.

During the early phase of the outbreak, the people who first came into contact with the superflu (infected by the soldier on the run) are forcibly removed from their homes and taken to Atlanta's Center for Disease Control. They die one by one except for one of them, the stoic, level-headed Stu Redman, who becomes one of the unlikely heroes of the novel. When he demands answers and wants to know who is to blame for this horrible tragedy, he is simply told: "Nobody. […] On this one the responsibility spreads in so many directions that it's invisible. It was an accident. It could have happened in any number of other ways" (King 1991, 104). The tests do not reveal the cause of Stu's immunity, and in the face of this failure, instead of taking extra care of this rare specimen (a healthy human amid the ravaging plague), the authorities send a hitman to execute Stu. He escapes from the facility and once outside the laboratory-turned-tomb, he starts journeying towards a place he dreamt about. All the survivors have been receiving subliminal messages in their dreams: they are either summoned by a faceless dark man to Las Vegas, or by a very old Black woman living in a shack surrounded by cornfields to Nebraska.

Before following these straggling survivors, who are on their respective journeys from all over the U.S., meeting one another, forming bands, drawn to two different destinations, King inserts a brief chapter to trace the course of the so-called second epidemic, which kills 16 % of the survivors (these people die "naturally", falling victims to the radically changed circumstances

of the new world: they die of heart attacks, fractured skulls, drug overdose or bizarre incidents like being accidentally shut in a walk-in meat freezer). This interlude serves the purpose of enhancing verisimilitude, tying the novel's plot to reality since all the incidents described are within the realm of possibility.

Since prophetic dreams are the means through which the survivors are called, this part of the novel leaves behind its sci-fi premise and veers in the direction of fantasy. The mysterious dark man who calls people to Las Vegas is called Randall Flagg, and under different guises he has already been around humanity. He witnessed civic unrest, protests, went to school with a notorious serial killer, met Lee Harvey Oswald, was associated with the Klan, fomented chaos and whispered evil plans to susceptible individuals (regarding the kidnapping of a rich heiress, for example).[4] Within a religious framework, he is clearly seen as an agent of Satan, a demonic entity wearing "the face of a devil" (King 1991, 354), who establishes a reign based on fear and tight control in Las Vegas. In a heavy-handed parallel with the temptation of Christ in the desert, Flagg offers all kinds of wordly riches to a deaf-mute youngster, Nick Andros: "*Everything you see will be yours if you fall down on your knees and worship me*" (1991, 360). Nick successfully resists, but many succumb to Flagg's powers of seduction. His dictatorial empire, where he strives to re-create the comforts of the old world (electricity, technology), tolerates no deviance, and drug addicts, for example, are crucified upon being discovered. Flagg can "do magic" (1991, 176), can levitate and command certain animals (ravens, weasels and wolves). It is implied he is a shapechanger, which is also reflected in his assumption of various names (Richard Fry, Ramsey Forrest, Robert Franq), and Joseph Reino further adds that in this respect Flagg even mirrors the devastating nature of the superflu (1988, 58): "Captain Tripps was a shifting-antigen flu […] the flu *itself* changed every time your body came to a defense posture" (King 1991, 1122). Curiously enough, Flagg does not seem to have a deep awareness of himself or of his origins, "[h]e doesn't know himself" (1991, 806). He is more like an idea incarnate, an instigator, bringing out the worst impulses in people.

Religious allusions are more pronounced in the opposing camp: the spiritual leader of this faction is Mother Abagail, an 108-year-old Black woman, living isolatedly among bucolic surroundings. In their dreams, the survivors see her calling them to visit her. Mother Abagail believes that "God had brought down a harsh judgment on the human race" (King 1991, 467) and she draws a parallel with Noah's story. She is reluctant to take her place in the center of the upcoming conflict but, remembering what happened to Jonah, she knows well she cannot escape God's calling: "And if God says to

[4] This allusion is not accidental since before embarking upon the writing of *The Stand*, King was trying to write a fictionalized account of the Patty Hearts abduction (King 1981, 397).

Abby, *You got to tell*, then tell I must" (1991, 502). She functions as some kind of a conduit between God and people: she is a messenger, a prophet, who receives "instructions" from above, which she relays to her people. She directs the survivors to Boulder, Colorado, where they settle and set out to organize the Boulder Free Zone: "This small-town society was like no other in American pre-plague society […] Whole groups of people were living together in small subcommunities like communes. […] Boulder itself was a cloned society, a *tabula* so *rasa* that it could not sense its own novel beauty" (1991, 671).

However, in the midst of this new Eden, where humanity is given a second chance to learn from their mistakes and leave behind "the mind-forged manacles of the past" (Holland-Toll 2001, 199), discontent is breeding within Harold Lauder, hopelessly in love with Frannie, who became the partner of Stu during their journey to Mother Abagail. Although Harold could have a fresh start in this "not-so-brave new world" (King 1991, 534) where people do not know about his past humiliations and grievances, he could "*accept what was*" (672) and "could turn himself into a new person" (671), he consciously chooses to reject this opportunity. He is convinced that "[t]o seize it would have been to murder himself" (672), it would have meant forgetting his painful past, his "murdered dreams and ambitions" (672), so instead he nurtures hatred in his heart, directed primarily against Stu, who had "stolen his woman" (671). He keeps a journal, where he vents all his evil thoughts, his "rage and fear and frustration" (725), all the while planning on betraying the Boulder Free Zone and defecting to the other side, intent on destroying this community. As pointed out by Bernadette Lynn Bosky, "murdering his old self is precisely what he should do. Harold will not himself realise that his rejection of hope and change also murders his new, better self before it is born" (1988, 241). With the character of Harold, King illustrates one of the focal points of his narrative: the question of free will (Bosky 1988, 239; Cassuto 2006, 70; Magistrale 2006, 109; Strengell 2005, 202).

Inside/Outside Evil

A recurring theme of Gothic and horror fiction is the thorny question of the origins of evil acts. Rosemary Jackson, in her study on fantastic literature, carefully distinguishes between two categories. In the first case, the source of the threat is located within the self, "[d]anger is seen to originate from the subject, through excessive knowledge, or rationality, or the mis-application of the human will" (Frankenstein and Dr Moreau are cited as primary examples), while in the second case "fear originates in a source external to the subject" (vampire victims or zombies are listed here) (Jackson 1981, 58). The same year Jackson's monograph came out, Stephen King published *Danse Macabre*, where he put forward almost the same theory: horror either

results from "an act of free and conscious will—a conscious decision to do evil" or it is "predestinate, coming from outside like a stroke of lightning" (1981, 62). He admits that outside evil has its undeniable grandeur, which he illustrates with the awe-inspiring (in their dreadful implications) stories of Lovecraft (1981, 63). Writers drawn towards the complexity of the human psyche, its repressed desires, dark and secret wishes, usually choose to write about inside evil, which gives them the chance to examine the question of free will and responsibility. This is what King concentrates on through the character of Harold.

On several occasions in the novel, Harold could stop himself from committing acts which take him in the direction of evil. For example, while on the road towards Mother Abagail, he steals Frannie's diary. He has a clear moment when his conscience cries out in protest, begging him to stop, but he ignores the voice of sanity and invades her privacy. To complicate the matter further, the omniscient narrator adds that "maybe it was already too late" (King 1991, 561), conjuring up the idea of the futility of resistance, as if Harold's moral decline was already irreversible at that point. After having read the diary, Harold has a prophetic dream in which he sees himself dying alone, out in the desert, with buzzards circling above him. In fact, this is his future, since after Harold has served his purpose (furthering Flagg's plans by detonating a bomb during a meeting, killing several people), Flagg mercilessly discards him, causing him to have a motorcycle accident on his way to Las Vegas. Commenting upon the dying boy, Magistrale compares the broken bones in Harold's body to the fragmented pieces of his self (2003, 195), which could not attain that level of maturity which would have paved the way to a new existence. Although Harold is clearly presented as an antagonist, readers might pity him and feel sorry for his wasted potential, which is hinted at on several occasions: Stu remarks that Harold has "the makings of a fine man somewhere inside him" (King 1991, 557), and Larry Underwood, whose band of survivors was following the signs and directions left behind by Harold to reach their destination, is clearly in awe of Harold's resourcefulness and intelligence.

As a counterpoint to Harold's tragedy, King presents the story of Larry Underwood, who proves that choice always remains within the grasp of the individual and it is never too late to mend one's ways.

Free Will

Due to the huge cast of characters, it is difficult to decide who the hero of the novel is. Traditionally, Stu Redman is cast in that role, partly because he is the sole survivor among the major male characters. He embodies the "classic western hero type" (Wiater 2001, 82), the silent, strong, independent man with a highly developed sense of justice and morals. However, he is a

static, non-developing character; he is just as good when we meet him in chapter 1 as in the final scene of the book. I argue that Larry Underwood is a more interesting character and he might easily be considered the true hero of the book.

Larry, a rock musician in his mid-twenties, has just made his breakthrough with a hit song in the beginning of the novel. He does not really know how to deal with this new way of life and amid his wild partying, while also being taken advantage of by false friends, he amasses such a huge debt that in the end he flees from L.A. to his native New York to stay at his mother's for a while. When the epidemic hits, he has to find his bearings among radically changed circumstances in an almost deserted metropolis. Initially, he is portrayed as a selfish, self-absorbed person, a "taker" (King 1991, 88) with a "hard streak" (42) in him, which always guaranteed his self-saving, even if it meant betraying other people, leaving them "to sink or swim on their own" (49). However, his mother "thought that there was good in Larry, great good. It was there, but this late on it would take nothing short of a catastrophe to bring it out" (49). And this is exactly what happens.

He meets a middle-aged woman, Rita Blakemoor, and although clearly seeing her as "a real pain in the butt" (King 1991, 299) in her desperate clinging to him, he starts to feel responsible for her. They have a fight just as they are about to leave Manhattan, so Larry enters the Lincoln tunnel alone. The crossing proves to be a turning point in his life. The tunnel is full of the corpses and stalled cars of the people who were desperately trying to leave the dying city, and Larry is terrorized as he is groping forward in pitch black: "The solid darkness provided the perfect theater screen on which the mind could play out its fantasies" (307). He is unnerved by the piled up bodies which he literally has to step on in order to proceed. Then he hears faltering footsteps from behind and in his irrational panic he starts to fire at random with the rifle he is carrying. It turns out that Rita followed him into the tunnel, and his old self resurfaces for a fleeting moment, thinking "why burden himself with her again?" (309), before turning back to help her. She clutches "his neck with a strangler's force" (309) and together they navigate their way out of the tunnel. When they leave the dark place, he mutters to himself "I'm not such a bad guy" (312), in clear reference to a heated exchange in an early chapter, when he was told "[y]ou ain't no nice guy" (82) by a young woman whom he left in the morning following their one-night stand.

In his analysis of the Lincoln tunnel episode, Winter cites the archetypal myth of the night journey, which he defines as a "solitary passage through darkness involving profound spiritual change in the voyager" (1989, 97). It is also a kind of rite of passage, upon the completion of which a new personality is born, or a new stage of being is attained. During the night journey, a person confronts his/her psyche, examining core motivations unflinchingly. Larry overcomes his ingrained selfish habits and a new chapter opens in his life.

Later on, he tends to refer to selfish impulses or ugly behavior as belonging to the "old Larry", clearly wishing to distance himself from that self ("here stood Larry, same old Larry, never a good word for anyone" [King 1991, 677]).

Returning to help another human being was an altruistic act on his part, a deliberate assumption of responsibility (Rita is clearly at a loss how to survive in the post-pandemic world). In a highly symbolic scene, they emerge into the light at the end of the tunnel, having lived through its terrors. Winter also interprets the tunnel as separating the death-filled past (the teeming city turned into a mass grave) from the "uncertain future" (1989, 97) where Larry will find that great good his mother believed he had in himself.

The character of Larry is built in a convincing way; he does have his weak moments, but he strives to become a better person throughout the narrative. "*I think I've changed. Somehow*" (King 1991, 435), he remarks at one point and he seems almost surprised by it. His detachment from his past self is also signaled by the fact that when he hears his hit song, instead of being proud, he feels almost embarrassed (at one point he even denies his authorship when someone asks him about the song: "What was that guy's name? The guy that did it?" "I can't remember." [1991, 866]). Unfortunately, Rita does not find the strength of character needed in this new world and one night while they are still on the road, she overdoses on her sleeping pills, which in Larry's estimation was "seventy percent accident and thirty percent suicide" (1991, 452). He is badly shaken (especially when he realizes that he spent the night with a corpse, as they were sharing a double sleeping bag) and he flees the scene in panic, unable to face her motionless body. His failure to behave decently and give her a proper burial haunts him later on and prompts him to try to do right by everyone. He meets a woman, Nadine Cross, traveling with a young, savage boy, Joe, and Larry succeeds in winning his trust and has a huge role in the slow emergence of the boy from his traumatized state. Once they settle in Boulder, after a while Joe chooses to move in with Larry and his woman, Lucy, and Larry realizes that he is "*falling in love*" (1991, 674) with the boy, becoming a role model and a father figure for him.

Then Larry's strength of character and morality are put to the test when Nadine tries to seduce him. While he does feel immense attraction towards this mysterious woman, he rejects her: "He reached up, and later he never knew how he was able to do that […] but somehow he reached up and unlocked her hands and pushed her away" (King 1991, 759). He knows that in his new life he belongs to Lucy and he equates giving in to temptation with "Old Larry triumphant" (758). He once again proves that humans have a say in the shaping of their lives, and he chooses wisely.

The Final Conflict

While the Boulder Free Zone is busy organizing the return to normality (burying the dead, turning on the power plant), even setting up a committee to act as some kind of a ruling body (with Nick, Stu, Larry and Frannie serving on it among others), Mother Abagail summons its members to her deathbed and passes on a message which sets the tone for the final section of the work, resembling an epic quest in the manner of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (explicitly referenced several times). She tells them in no uncertain terms that "God didn't bring you folks together to make a committee or a community" (King 1991, 902) but to send them "on a quest" (902) to confront the Dark Man. Four men are selected (Larry and Stu among them) and sent to Las Vegas to make their stand against the powers of darkness. They are to travel on foot, carrying nothing. The trek across the country (771 miles), while physically taxing, has a spiritually cleansing effect. The men are compared to prophets wandering in the wilderness and to Native Americans, whose manhood rite often involved having "visions" after spending time in the wild, where they "weren't supposed to eat" (1028). They are described as powerful batteries which, once freed from material and earthly concerns, are able to function at a more heightened level. Although their chances of survival are slim, they accept their appointed task, at peace with the idea that what they are doing is for the greater good (eliminating the threat to their beloved community). The matter of free will is repeatedly emphasized when Larry explicitly asks Mother Abagail if they have a choice and she replies: "There's always a choice. That's God's way, always will be. Your will is still free. Do as you will" (905).

Stu breaks his leg during the journey, so he is left behind, but the others reach their destination where they finally make their stand. After being captured, Flagg plans on executing them publicly, but it all goes awry when one of his loyal followers, a deranged man called Trashcan, a pyromaniac obsessed with explosives, returns from the desert from his latest treasure hunt, bringing back an atomic warhead (after all, "[m]ost of western Nevada and eastern California was owned by the good old U.S.A." and was used as a testing ground for "their toys" [King 1991, 935]). An electric spark, a "blue ball of fire" (1067), conjured up by Flagg to kill a man who dared to speak up in defense of the Boulder captives, still hovers in the air, and in a slightly contrived deus ex machina maneuver, it descends upon Trashcan's surprise gift, and "the righteous and unrighteous alike were consumed in that holy fire" (1072).

Fire often acts as a cleansing agent in horror fiction, and King finished all his previous narratives (*Carrie*, *'Salem's Lot*, *The Shining*) in flames. However, the case of *The Stand* is more complicated, maybe because the technophobic subtext is never far from the surface. Although the last section shows

affinities with the epic quest tradition, it still keeps its anti-technological slant and the evil power destroying Las Vegas is not tied directly to the demonic figure of Flagg, but to technology and the dangers inherent in a misapplication of science, which started the whole story. In fact, the prologue is entitled "The Circle Opens" (the chapter describing the flight of the army security guard from the testing site), while the epilogue is called "The Circle Closes" to underline the cyclical nature of human affairs. The closing image is that of the wheel, which, in the end, always comes "round to the same place again" (King, 1991, 1141).

Following the destruction of Las Vegas, only Stu returns to Boulder to be reunited with his beloved Frannie, who gives birth to the first healthy baby of the post-pandemic world. The population of Boulder in the meantime has dramatically increased with constant floods of immigrants, comprising nearly nineteen thousand people by now. Both Fran and Stu feel uneasy because of the crowded nature of the city with its too many strangers and unfamiliar faces. When deputy marshals are given the right to bear arms, Stu wonders: "What happens after you give guns to deputies? […] What's the logical progression? […] You give them bigger guns" (King 1991, 1134). Eventually, he and Frannie decide to leave Boulder to return to her native Maine. While this ending has a slightly Edenic flavor to it (Winter 1982, 201; Casebeer 1992, 54), the first couple has misgivings about the future of humanity. Stu believes it was "organization that always seemed to cause the problem" (1134) and thinks Boulder should disband since scattered groups of people would be less inclined to return to the old ways of the world. Confirming once more King's technological fears, Stu remarks that "*[t]hese toys are dangerous*" (1135) and he asks Frannie whether people ever learn anything. However, she can only reply: "I don't know" (1135).

This far from affirmative closure is further undermined when, in the epilogue, it turns out that Flagg miraculously survived the explosion. Although apparently in a state of amnesia, he wakes up on a beautiful tropical island, surrounded by a group of primitive, simple folk, who soon drop on their knees in front of him. He tells them he has come to teach them "how to be civilized" (King 1991, 1141) and the closing image of the novel confirms Holland-Toll's belief that *The Stand* is a mid-spectrum horror text: evil forces might indeed be defeated, but only temporarily, and they are bound to return.

King is a conservative romantic at heart, who claims that while the starting premise of the novel was that "the human race carries a kind of germ with it" (1981, 402), literally visualized in the superflu, the "book also tries to celebrate brighter aspects of our lives: simple human courage, friendship, and love in a world which so often seems mostly loveless. Despite its apocalyptic theme, *The Stand* is mostly a hopeful book" (403). It is a testament to the rich complexity of the work that it can sustain even contradictory readings, but

the fact that Randal Flagg returns in various guises to foment trouble in later novels (in *The Eyes of the Dragon*, 1984, and the *Dark Tower* series) reveals more about the precarious nature of balance and order than King might wish to admit.

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ARAB AMERICAN LITERARY PRODUCTION: BETWEEN MIGRATION AND ORIENTALISM

Aya Chelloul

Introduction

Arab American literature emerges as a vibrant yet complex field that addresses the intersections of identity, culture, and resistance against stereotypes. Rooted in the dual experience of being Arab and American, this type of literature confronts centuries of Orientalist portrayals that have defined the Arab world through simplistic and often damaging tropes. These depictions of veiled women, harems, and hypermasculine men—laden with overtones of sensuality, despotism, and exoticism—have served to define the Arab world as "the other," juxtaposed against the West's self-image of modernity and rationality. These stereotypes are not mere relics of history; they continue to influence popular culture, literature, and public perception. The enduring power of these narratives lies in their ability to shape knowledge and attitudes, creating a mythical "Orient" that obscures reality and perpetuates cultural misunderstandings. Arab American literature seeks to dismantle these misconceptions, offering nuanced portrayals that emphasize the humanity, diversity, and struggles of Arab Americans.

This essay explores the evolution of Arab American literature by focusing on key historical moments and authors who have shaped the genre. By charting Orientalist texts that have emerged early in the nineteenth century in the United States, to the contemporary twentieth century Arab American voices such as that of Joseph Geha, it aims to juxtapose the rich tapestry of experiences to undo persistent stereotypes. The essay also examines the impact of Orientalism, the progression of Arab American literary production across immigration waves, and the thematic concerns that define the genre. Through this analysis, the essay underscores the critical role Arab American literature plays in fostering cultural understanding and challenging monolithic narratives, especially through a focus on Joseph Geha's short stories representing hybrid Arab American identities.

Setting the Record Straight: Orientalist Tropes in US Culture, Latent and Manifest

The representation of Arabs and the Arab-Muslim world in US culture has long been mediated through Orientalist tropes. These tropes are mostly steeped in stereotypes, portraying the Arab world as a land of sensuality, despotism, and timelessness. Veils, harems, belly-dancers, and hypermasculine men dominate these portrayals, offering a reductive and often misleading lens through which Arab societies are understood. Orientalism generally constructs the East as an exotic, backward, and inferior counterpart to the rational and superior West, so these representations serve political and cultural purposes, legitimizing Western imperialism and reinforcing domestic values by contrasting them against an imagined "other." For instance, veiled women are often used as symbols of oppression, contrasting with Western notions of liberty and equality, while despotic rulers embody chaos and a lack of progress. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, however, is instrumental in understanding these depictions.

In *Orientalism* (1978), Said argues that orientalist discourse has double articulation. He makes the distinction between latent and manifest orientalism when examining the generated knowledge on what the West understands as the "Orient." Manifest orientalism refers to the explicit, tangible representations of the Orient in Western discourse. Unlike latent Orientalism, which is composed of unconscious biases and stable dogmas about the East, manifest Orientalism manifests through concrete expressions—such as literature, art, policy, and public discourse—depicting the Orient in ways that reinforce stereotypes. This distinction is crucial because manifest Orientalism serves as the visible and communicable framework through which the West constructs its understanding of the East. Manifest Orientalism is shaped by key characteristics such as frequently portraying the Orient as backward, exotic, and fundamentally different from the West. These depictions often emphasize elements like veils, harems, belly-dancing, and despotic rulers. For instance, the representation of the harem as a site of male domination and female subjugation exemplifies how Orientalist narratives used gender to underscore the supposed inferiority of Eastern societies. As Said notes, these portrayals not only reflect but actively construct knowledge about the Orient to fit Western preconceptions (Said 1978, 2).

Orientalism also operates using fixed stereotypes, presenting the Orient as a monolithic entity. Although Said argues that American orientalism emerged after WWII, there exists ample evidence to the contrary. As William Tolbert notes (2021), the scholarship on American orientalism has created a distinction between the US and Europe when it comes to the discourse it generates about the Orient, creating a direct link between the discursive

constructions of the Orient and imperialism. However, he demonstrates that the US was an active participant in generating knowledge about the Orient through the works of the members of the American Oriental Society, most of whom were theologians, missionaries, ministers, diplomats, explorers, leaders of naval expeditions and renowned scholars, arguing that "from 1842 to the close of the century, members of the AOS [American Orientalist Society] were connected in various ways to virtually every aspect of U.S. foreign policy" (34). Members like John Pickering, Edward Everett, and Alexander Cotheal, to a name a few, are associated with political, academic and transnational societies creating a substantial, tight-knit network that mixes commerce, politics, and academic fields like ethnography, linguistics, and natural sciences together. Early works include Samuel George Morton's *Crania AEgyptica (1844),* and William Lynch's *Narrative of the U.S. Expedition to the River Jordan and the Dead Sea* (1849) which interlink themes of science, discovery, and economic expansion. Most notably, the works of prominent literary scholars stand out as the major actors that introduced the image of the Orient in US popular culture.

Furthermore, early American works like *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* (1787) and *Slaves in Algiers* (1794) reinforced the idea of Arabs as despots and pirates, contrasting these figures with American ideals of liberty and progress. The repetition of such images entrenches them as "truths" in public consciousness. Nevertheless, a central feature of manifest Orientalism is its reliance on binary oppositions to define the East in relation to the West. These binaries which include civility/barbarity, rationality/irrationality, modernity/tradition, frame the Orient as the antithesis of Western progress. This framework can be seen in the narratives surrounding events like the 1893 Chicago World Fair, where Middle Eastern exhibits were used to emphasize Western industrial and racial superiority (Buel 1894, 27). Manifest Orientalism is thus perpetuated through literature and media that emphasize exoticism and danger. Stories of veiled women trapped in harems, romanticized by Western male authors, or the depiction of Arab men as violent and hypersexual strengthen the idea of an East that is both alluring and threatening. These narratives served as tools to justify US expansionism, economic dominance, and later, colonialism. In this context, thus, early American texts borrowed heavily from European Orientalist traditions to depict the East. For example, Peter Markoe's above-mentioned novel, *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* (1787) frames its story around a pseudo-foreign observer who critiques American society while simultaneously reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes. Similarly, Susanna Haswell Rowson's play *Slaves in Algiers* (1794) uses the context of Barbary piracy to contrast American liberty with Arab, precisely North African, despotism. Both texts contribute to the construction of a "barbaric" East in opposition to the civilized West.

The Barbary Wars (1801–1805, 1815) provided fertile ground for manifest Orientalism in American political rhetoric and culture. According to Marwan Obeidat, the conflict between the United States and the Barbary states (modern-day North African countries) was framed as a struggle between freedom and tyranny (1998, 24). Writings like Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* (1797) used captivity narrative as a means to highlight the moral and cultural superiority of America, while painting the Barbary states as lawless and savage. Additionally, the 1893 Chicago World Fair presented the Orient as an object of fascination and otherness. Exhibits such as the "Cairo Street" were designed to evoke the allure of the exotic while underscoring Western industrial, racial, and cultural superiority (Buel 1894, 43). These exhibits served to codify Orientalist ideas in the public imagination, presenting the East as timeless and unchanging. The ideology underlying the Fair revolves around a narrative of progress, which predates contemporary globalization and is rooted in late 19th-century ideas of expansionism and industrialization. These themes reemerged with the rise of mass consumerism and early imperialism and have become the groundwork for the emergence of modern imperialism and multinational capitalism. According to Amira Jarmakani, the 1893 Fair can be understood as a "galaxy of symbols," which functions as a rich site through which to explore U.S. manifestations of orientalist logic, and from which to trace French influences on the articulation of U.S. orientalism (2008, 28).

In the contemporary era, especially after the events of 9/11, manifest Orientalism resurged intensely in the media and in the political rhetoric. Images of Arab men as terrorists and Muslim women as oppressed became dominant tropes in news coverage, film, and policy debates. These depictions reiterated the binary of a civilized, democratic West versus a violent, authoritarian East, perpetuating stereotypes with significant political and social consequences (Salaita 2007, 34).

The purpose of manifest Orientalism was, originally, to create a visible and intelligible framework for Western audiences to understand the East. Through the maintenance of stereotypes and binaries, manifest Orientalism legitimizes political and cultural dominance over the Orient, the invasion of Iraq is a case in point. It keeps alive existing power structures while creating more legitimacy for their continuation, providing ideological justification for neo-colonial endeavors. By framing the East as backward and in need of Western intervention, colonial powers could claim a moral imperative to dominate and "civilize" these regions. Orientalist representations thus have shaped Western foreign policies, particularly in the Middle East. The persistent portrayal of the Arab world as volatile and threatening has underpinned military interventions and economic exploitation (Said 1997, 321). The imagery articulated through manifest Orientalism continues to shape public attitudes toward Arab and Muslim communities. These

representations contribute to Islamophobia and xenophobia, fostering an environment of suspicion, discrimination, and sometimes, violence.

While Edward Said's critique of Orientalism has brought significant awareness to these issues, manifest Orientalism remains pervasive. In Hollywood films, television shows, and political discourse, the stereotypical portrayal of Arabs and Muslims persists. Arab American literature serves as a counterpoint to manifest Orientalism, offering nuanced and humanized depictions of Arab and Muslim identities. Writers like Joseph Geha, Mohja Kahf, and Diana Abu-Jaber challenge these stereotypes by presenting complex characters and narratives that reflect the diversity of Arab American experiences.

Edward Said's distinction between latent and manifest Orientalism explains how these stereotypes persist. So, on the one hand, manifest Orientalism refers to explicit iterations of stereotypical representations, such as literary depictions of harems or despots who stand as the antithesis of the established ideals of the white, Western Christian society that the U.S. understands itself to be. Latent Orientalism, on the other hand, represents the underlying assumptions and dogmas about the East that shape these depictions. These include notions of the Orient's backwardness, racial inferiority, and feminized passivity. As Said argues, these concealed assumptions and ideas are stable and durable, forming the foundational biases through which the Orient is perceived. Central to this perspective is the notion of the Orient's inherent separateness from the Occident, a mirror image that is geographically and culturally outside of it. On that account, the Orient is given an eccentric quality that accentuates backwardness and arrested development, traits essentially justified through biological theories of racial hierarchies. Pseudoscientific ideas like cultural Darwinism were historically used to validate these hierarchies, as they are seen in the aforementioned *Crania AEgyptica* (1844) and Robert Knox's *The Dark Races of Man* (1850), in which he argues that Arabs inherently lack the capacity for improvement, attributing this unfounded incapacity to race to recast cultural diversity and difference into natural, unchanging paradigms. Such hierarchies framed the Orient as "uncivilized", legitimizing colonialism and territorial annexation by so-called superior powers.

This latent perspective of biological essentialism thus shapes the way the Orient is perceived. It is seen as a passive and silent entity, marked by "feminine penetrability" and "supine malleability", requiring Western intervention for its "redemption" and reconstruction (Said 1978, 206). These perceptions reflect a male-centered worldview, in which the Orient is construed as a domain controlled by figures like the "tyrant oriental patriarch." Simultaneously, this worldview granted the West an enunciative authority, enabling it to make meaningful statements about the Orient while

constructing a closed, repetitive system of knowledge embedded in Western culture.

Specs of Sand in the Wild West: Waves of Arab American Literary Production

Within these cultural parameters, Arab American literature has evolved through distinct waves, each shaped by historical and cultural contexts. The first wave (1880–1924) coincides with the immigration of Christian Arabs from the Levant, particularly from the region of the Greater Syria which includes both Syrians and the Lebanese. Writers like Khalil Gibran and Mikhail Naimy emerged during this period, blending Arabic and American literary traditions to address themes of identity, cultural hybridity, and East-West relations within their anglophone writings. The second wave (post-World War II) is marked by the arrival of mostly educated, skilled Muslim professionals, many of whom were Palestinian refugees. These writers grappled with themes of displacement, nationalism, and the challenges of assimilation. Works such as Eugene Paul Nassar's *Wind of the Land* (1979) and Vance Bourjaily's *Confessions of a Spent Youth* (1960) depict characters intensely preoccupied with assimilation, whose sense of ethnic belonging is eroded under the heavy weight of American individualism (Al Maleh 2008, 21). The third wave, beginning in the 1960s and continuing today, presents a more politicized and self-aware Arab American literary community. This period was defined by the rise of multiculturalism and a growing resistance to stereotypes. Chief works among them is *Arabian Jazz* (1993) by Diana Abu-Jaber, an autobiographical novel in which she critiques both anti-Arab prejudice and the Arab society's constructions of gender and religious identities, ultimately arriving at an acceptance of both communities. Her reflections provide a nuanced exploration of the complexities of living with a hyphenated Muslim identity, despite her use of exaggerated stereotypes of Arabs. Abu Jaber's tackling of religion and identity, however, does not preclude the diversity of the Arab community in the United States. Similarly to Abu Jaber, Joseph Geha's works stand as important examples of the multiplicity of identities that shape the Arab American community's literary production.

An Example of Notable Contemporary Work: Joseph Geha's Short Stories

Geha's *Through and Through: Toledo Stories* (first published in 1990 and then expanded in 2009) is a collection of short stories that explores the intricacies of Arab American life, particularly through the lens of family, culture, and the immigrant experience. The stories offer profound insights into the

struggles of identity, generational dissonance, and the tensions between tradition and assimilation. Geha uses vivid character-driven narratives to portray the nuanced realities of Arab Americans, making his work a cornerstone in Arab American literature. Below is an expanded analysis of three of his most notable stories within *Through and Through*.

"Almost Thirty" delves into the anxieties of disconnection and belonging within an immigrant family network of Maronite Christians of Lebanese origins. The protagonist, Haleem Yakoub, a Lebanese American man, copes with the death of his father, Rasheed, and the symbolic weight it carries for his identity and cultural continuity. The loss brings with it a deep anxiety over the dissolution of his family network, a concern that has grown since their grandfather, Jiddo Braheem, emigrated from Lebanon in the early 20th century. The striking repetition of the phrase "almost thirty" gives away Haleem's anxiety over aging, death, and the passing of cultural traditions as he undergoes an episode of reminiscence triggered by his hate of untimely snow which echoes the same irritation expressed by his late father. The death of his father amplifies his awareness of his own mortality and the responsibilities he feels toward maintaining familial ties to weather the harshness of the Midwest. As Haleem reflects,

> Uncle E and his wife died first. Then Jiddo Braheem's wife died of her old age. Aunt Yemnah died in Cleveland some years after that. ... George's parents, Aunt Anissa and Uncle Najeeb, had a baby boy when it was past their time, and the child died without ever seeing light and nearly took his mother with him. Uncle Najeeb died when George was still in grade school. Habeeb's first son was killed in the early days of Vietnam. Then in 1964, when I was almost thirty, my father died. (39)

The image he draws is of a dying family network and his fixation on loss evinces his incapacity to processing his grief. His self-imposed isolation led to his emotional collapse in an unseasonal snowstorm in the middle of spring. The extraordinary event brought up the memory of his father who hated snow and never was able to cope with its whims as a first-generation immigrant, a metaphor for the hardships and the unpredictability of their place of settlement. The overwhelming memory pushes Haleem into a spiral of overindulgence, ultimately passing out in his apartment. His landlady finds him and reestablishes his connection with his family, leading him to finally break down and cry over his father's passing for the first time. This emotional release represents Haleem's first step toward accepting the changes in his family and life.

Indeed, Haleem's life, especially his relationships with his family, reflects the anxieties and conflicts of being caught between two worlds. His relationship with his cousin George is especially significant. George, who is several years younger, suffers from health anxieties and has a more

stereotypical American lifestyle, which contrasts with Haleem's deep-rooted family connection and traditional masculinity. Haleem's aunt, Affeefie, underscores this difference when she remarks that Haleem is not like "the crazy Americans". This view captures the tension between preserving traditional family structures and adapting to American ideals of individuality. Haleem's fears of aging and death are intensified in relation to George who also obsessively worries about his health the passage of time, and his relationship with women. Their family network, though rooted in their shared Lebanese heritage, is slowly being redefined by the changes they experience in America. Haleem's reflection on these changes highlights how their cultural differences are marked by their origins as well as by ways they choose to adapt to American society. In other words, the tensions that arise within himself and in opposition to his cousin capture precisely the tension between preserving traditional family structures and adapting to American individuality.

The family's experience of immigration is filled with acts of translation, both linguistic and cultural, that demonstrate the complexities of assimilation. This is seen in their use of Arabic idioms, which are often expressed through English, and in the way they adapt Lebanese customs in their American lives. The linguistic doubleness is evident in George's nicknames, courtesy of Halim's, include *div'da'a* and *deb*, meaning frog and bear, respectively. Their cultural adaptation is captured in the way George and Haleem continue to eat egg salad sandwiches at family picnics, a subtle yet telling contrast to the Lebanese dishes like "kibbee" that are culturally significant but ultimately foreign to their American wives who could never get them right. These small cultural practices illuminate how Haleem and George, despite their attempts to maintain or distance themselves from their cultural heritage, are challenged with reconciling their past and present identities.

The story concludes with a poignant, though ambiguous, resolution. In the denouement, Haleem's marriage to an American woman and his continuing connection to his Lebanese heritage become intertwined in the celebratory act of a Dabkee dance at a family picnic. This dance, traditional to the Levant region, symbolizes Haleem's tentative acceptance of both his American life and his cultural roots. As Haleem, his cousin George, and their spouses join in the dance, they bridge the generational and cultural gaps, locking arms and stamping in unison, creating a sense of continuity even amidst the losses and transformations they have experienced. Haleem's choice to marry an American woman, symbolized by their integration in the Dabkee line of dancers, represents both a departure from and a continuation of his Lebanese heritage. The dance thus functions as a symbol of cultural integration, acceptance, and change. By participating in this communal dance with his American wife, Haleem finds a way to root himself in both worlds, bridging his dual identities.

Geha's other story, "Something Else," is premised on Tonia's journey of self-discovery. Tonia, a young woman of Christian Syrian descent, returns to visit her family in Toledo, secretly seeking clarity on her recent marriage to Wayne, an American. While she was planning her visit, she had the inclination not to return to him and her home in Tulsa. Her longing for the sense of belonging her family offers underscores this choice, highlighting the ache for community that her marriage fails to satisfy. Despite being married for only five months, Tonia finds herself disillusioned by the ordinariness of married life, far removed from the idealized "specialness" she had envisioned. At just eighteen, her youthful expectations clash with the reality of marriage. This tension mirrors an earlier formative experience: her father's funeral when she was twelve. The funeral, coupled with a confessional moment with the family priest, led her to view her father's death as extraordinary. This tendency to elevate ordinary events into ideals is echoed in her childhood fantasies:

> What she wanted was the tall cowgirl with smooth blonde hair, also named Tonia, who came to her imagination before sleep and stayed sometimes into her dreams. Her outfit was white, the hat and blouse and fringed skirt. The horse she rode was jet black except for the tail and mane, which were white. Of it all, that horse was the hardest to imagine—its mane would not stay pure white as she wanted it, or its coat would gradually turn brown like the milk horses that came by every morning. And the name, too, would change. For a while the horse was called Thunderbolt, which eventually became Tommy; Black Star, then simply Blackie. No matter which she decided on, it would always—as if of its own accord—turn into something ordinary: Magic to Mickey. (53)

Geha frames Tonia's anxiety through intergenerational comparisons of marriage. The story contrasts Tonia's marriage with her parents' union, revealing generational and cultural differences. Her parents' marriage, arranged in Damascus by her grandmother, lacked love from the start and was defined by practical considerations. Tonia's mother resented her father's rural origins but accepted the match due to his migrant status, which socially meant better opportunities and class mobility. Over time, their marriage settled into routine: "So it was never love, even in the beginning, and later it was something else; it was Mama sitting alone in the dark of the kitchen saying her rosary, and Papa with his shoes off in the front room tired after standing all day at the cash register, offering Tonia dimes to curse in Arabic" (52). Upon hearing her daughter's expressing her hurried wish to get married, Tonia's mother reflects, "It is not what you think it is. It is something else, My Heart" (60). In contrast, Tonia's decision to marry Wayne is depicted as borne out youthful insistence rather than a mere sense of social obligation. Her mother objected, citing Tonia's age and the eventual physical distance between her family in Toledo and her new home in Oklahoma. She warns

her that "[her] father, God give him rest, would forbid this" (59). It is difficult not to read her mother's warning as a deviation from the social expectations set up for women her age. Her warning seems to suggest that she would want to spare her daughter from going through the motions of a premature, unhappy marriage. However, when Tonia threatens to elope, her mother reluctantly approves, resolutely going "downtown with them to sign her name" (60). This comparison highlights cultural shifts and generational tensions in perceptions of marriage and agency within this Arab American community.

At the heart of Tonia's struggle to stay with Wayne is a reflection on feminine subjectivity and cultural dynamics that shape its emergence. As a child, she idolized her father, seeking to emulate him. Yet, as she watches her wedding tape, Tonia notices how much she resembles her mother, signaling her alignment with maternal roles. This realization epitomizes the tension between the processes of identification and differentiation, illustrated in a childhood exchange between herself and her father:

> "Papa, will I grow up to be like you?"
> "Tch." He clicked his tongue—Arabic for no—and cocked his head as if to say, "Whoever heard of such a thing?"
> "When I grow up, are you going to be my husband?"
> "Tch."
> "Then who?"
> "A young man. Tall and young, with a red face like the French. He will put his arm around you," he circled her shoulders with one arm, "and you will go away with him."
> "I won't."
> Papa darkened. "There is no other way." (56)

Geha portrays patriarchy as a universal structure while accruing this understanding with cultural specificity. While the story acknowledges that patriarchal norms transcend cultures, it also emphasizes how cultural particularities shape their expression. The repeated reference to "something else" points to possibilities beyond these structures, hinting at a critique of dominant narratives that shape love, gender roles, and familial expectations.

Through "Something Else," Geha invites the reader to ponder on Orientalism and its citationality. The narrative provokes reflection on whether it aligns with or resists Orientalist frameworks. Furthermore, his approach seems to find a point of equilibrium to Tanyss Ludescher's interrogation on whether Arab American writers should emphasize one side or the other of their hyphenated identities (106, 2006). Tonia's family dynamics complicate stereotypes of "oppressed brown women" by presenting characters who attempt to navigate their circumstances. While Geha resists overt self-orientalizing, the pervasive "citationality" of

Orientalism, that is, the way Orientalist tropes intervene in discourse, renders any articulation of such experiences vulnerable to being framed within these prejudices. This tension underscores the challenge of articulating non-Western experiences without perpetuating reductive narratives. Ultimately, the story critiques mainstream notions of love and identity, emphasizing that cultural and personal experiences often exceed simplified frameworks. The recurring phrase "something else" captures this effort, pointing to the need for interpretations that allow room for complexity and nuance.

In "Alone and All Together" (2002) Geha explores the heightened tensions faced by Arab Americans, by capturing the fear, guilt, and solidarity that define their experiences in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The central tension of the story lies in the classical boundary between us and them. Watching the event unfold live on television, Libby, one of the central characters, instinctively wishes, "don't let it be us" (172). This silent plea reflects the frustration at collective blame, a sentiment that resonates deeply within Arab American communities that intensely suffered from hate crimes and negative stereotyping in the wake of the attacks. The sisters Libby and Sally stand as foils to one another to demonstrate the diversity of the community and affirms their equal belonging to American society. The narrative contrasts Libby's transnational, pan-Arab identity with her sister Sally's rootedness in multigenerational American belonging.

The contrast Geha draws between the sisters highlights the dilemma of visibility and invisibility. Libby, who appears "white enough to pass" initially relishes her ability to avoid scrutiny. However, as hate crimes against Arab Americans escalate, this privilege comes with guilt. Sally, on the other hand, experiences her outsider status more acutely due to her physical features like her curly hair and tan skin tone and compensates by rejecting cultural markers like food or language. The contrasting responses capture the paranoia and alienation Arab Americans felt during this period. Libby's hyper-awareness of her Arab identity manifests in irrational fears too, such as believing strangers can "detect Arabic in her brain" (179). This paranoia underscores the psychological toll of living in a society where cultural identity is often weaponized.

The assault on Ahmad, a friend's older brother, acts as a catalyst for Libby's transformation. Witnessing the slurs and physical violence against Ahmad forces her to confront the fragility of her racial and cultural identity. This moment shifts her from self-preservation to communal support, reshaping her understanding of belonging and driving home the idea that the best antidote to racist vitriol is solidarity. The story concludes with a poetic juxtaposition of isolation and unity. Sally, attending a candlelight vigil in New York to commemorate the lives of the victims of the attack, observes a moment of collective silence where "everyone was alone, and we were all together" (182). This sentiment captures the complexity of hyphenated

identities, being simultaneously distinct and a part of a larger whole.

Through these stories, Geha captures the multifaceted experience of Arab Americans, addressing themes of generational conflict, cultural hybridity, and the societal pressures of assimilation. His work offers vivid portrayals of identity that resist reductive binaries, instead celebrating the fluidity and resilience of his characters. Whether exploring intergenerational tensions in "Almost Thirty," the personal struggles of bicultural marriage in "Something Else," or the collective trauma of post-9/11 America in "Alone and All Together," Geha's stories resonate with universal themes while remaining deeply rooted in the Arab American experience.

Conclusion

Arab American literature serves as a vital medium for challenging stereotypes, fostering cultural understanding, and asserting the humanity of a community often marginalized in mainstream narratives. From early representations written by first generation writers to the contemporary voices of Joseph Geha, this body of work reveals the richness and diversity of Arab American experiences intertwined as they are with the experience of immigration and orientalist, racist discourse. However, it seems that as the field of Arab American writings continues to evolve, it remains rooted in the dual struggle against Orientalist depictions and the perennial search for self-definition. By celebrating and preserving these narratives, Arab American literature not only enriches the cultural fabric of the United States but also contributes to a broader, more inclusive understanding of identity in a multicultural world.

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