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Disentangling the American Patchwork Heritage

Guest editors
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IS MULTICULTURALISM WHO AMERICA IS? INVESTIGATING THE UNITED STATES' "PATCHWORK HERITAGE"

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Over the decades, the interaction among ethnic communities within the United States has produced an intense discussion that is far from being exhausted. We found it relevant to explore it further in its contradictory and ambivalent nature, especially in relation to a country which has never ceased to be a target destination for migrants. The result of this collective analysis is the fourth issue of *JAm It!*, which gathers recent perspectives from young scholars in different disciplinary fields, namely Cultural Studies, Literary Criticism, and History. Ethnic identity and relations in the United States are investigated through the articulation of positions ranging from reflections on multiculturalism and disability, to the disruptions brought about by phenomena of gentrification, to diasporic self-fashioning and returns to the 'motherland.'

This discussion has often revolved around labels such as the controversial multicultural category: broadly definable as the set of policies established by societies to protect, and equitably treat, their cultural diversity, multiculturalism appears indeed to be constantly (re)conceptualized—when not plainly misused or abused—according to one's individual standpoint. A recent exemplary iteration of this dynamic occurred on January 19, 2021, when Mike Pompeo declared in a tweet that "multiculturalism [...

is] not who America is."[1] On his last day as a Secretary of State, the Italian American and former CIA director maintained that the claim to cultural differences as a key component of the American ethos is a tactic adopted by America's internal enemies. In just 34 words, Pompeo's aggressive, retrotopian rhetoric brought the often-fraught multicultural paradigm back to the spotlight after some years of relative oblivion, and this reappearance obviously attracted several reactions in its defense. Such statements emphasized the status of multiculturalism as a (normatively) positive framework, in that "it gives us something to be *for* and not just something to be *against*" (McLennan 2006, 99). Notwithstanding this enthusiastic definition, since the Nineties the concept of multiculturalism has been variously criticized within intellectual *milieux*. While in declaring multiculturalism divisive and a threat to national unity (Kivisto and Rezaev 2018, 180), Pompeo's accusation seems to refer to Arthur Schlesinger's claims in *The Disuniting of America* (1992); on the left side of the spectrum, Nancy Fraser has pointed out that a process of redistribution (1995, 2007) should integrate politics of recognition (Taylor 1992). In the feminist debate arena, a tension between multiculturalism and feminism has famously been highlighted by Susan Moller Okin, who posited that the former may be detrimental to the latter's conquests (1999). This controversial stance elicited a huge number of responses from intersectional feminists, countering Moller Okin's white, ethnocentric (thus extremely limited) perspective. In the wake of the 2008 economic recession, the discussion about social inequalities in the United States has shifted its focus from multiculturalism to wealth distribution and the disastrous consequences of globalized economy on minorities, especially in sociological studies. And yet, to quote Peter Kivisto and Andrey Rezaev, "while there is clear evidence of a backlash to multiculturalism, analyses reveal that in terms of concrete policies and practices, there is little evidence of the retreat of multiculturalism" (179). Rather than completely disappearing, discussions concerning multiculturalism seem to

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[1] The entire tweet reads: "Woke-ism, multiculturalism, all the -isms — they're not who America is. They distort our glorious founding and what this country is all about. Our enemies stoke these divisions because they know they make us weaker." (Pompeo 2021)

have gone undercover, thanks to the acquired discursive practice of using 'code words' to refer to race and ethnicity without explicitly mentioning them.

After undergoing a number of attempts at theorization (especially in the 1990s, a period in which the study of ethnic interaction held prominence in American Studies), multiculturalism seems to have slipped today into the general discourse as an empty rhetorical formula for inclusivity. The reality of America's social fabric rather displays a waiting room for its multifarious ethnic identities, which the groups who can claim access to the white mainstream are eager to leave. Through this lens, Pompeo's outburst on Twitter could be read as the epitome of the Italian American history of assimilation into the United States white mainstream. This attitude confirms Fred Gardaphé's provocative claim about Italian Americans becoming 'invisible people' and embracing discrimination against ethnic minorities as a rite of passage to enter the American whiteness, rather than contributing to fighting it (2010, 1). Nonetheless, this aspect does not exhaust, but rather further complicates the discussion about the problematic racial positioning of Italian Americans and other ethnic groups, which is an on-going subject of inquiry that cannot be reduced to a single perspective.

In fact, the investigation of the encounters between ethnic communities within American urban spaces appears today more relevant than ever, after the tragic events of 2020 and 2021, highlighting the controversial evolution of the debate regarding ethnicity (and its discontents) in the United States. The call for unity in Joe Biden's inaugural address as the 46th President of the United States, delivered on January 20, stands as a sharp turn away from Pompeo's previous statement. Biden's words seem rather to faintly echo Barack Obama's first inaugural address, delivered twelve years earlier, when Biden was a newly elected vice-President. On that occasion, a reassuring and quasi-utopian self-portrayal of the United States undergirded Obama's address, highlighting the strength of America's "patchwork heritage," defined as the very fabric of its society. The election of the current vice-president Kamala Harris, serving her role as the first African American and Asian American woman in the country's history, seems to (nominally) go further toward fulfilling Obama's vision. Harris emblematically embodies the potential empowerment of multiple racial and gender identities so far

underrepresented in political hierarchies. On the other hand, it would be naïve to downplay the fact that this single (hence purely symbolic) achievement follows the blatant awakening of white supremacy, most recently epitomized by the brutal killing of George Floyd and the assault on the US Capitol.

In the current state of events, the idea of an amicable interaction between diverse ethnicities in the cities of the United States seems as far as ever. It rather sets the stage for a paradoxical friction, which nonetheless does not cease to be advertised as a harmonious togetherness by hegemonic cultural narratives. By and large, the productive intellectual debate concerning multiculturalism peaking in the nineties has in fact frequently been obscured, in the US context, by a Jeffersonian exceptionalist ideology promoting the myth of America as an ideal place of peaceful coexistence, which obliterates all the historical tensions and racial conflicts inherent to the fabric and institutions of the United States (Daniele 1996). From this angle, liberal bourgeois multiculturalism has also been defined 'a fetishism of difference' (Mooers 2005), creating an arena for democratic discussion that remains abstract and counterproductive to the objectives of cultural pluralism. And yet, the proliferation of cultural narratives foregrounding the connections among different communities seem to express an unstated desire to bring the multicultural category back to the center of critical discourse, in an attempt to problematize it and investigate its limits, by pushing against its foundational concept.

On these premises, multiculturalism has been explored in the first essay of this issue by Elisa Bordin, who looks at the figure of the freak *vis-à-vis* the multicultural category. She analyzes the case of the Tocci brothers, two Italian conjoined twins who were exhibited as oddities/wonders from their birth in the 1870s until their twenties and travelled in Europe and the United States as members of freak shows. Her fascinating and original analysis of the case investigates the category of the disabled body and the ways in which it intersects with, clashes against, and exceeds the categories of 'nation,' 'culture,' 'gender,' and 'ethnicity' in the formation of a subject's identity. Bordin eventually concludes that extreme bodies are defined by the transnational figure of the 'freak' as their only possible cultural classification.

While Bordin's contribution directly addresses the multicultural paradigm, the following four articles focus on specific articulations of a dialogue between different ethnicities in their attempt at cohabitation. In fact, the articles address from four specific angles the often-fraught relationship between abstract notions regarding ethnic interaction and the latter's inscription in the specific urban contexts of the United States. In particular, Anna Maria Marini's article shifts the focus of our exploration to a TV show investigating the gentrification of the Latinx neighborhood of Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, as represented in *Gentefied*. In examining the entanglements between race relations and an ever-accelerating capitalism, her contribution acknowledges the latter's intrusion into spaces originally inhabited by poorer ethnic communities. Therefore, Marini's article assesses the violent impact that gentrification has not only on the financial situation, but also on the family and gender relations of the Morales family, thus shedding light on a factor which has had crucial importance for the dynamics between WASP Americans and hyphenated ones: capitalism.

Shifting the focus of the analysis from the West Coast to the Midwest, Marco Moschetti's contribution taps into the reflection about the imbrication of social mobility and racial urban geography. His article, which is a historical investigation of the social housing policies in Chicago after WWII, explores the ways in which multicultural categories intersect with class and are (un)able to foster a harmonious relationship in the inhabited space of the neighborhood. Moschetti delves into the connections between whiteness, social status and urban geographies, and focuses on the specific case of the Italian American community. He draws on the extensive scholarship on the subject and reads the latter's 'white flight' in the Chicago context as a further mark of assimilation to the American dominant culture.

Moschetti's contribution resonates significantly with a literary text such as Kym Ragusa's memoir *The Skin Between Us* (2006). Victoria Tomasulo's exploration of the book focuses on the elements keeping the African American and Italian American communities separate, rather than encouraging inter-ethnic dialogue. By analyzing the various neighborhoods in which the memoir is set (East and West Harlem, the Bronx and suburban New Jersey), and referencing John Gennari's key study on the interactions

between Italian Americans and African Americans (2017), Tomasulo reflects on the dual upbringing of the author as a daughter of an African American mother and an Italian American father. She underlines the role that gender dynamics, in addition to racial ones, have had in Ragusa's self-identification. She further problematizes colorblind discourses of multiculturalism, by underscoring how racial difference complicates ethnic identification. Her analysis focuses on racial tensions based on the disparity between the configuration of African American and Italian American neighborhoods in New York City.

Finally, Giacomo Traina's contribution resonates at once with Tomasulo's diasporic conceptualization of identity and the transnational dimension of Bordin's investigation, exploring the connections between the United States and the motherland from the viewpoint of Vietnamese American writers such as Aimee Phan, Lan Cao, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Ocean Vuong. In Traina's view, for such American-born writers of Vietnamese ancestry, the return is translated as the paradoxical "reverse exodus" to Vietnam as a homecoming to a land where one has never been. Traina examines the most recent development of that literary trope, and the contradictions introduced to its treatment by the recent postwar reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam, carrying out a reflection about its function as a narrative device.

This issue is enriched by Fred Gardaphé's afterword, which provides a retrospective comment on the questions raised in the articles, from the perspective of a scholar who has been working on ethnicity and multicultural interactions in American literature and culture for several decades. Gardaphé's contribution to this issue, such as his other past and forthcoming writing on the topic, provides illuminating insight on both the multicultural category in American Studies and the crucial role of the latter in the development of Italian American Studies. His viewpoint resonates with the contributions collected in this issue, due to the strong presence of contributions pertaining to the field of Italian American Studies. This is only partially due to the guest editors' involvement in this field: in fact, it is more the result of both the intellectual energy of American Studies in Italy, which is well encapsulated in this graduate journal, and the current configuration of the field of Italian American Studies, which keeps

exploring uncharted territories in order to establish a fruitful intellectual dialogue with other fields of academic inquiry. Italian American Studies has in fact been receiving a growing surge of attention in Italian academia in recent years, with most major national American Studies journals intensifying their scholarship on the topic and contributing to a "reorientation of the critical gaze," as stated by Valerio Massimo De Angelis, coordinator of the Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi ItaloAmericani (CISIA) at the University of Macerata (2018, 225). *Ácoma* introduced in 2017 its first issue entirely devoted to Italian American culture since the foundation of the journal, edited by Bordin and Roberto Cagliero. Such intellectual debate was expanded and enhanced by thematic sessions devoted to the Italian American cultural and theoretical scene on *RSA Journal* (2010-11; 2019). Publications by leading scholars in the field, such as Fred Gardaphé and Anthony Julian Tamburri (2015), have been disseminated in Italy as well through the John D. Calandra Institute for Italian American Studies, which has been foundational and invaluable in organizing events and projects in conjunction with Italian institutions such as the University of Naples L'Orientale, the Roma Tre University and the University of Calabria, alongside the role played by the Italian American Studies Association under the current presidency of Alan Gravano. Inspired by such a flurry of intellectual activity, we invited Bordin and Gardaphé, whom we thank, to open and close our issue: their contributions represent the drive within the Italian American Studies field to multiply the interactions and broaden the conversation with the larger fields of American and Diaspora Studies.

In turn, we tried to further this conversation by connecting engaging contributions that delve into the depiction of communities defined by their different ethnic backgrounds. In fact, all the articles collected in the issues significantly mobilize what Laura Ruberto defines as "the edges of ethnicity," urging scholarly research to recognize "the fluid nature and marginalized aspects of an ethnic identity as well as consider ... how ethnic identity works within mainstream modes of production" and "dominant ideological articulations" (Ruberto 2019, 118). Ruberto's theoretical stance thus invites a disentanglement of the "patchwork heritage" in favor of an investigation that highlights, rather than hiding, specific ethnic signs—for instance, those which

Gardaphé defines as 'Italian signs' (1992)—emerging as recurrent elements that resist and complicate assimilation. The ongoing discussion on mobility and citizenship in the wider field of American Studies in Italy (see, for instance, *RSA Journal* 30, 2019) shows the urgency of opening new pathways facilitating the encounter of ethnic identities in the broader context of American culture: with this issue, we aim to add some relevant elements to this lively debate. Yet, what seems to be reiterated by the contributions in this issue, and from our own meditation on the subject, is that the impossibility of actualizing the most hopeful aspects of multiculturalism replicates the unattainability of the American Dream. Indeed, it still appears as a utopian and deceiving self-narrative, as epitomized in F. S. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which is explicitly referenced in Victoria Tomasulo's article and serves as a backdrop for the other contributions as well.

This issue of *JAm It!* is for us a step in an intellectual journey and the result of a mutual exchange which has, at times, even taken the shape of a collision. Our first discussions around this topic date back to 2019, on the occasion of the panel "When the Subaltern Speaks: Lost Voices in America, Lost Voices of America," presented at the MLA Symposium in Lisbon. The papers we delivered were looking at ways to navigate the difficult task of negotiating an ethnic identity in the United States, from a literary perspective distinctly evoking Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial perspective. Our lively discussions laid the groundwork for our panel proposal to the 2020 EAAS conference (which was postponed to 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and took place online in early May), titled "Mapping Heterotopias in Multicultural America." In that context, we decided to adopt a different approach and explore the ways in which Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia" intersects different cultural, ethnic and racial experiences in the United States. During these two experiences we considered a number of challenging questions, to some of which we have yet to find satisfactory answers. Moreover, as sometimes happens with journeys, our intellectual paths have at times parted, just to reunite at unexpected further junctions. In this third step, we did not aspire to formulating comprehensive or conclusive statements about how multiculturalism should be reconceptualized in the 21st century. Our primary interest laid rather in looking at what young Americanists, across different disciplines and with

different approaches, would add to the conversation about the evolution of such a category *vis-à-vis* its most recent reconfigurations in the American cultural landscape.

In concluding this introduction, we would like to thank all the early-career scholars who answered our call and submitted their contributions, despite the extraordinary circumstances which we have all been experiencing over the past year. Producing valuable academic work can be an everyday challenge given our precarious lives, in a Butlerian and also in a financial sense, but doing so in a global health crisis has an added value to it that we want to celebrate here. We would also like to thank all the reviewers that generously accepted to provide valuable feedback to the contributors in this issue and significantly helped them improve their work in meaningful ways. In addition, we thank all our colleagues who contributed to improve this issue with discussions and suggestions, many of whom have been mentioned already somewhere in this introduction, and the innumerous ones who we have not managed to mention. Last but not least, we want to thank the editorial board of *JAm It!* for giving us the opportunity to edit this issue. In particular, we thank Stefano Morello and Marco Petrelli, who continually assisted us during this first experience as journal editors, under such unprecedented global conditions.

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THE FREAK AND 'DISABLED' MULTICULTURALITY

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ABSTRACT

Differently from positive visions of multiculturality as the richness of American diversity, in this essay I tackle 'negative multiculturalism' as one of the elements of the category of the freak, where cultural, ethnic and racial difference coincided with disability, all concocting to fence off diversity in American society. I understand the freak as a field for multicultural criticism because of its recruitment processes, as evidenced by the case of the Italian Tocci brothers, but also as a place of confinement and exoticization of the American citizen who, as a consequence of disability, came to inhabit a transnational category used to police concepts of 'normal' masculinity and femininity. In this reading, multiculturality is understood as a fabrication that veils processes of enfreakment.
Keywords: Freak, Disability, Tocci Brothers, Conjoined Twins, Negative Multiculturalism.

In the perceived deficiency of the Other, each perceives—without knowing it—the falsity

of his/her own subject position.

(Slavoj Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, 2006, 160)

In *The Golden Door* (2006), director Emanuele Crialese tells the story of the Italian Mancuso family and their migration to the United States. After dreaming of America as a land of milk and honey, once they have crossed the Atlantic Ocean the family have to face the examinations of Ellis Island, the port of entry to the United States for European migrants, and the 'scientific' interpretation of immigrant bodies as potentially deviant. In that in-between space, functioning as a sort of limen where migrants, although physically in the US, continue to inhabit their Old World identity, the Italian family must undergo a series of abusive examinations that reveal the implicit discrimination of scientific and objective readings of culturally different bodies.

The film partly anticipates noteworthy studies such as the ones by Douglas Baynton (2016), David A. Gerber (2005), and Jay Dolmage (2011), on how categories like ethnicity and race have historically been constructed in a constant dialogue with

notions of disability. As these studies show, disability and race/ethnicity have been mutually constructed, one providing evidence of the other and thus creating a vicious circle of marginalization and discrimination. This was especially so in the last decades of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, when disability, or just ugliness, imposed on immigrant bodies was part of a wider discussion on the American character and the acceptability of migrants in the fabric of the nation. I combine here research on disability, ethnicity or race, and migration with freak studies. While classics works such as Leslie Fiedler's *Freaks* (1978) or Robert Bogdan's *Freak Show* (1988) have mainly investigated the psychological meaning of such a figure or how freak shows functioned, scant critical work has been done on "the ways in which the categories of race/ethnicity and disability are used to constitute one another or the ways that those social, political, and cultural practices have kept seemingly different groups of people in strikingly similar marginalized position" (James and Wu 2006, 4).[1] This work situates itself at the intersection of Disability and Cultural Studies and aims at shedding light on how the freak has functioned as a multicultural repository of ethnic/racial, physical, and cultural difference, supporting other systems of exclusion.

The 'disabling' reading the Mancuso family undergo in *The Golden Door* is not what the Tocci brothers probably experienced once they arrived in the United States in 1891 (fig. 1). Despite their "extraordinary body," to use the expression popularized by disability scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1996), they were rather welcomed as stars. Giacomo and Giovanni Battista (also spelled Baptista) were born in Locana, Piedmont, in 1877, although they are also reported to be from Sardinia or Lucania, today's region of Basilicata (Gould and Pyle 1896; Calvino 1980). They were the first children of their parents and their mother was 19 when she gave birth to the brothers.

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[1] Baynton 2016, Gerber 2005, and Dolmage 2011, quoted at the beginning of this essay, offer of course interesting innovations. See also James and Wu 2006. For an overview of the development of freak studies, see Samuels 2011, 56.

Figure 1. Advertisement for the Tocci Brothers, produced during their touring of the U.S. (Science Museum Group, Wellcome Library)

Their notoriety in freak shows is due to their being one of the few cases in history of *dicephalus tetrabrachius* conjoined twins reaching maturity, that is, the most long-lived example of two persons with one single set of legs, 2 torsos, two heads and four arms. They "each had a well-formed head, perfect arms, and a perfect thorax to the sixth rib," where their torsos came together; they also shared "a common abdomen, a single anus, two legs, two sacra, two vertebral columns, one penis, but three buttocks, the central one containing a rudimentary anus" (Gould and Pyle 1896). According to medical reports of the time, they were clever boys, with different characters, "their sensations and emotions … distinctly individual and independent" (Gould and Pyle 1896). They never walked, because of an absence of mutual control on their limbs, because of one of the twins' club foot or, more probably, because of the daily exposition they were forced to endure since they were one month old, which prevented the development of a proper leg musculature.

The brothers' parents were the first to enroll the twins in the sideshow business. They were first exhibited in Turin and exposed to audiences in other Italian cities, Austria, France, Germany, Poland, and Switzerland. After a career as human curiosities in Europe, they moved to the US at the beginning of the 1890s. They were to remain just one year, but eventually spent five in the country. In New York, they exhibited for at least three weeks, making about 1000 $ a week, an incredible amount of money which qualified them as the most-paid freaks of the industry of the time (*Circus Scrap Book*, quoted in Adams 2001, 256). They later traveled and exhibited in Boston, Philadelphia, and cities of the Eastern coast. They were sensational, so much so that Mark Twain originally modeled on them the characters of the Italian brothers in "Those Extraordinary Twins," a short story deriving from the material originally gathered for *Pudden'head Wilson* (1893). Inspired by the billboards sponsoring one of the Toccis' American shows, Twain transformed the original Italian conjoined brothers into the aristocratic Luigi and Angelo, a tragicomic version of the Toccis and an evidence of the American writer's fascination for the double. When about twenty, no longer under their father's jurisdiction and after accumulating a solid sum of money, the brothers retired, passing from the transnational experiences of their first twenty years, to the extreme locality of the rest of their lives: they bought a villa near Venice and lived there till the end of their days. The date of their death is unknown, as well as how they lived.[2]

In spite of the fame they enjoyed during their lifetime, the Toccis remain unacknowledged in studies of Italian Americana, despite its attempt to inclusively pluralize American past and culture by reclaiming a specific Italian American archive. Their story is simply unregistered in the history of the Italian diaspora.[3] Notwithstanding their invisibility in such an archive, the Toccis emerge elsewhere, in studies about the freak and alongside a group of 'multicultural subjects' differently

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[2] Some report they married and had children, others that they died alone. Jan Bondeson estimates they lived at least till they were 34 (2001).

[3] The only contemporary documentation of the Tocci brothers in Italian is a short reference in an essay by Italo Calvino, entitled "Il museo dei mostri di cera" (The museum of wax monsters, 1980), published in the collection *Collezione di sabbia*. In this essay, the writer/journalist describes his visit to the "Grand Musée anatomique-ethnologique du Dr. P. Spitzner," an itinerary exhibition showing wax statues of the brothers, aged 9.

informed by varying degrees of disability. It is this triangulation of ethnic or racial otherness, disability, and 'negative multiculturalism' that I aim at investigating here. Why are the Toccis invisible in the archive of Italian Americana, that division supporting 'American multiculturalism' that is supposed to contain them? And why do they emerge somewhere else?

In an article appeared on the *Scientific American* of December 1891, exactly when the Tocci arrived in the United States, the brothers are compared to the most famous American conjoined twins of all times, Chang and Eng (1811-1874), the original Siamese twins (fig. 2). Born in today's Thailand of Chinese ancestry, they were 'discovered' by the merchant Robert Hunter in 1824, sold in the US, and they later became American citizens, eventually marrying a couple of white English sisters and adopting the surname Bunker. Their bill name became a common term to indicate conjoined twins, and has remained largely so even today; because of them, the word *Siamese* (literally, from the country of Siam) has come to indicate disability, stressing the imbrications of cultural/racial/linguistic and bodily difference and ideas of nationality, as I will later highlight.[4] In that same 1891 article, the Toccis are compared to the 'Hungarian sisters' Helena and Judith (1701-1723), and the 'South Carolina negresses' Millie and Christine McKoy (fig. 3). The same happens in Gould and Pyle's *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine* (1886), in which the Toccis are described together with Ritta-Cristina from Sassari, Italy, and Chang and Eng.[5] This referential group is again found in other studies, such as Fiedler controversial *Freaks* (1978), in which the cultural critic devotes some pages to the Italian conjoined twins, mentioning them alongside the African American Millie-Christine sisters, Chang and Eng, and the white American Daisy and Violet Hilton, famous for their participation in Tom Browning's *Freaks* (1932). An equally comparative approach is found in Jan Bondeson's 2001 essay, where the brothers are

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[4] As was the case for the Toccis, Chang and Eng came to be the subject of a sketch by Mark Twain, "Personal Habits of the Siamese Twins" (1869). On them, see Grosz (1996, 62), Fiedler (1978, 222), Orser 2014, Wu 2008 and 2012, and Pingree 1996.

[5] The same group is again used in an article of 1902 appeared in *The American Naturalist*, in which the couples of conjoined twins are invoked to study the anatomy of double calves.

discussed across time and spatial and national differences, together with other 'wonders' such as the 375 AD 2-headed boy, the Scottish conjoined brothers at the court of King James IV of Scotland, the "Fair Maiden of Foscott" (16th century), dicephalic twins from Bavaria and Switzerland (16th century), and, eventually, the Turkish archer/s of the 17th century. Across critical history, then, the Toccis seem to occupy just one space, that of the 'multicultural' freak. There appears to be, in other words, a precise 'multicultural' archive of conjoined twins, which has, however, never been recuperated in the critical debate multicultural studies has usually reserved for its subjects.

Figure 2. Chang and Eng Bunker, the 'original' Siamese twins (Wikimedia Commons)

Similar to the silence around the Toccis in Italian American Studies is the case of Millie-Christine McKoy, as researched by Ellen Samuel. The black conjoined sisters were born into slavery in North Carolina in 1851 and traveled the world performing as the "Two-Headed Nightingale." Despite the popularity the McKoys enjoyed, Samuel laments an almost absolute lack of consideration within African American Studies (2011, 54). Theirs, as well as the Toccis', is a case of critical silence from the part of those agents for multiculturalism that surprises, especially considering that "no public Black figure

exacerbated corporeal definitions of legitimacy, pushed the boundaries of identity authenticity, and ran the gamut of representational ambiguity more than these Carolina twins" (Brooks 2007, 308). While the small number of conjoined twins may explain the necessity of grouping them together, the absence of other references in their specific ethnic/racial field induces interrogations. Why, in other words, do the Toccis or Millie-Christine continue to exist only in the discursive multiculturality of the freak, whereas the different groups advocating for the pluralistic representation of American society have ignored them? Aristotle used the term *lusus naturae*, freaks of nature (Fiedler 1978, 239), to describe similar groups of people, as if their body were supreme, outstanding other identitarian categories. According to disability scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, the body as the category that surpasses any other possible identitarian model is exactly "the 'real' stigma of a disability" (2000, 33), which operates a reduction on the possible cultural readings of such bodies. The depletion of multiple reading lenses in favor of the 'bodily' one is the cardinal principle of the so-called *enfreakment* (Hevey 1992), a process occurring when "the body envelops and obliterates the freak's potential humanity" (Garland Thomson 1997, 59) and the analytical categories we generally use to describe, perceive, and categorize it. In this sense, disability has an "unambiguous ability to impact every other identity category at any time" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, x): disability, and especially forms of extreme physical disability such as conjoined twins, trumps other identitarian status because, "Although the components of freakishness change with time, the centrality of the body remains a constant and determining feature of the freak's identity" (Adams 2001, 6).

Figure 3. Millie and Christine McKoy (Collection of Robert E. Green, John H. Fitzgibbon, St. Louis, 1867)

The category of race/ethnicity therefore vanishes: white Americans like Daisy and Violet Hilton, black Americans like Millie-Christine, Asians like Eng and Chang, and Italians like the Tocci brothers, are all pigeonholed into a 'negative' multicultural class, that is, that of 'freaks,' with no analytical references to any other signifying class. This creates the assumption that disability is natural, so visible and extraordinary that one does not need to question the cultural construction of it. The enfreakment process deforms thus the value of otherwise reclaimed differences, and the freak becomes a capacious category, which includes physical, psychical, but also geographical and cultural marginalities. It functions as a multicultural repository of otherness: the freak provides an ample and apparently 'natural' spectrum of diversity, oblivious of the regulations imposed by ideas of humanity and citizenship which, in the specific space and time where the Toccis performed, that is, the turn-of-the-century US, combined notions of ableness, the fascination for exoticism, and narrations of multiculturality.

As a matter of fact, the silence of multicultural criticism with regards to its 'freak' subjects mirrors the historical process of enfreakment these people were subject to. The end of the 19th century, when the Tocci came to work in the US, marked a turning point in American cultural, national, and 'bodily' politics, during which the 'multicultural freak' functioned as a category in contrast with normalizing ideas of Americanness and the requirements of the ideology of the melting-pot. Processes of enfreakment, and their exposition in sideshows and freak shows, did create a possible transnational and multicultural space, but not in the positive terms of inclusion with which multiculturality has recently been employed in the US.

If migration, together with the prospect of national diversity it implies, has always been specific features of the United States, the bulk of the phenomenon at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century impinged problematically on American society, with peaks of open opposition to that prospective multiculturality leading to the quota system of 1924. Historian Gail Bederman (1995) explains how, at the end of the 19th century, as ideas of Americanness were anxiously changing and being questioned, the nation became increasingly captivated by ideas of the body, its efficiency or recreation. In the second half of the 19th century new fears became palpable when the plurality of American democracy was perceived as imperiled by the hordes of 'unassimilable' new Americans. This is when the American body's manliness, efficiency, and adequate physical appearance came to be considered attributes of proper citizenship—a category which, however, was not inclusive enough to accommodate the "extraordinary body" within the conceptual limits of the nation. It is in those years that freak shows gained momentum, providing an entertaining—and little risky—arena for America's interest in the body, the exotic, and dis/abledness, and projections of civic inclusion or its absence. The popularity of the freak show, throughout the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th,[6] is evidence of this preoccupation with the body as a 'site' for discussing national difference. As such, freak shows constituted a "cultural ritual

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[6] Sideshows and freak shows were popular in the Western world between the 1820s and 1940s, when the discussion on the "extraordinary body" was definitely confined within medical discourse (Garland Thomson 1996b, 4; 1997).

that dramatized the era's physical and social hierarchy by spotlighting bodily stigmata that could be choreographed as an absolute contrast to 'normal' American embodiment and authenticated as corporeal truth" (Garland Thompson 1997, 63). While American society was struggling to come to terms with its *de facto* multiculturality, it fabricated in the form of freak shows a safe arena where attraction to and repulsion from physical, racial/ethnic, and cultural difference veils the show's highly cultural function as a reinforcement of normative ideas of Americanness.

The beginning of Western freak shows is usually considered London's Bond Street's exposition of Tono Maria in 1822. There she was billed "the Venus of South America," her multiply scarred body functioning as a visual anomaly but also as a mark of the cultural diversity of South American femininity. The woman's sexual 'transgression' was marked on her body, scarred each time she committed adultery (Garland Thomson 1997, 55). In the United States, "free enterprise and the rise of a democratized and fluid middle class fostered the proliferation of exhibitions like Tono Maria's in institutionalized shows" (1997, 56), which came to include stars like the 'ape woman' Julia Pastrana, the dwarf General Tom Thumb, or Chang the Chinese Giant, alongside conjoined twins, tattooed and bearded women, extremely fat people, and a number of persons we would hardly define as 'freaks' today. They performed as curiosities, a visual rendition of human difference and limits which aroused an intermingling sentiment of "affection and will to dominate" in the spectators (Gerber 1996, 43).

Such forms of entertainment were highly ambivalent, because in their offering central stage to physical diversity they transformed human variety into a source of attraction, an object of exploitation, and a target of derision and exclusion at the same time. As "simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive, enticing and sickening," the figure of the freak was in fact usually perceived as "an *ambiguous* being whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life" (Grosz 1996, 56-57) and, as such, enters into dialog with broader discourses that lie outside the freak's body. Their differently created extraordinary bodies, when exposed in sideshows, established with the spectators a relationship of deviancy and normalcy which

coincided with the desire of mastery of the national expansion and imperialism of the time, the related scientific racism, and Victorian ideals of masculinity and femininity.[7] In other words, the freak show served as a form of visual representation which marked, as a contrastive example, female and male 'normalcy,' as well as Americanness. As the counterpart to mainstream definitions of Victorian masculinity and femininity, sideshows therefore contributed to police interpretations of humanity, in which multiculturality coincided with monstrosity. The category of the freak worked hence as a sort of visual and cultural enclosure, confining different forms of human diversity and functioning as a microcosm of multiculturality for both its performers and its viewers while policing ideas of Americanness.

The extent to which the figure of the freak worked to discursively and imaginatively expel diversity from American society is evident if we consider the fabrication of its multiculturality. The multiculturality of the freak show is indeed not just a matter of a forced coexistence of people coming from different cultural milieus in the name of the predominance of their body. In other words, the freak show was multicultural not only because the Chinese Chang, the African American Millie-Christine, or the Italian Toccis coexisted in a same working environment and, often, living environment—see, in this regard, the rendition of a freak circus life in Browning's *Freaks*. Cultural diversity was also a typical feature of the narratives used to create the freaks, the stars of the shows. Bogdan and Barbora Putova reconstruct the history of the American freak show and, especially, of its patron P.T. Barnum, "the apotheosis of the American entrepreneurship," the person who single-handedly "brought the freak show to its pinnacle in the nineteenth century by capitalizing on America's hunger for extravagance, knowledge, and mastery" (Garland Thomson 1997, 58). Barnum flirted with the idea of a 'multicultural' show throughout his life, from the 1840s briefly after starting his career as a showman, when he envisioned a "Congress of Nations" (Putova 2018, 96) till his "Grand Ethnological Congress" of the 1880s, a touring act that exhibited

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[7] On the possible social functions of freak shows, see Gerber (1996, 44) and Garland Thomson (1997, 58); on ideas of American masculinity, see Kimmel (1994), Rotundo (1993), and Bederman (1995).

persons from all over the world. His idea of showcasing diversity, therefore, although including white Americans such as Tom Thumb (1838-1883) or giantess Anna Swan (1846), had specifically to do with visual as well as cultural diversity.

Barnum's freaks' stage-personas were created alternatively out of disability, racial difference, or culture-turned-visual difference. His first success, Joice Heth, is a clear example of how disability, racial diversity and cultural value coincided in the creation of the freak. As the black, blind, and paralyzed supposed nurse of George Washington, Heth's freakiness was primarily a matter of narration—her being Washington's nurse, and therefore very old—which could be sold as true because of the simultaneity of blackness and disability. But Barnum's and his public's flirtation with multiculturality can be traced in a number of other stage personalities like fu-Hum-Me, the Native American dancer, the Fiji mermaid, or Maximo and Bartola, a couple of microcephalic siblings originally from Salvador who performed in the 1860s, to name just a few.

As the word *performing* hints at, the freak show was not only about exposition— moments for gazing, staring at physical difference—but was a more complex spectacle that included narrative moments serving as a way to wrap disability with notions the public perceived as fascinating yet repulsive. In his examination of how the freak show functioned, Bogdan explains that "showmen fabricated freaks' back-grounds, the nature of their condition, the circumstances of their current lives, and other personal characteristics. The accurate story of the life and conditions of those being exhibited was replaced by purposeful distortion designed to market and exhibit, to produce a more appealing freak" (1996, 25). The Salvadoran siblings Máximo and Bartola, for example, were nicknamed "the Aztec Children" or "the Last of the Ancient Aztecs." Their physical and geographical difference was further modified culturally as a strategy "to achieve more publicity" (Putova 2018, 95). The same is the case with Jo-Jo, the "Dog-Faced Man," born Fedor Jeftichew, who performed in the United States in the 1880s. Putova asserts "Barnum increased the attractiveness of his origin with a story according to which Fedor was found by a hunter as a wild man in a cave in the deep woods in the central part of Russia" (2018, 96). In these cases, disability matches national otherness,

and becomes saleable and profitable when in conjunction with other narrations of diversity, a link that speaks to a typically imperialist interest for exotica. The human variety of the freak show thus shows how disability and racial/ethnic and cultural difference were chained together in the show's very specific acts; disability, racial/ethnic and cultural difference constituted a continuum of otherness that stood as a 'negatively multicultural' Americanness, pigeonholing everything unwelcome within notions of national citizenship into a static, ethnically exoticized category.

The policing function of the freak's multiculturality comes even more plainly to the forefront if one considers that sideshows were also spaces for 'performed' expulsion for certain American-born subjects. This is the case, for example, of the so-called Wild Men of Borneo, born Hiram W. and Barney Davis (1825-1912) in Knox County, Ohio, two mentally disabled brothers who suffered from a form of dwarfism. Or of Zip the Pinhead (1857-1926), an African American microcephalic man born in New Jersey with the name of William Johnson. His performance was accompanied by a story about his origin that denied his Americanness in favor of a mythic African origin:

> It was captured by a party of adventurers who were in search of the gorilla. While exploring the river Gambia, near its mouth, they fell in with a race of beings never before discovered. They were six in number. They were in a PERFECTLY NUDE STATE, roving about among the trees and branches, in the manner common to the monkey and orang outang. ... The present one is the only survivor. (quoted in Lindfors 2014, 167)

Zip the Pinhead was exhibited (and therefore attractive) both for his physical impairment and for the story of his character, which provided evidence of the 'missing link,' that is, the unknown specimens testifying human descent from apes. Disabled and racialized people alike were then "depicted as evolutionary laggards or throwbacks" with respect to the white race (Bayton 2016, 36), their Americanness easily dismissed through narrative and cultural relocation.

Zip and the Wild Men of Borneo, just to cite a couple of the many more numerous possible examples, show the curiosity about physical anomaly, as well as a hunger for exotica which American imperialism was making available in the US. And, what is more interesting in my reading, they provide an exemplary case of narrative

dislocation, which moved US-born disability outside the limits of the nation via ideas of "racial otherness." By narratively expelling physical or psychological difference out of Americanness, and placing it within a performative cultural and national otherness, the freak show thus repositioned American disability within the field of the exotic/national other. The assortment of real or counterfeited non-US diversity in freak shows was in this sense "not intended as a cross-cultural experience to provide patrons with real knowledge of the ways of life and thinking of a foreign group of people" (Putova 2018, 95). Rather, the cultural ritual of freak shows "provided dilemmas of classification and definition upon which the throng of spectators could hone the skills needed to tame world and self in the ambitious project of American self-making" (Garland Thomson 1997, 59). In the cases of these extreme bodies, such as the Davis brothers' or Johnson's, cultural difference was fabricated in order to draw the line of what was to be performatively included and excluded from the United States, reinscribing local disabilities as "cultural exoticism" and expressions of foreignness. The Salvadoran Maximo and Bartola, the Italian Tocci Brothers, the Russian Jo-Jo and the 'African' Zip, came in this way to be part of the same discursive community, the 'multicultural' freak, a rendition of difference in a safe entertaining show format aimed at exorcising the intimidating changes American society was facing. In it, the disabled body and cultural and ethnic/racial otherness are linked in ambivalent ways, and trigger a reflection on how multiculturality associated with disability functioned as a tool of exclusion.

The regimentation of American bodies—from the freak to the practices of admission at Ellis Island mentioned at the beginning of this essay (Dolmage 2011)—raises doubts about the compatibility of diversity and Americanness. The list could be longer and include the physical annihilation of Native Americans, the abuse of black bodies, the legal prohibition of miscegenation, all showing a fear of an opening to bodily diversity. This is even more evident if we think of how, at the end of the 19th century, the culture of physical fitness started to become more and more central in American culture also thanks to figures such as Eugen Sandoz and Charles Atlas, two champions of American masculinity whose immigrant status has been whitewashed. Born Angelo Siciliano in Cosenza, Italy, Charles Atlas was one of the first American body-builders.

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An Italian migrant to the US—where he arrived when he was about 10—Atlas was the winner of the "America's Most Handsome Man" contest in 1921; as the creator of the Dynamic Tension program for body-builders, he became a renowned personality at a time when "Italian immigrants' whiteness was probationary and their racial difference uncontested" (Reich 2010, 445). Despite Italian Americans' uncertain racial status, Atlas' "perfect" body allowed immediate assimilation to the category of the 'American,' thus transcending his racial background (453). Whereas American disabled people were de-Americanized through the freak performance, Atlas was 'de-otherized' because of the ableness of his body, functional to discourses of American masculinity.

The comparison between Atlas's inclusion as a performer of exemplar masculinity despite his original otherness, as opposed to the exclusion of native others and their consequent inscription within freak multiculturality, highlights the centrality of disability in definitions of Americanness. While positive multiculturalism presupposes a "politics of representation and recognition within a national frame" (Chandra 2008, 834), the multiculturality of the freak, in history and in critical discourse, functions as a closet for undesired subjects, a fluid category of un-Americanness, possible by the obstructing enfreaking power of the disabled body, a category that overcomes other possible interpretive paradigms by downgrading national, ethnic, or gendered readings and imposing itself as a transnational and negative multicultural category. Contrary to the 'perfect' Atlas, the Italian Toccis, the Asian American Chang and Eng, and the African American Millie and Christine belonged to the deviant and multicultural side of the spectrum of human variety. Their disability, while physical, also testifies to how the discourse on the freak has worked as a cultural mechanism used to segregate physical otherness into a negative discourse of multiculturality opposed to Americanness. Rather than an ephemeral form of amusement, the freak performed then "important cultural work by allowing ordinary people to confront, and master, the most extreme and terrifying forms of Otherness they could imagine" (Adams 2001, 2).

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GENTEFIED AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE GENTRIFICATION RELATED LATINX CONFLICTS

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ABSTRACT

Gentefied, launched by Netflix in 2020, is a series revolving around a Mexican American family living in the LA neighborhood of Boyle Heights, showing their efforts to cope with daily needs, economic problems, and life dreams. The series tackles the complex issues related to gentrification, a phenomenon that raises a variety of conflicts in areas historically populated by minorities, changing the shape and nature of neighborhoods by increasing their economic value by renovating buildings and businesses in order to attract a more affluent population. *Gentefied* succeeds in conveying the complexity of the community's internal conflicts as well as the struggles against imposed gentrification, staging the underlying sociocultural and economic contexts in which a reconfiguration would have been inevitable in order for the neighborhood to adapt and overcome marginalization. Supported by a study of the mechanisms intrinsic to gentrification processes in the Latinx neighborhood, this paper will analyze them through their representation offered by *Gentefied*, pointing out its intrinsic values as well as fiction-related simplifications.
Keywords: Gentrification; TV series; Chicanx; Spatial Justice.

On February 21, 2020 Netflix launched *Gentefied*, a 10-episode long, fast-paced series revolving around a Mexican American family living in the LA neighborhood of Boyle Heights and their efforts to cope with daily needs, economic problems, and life dreams. Created by Linda Chávez and Marvis Lemus and produced by America Ferrera, the series was adapted from the same team's eponymous Sundance digital series (2017); aside from its slice-of-life value, *Gentefied* tackles a rather complex issue that has raised a variety of conflicts among the inhabitants of areas historically populated by minorities. Gentrification has been progressively changing the shape and quintessential nature of neighborhoods, increasing their economic value by renovating buildings and businesses in order to attract more affluent consumers and inhabitants.

Widower 'Pop' Casimiro Morales (played by Mexican actor Joaquín Cosío) and his grandchildren Erik (J.J. Soria), Chris (Carlos Santos), and Ana (Karrie Martin) orbit around their beloved family-run taco shop. Erik is presented as a loyal, little educated yet book-loving, heavily tattooed, machista young man with an estranged pregnant

girlfriend, ticking—and at the same time, challenging—most of the stereotyped features of a cholo. His conflict with Chris—who wishes to become a chef in fine dining restaurants—is pervasive and juxtaposes the clashing realities of a small family-run business and the luxury industry. Both within the family and the workplace, Chris is mocked and discriminated against because of his lighter skin tone and alleged betrayal of his own roots; nonetheless, he gets fired—and consequently ostracized within the industry—for directly confronting his employer about racist attitudes. Ana embraces her ethnicity and sexuality, but as a struggling artist she ends up 'selling out' too. Her conflicts with Afro-Latina activist girlfriend Yessika (Julissa Calderon) embody the dilemmas faced by many Latinx to achieve career goals without being exploited by affluent, overbearing Anglo agents. As their grandfather struggles to keep the shop afloat, the family tries to unite efforts to avoid its closure while pursuing their dreams. Nonetheless, both their dreams and intents of regenerating the shop to attract new clients will clash with the struggle to preserve the neighborhood from gentrification.

Through the articulation of the cousins' relationships and networks, the series reconstructs the fundamental issues related to the neighborhood's internal conflicts generated by gentrification and, more in general, the assimilation mechanisms imposed within a monoglossic national state.

GENTRIFICATION AND THE RESHAPING OF THE BARRIO

The process known as gentrification—a term coined by sociologist Ruth Glass (1964) analyzing urban evolutions in London—is fundamentally embodied by urban redevelopment and a consequent socio-spatial restructuring involving the local resident components. It is a process that "replaces the poor, usually minority, residents of frequently well-established neighborhoods with middle-class residents" (Deutsche 1996, 69), by reshaping spatial dynamics in a way that appeals to external investors and upgrading the image of the neighborhood. Gentrification is seldom planned as an equitable process: it is usually characterized by projects that dissect the neighborhood, neglecting the local, low-income residents' necessities in favor of providing an environment that is attractive for gentrifying investment (among many, see Sandoval

2018). The urban, architectural, commercial, and social upgrading lead to dramatic changes of the existing urbanscape, reinvestment of capital, and displacement of low-income groups (Lees et al. 2008). The precondition that usually represents the foothold for gentrifying plans lies in the decline of neighborhoods, affected by a systemic administrative neglect rooted in historical segregation and repression. Neighborhoods such as Boyle Heights have been populated by consolidated ethnic communities and have been objects of a consistent afflux of migrants over decades. Their urban configurations are characterized by the manifestation of the structural violence intrinsic to a history of urban policies that have led to abandonment and local devaluation of real estate. Historical neighborhoods have been plagued by underdevelopment and a progressive deterioration of urban conditions, in particular if inhabited by minority communities (among many, see Diaz 2005, 3-79). An unfair distribution of resources has been known to facilitate the exploitation of space as form of domination and segregation, as locational discrimination can be exerted by means of differential access to services (Soja 2011).

The social meaning—and the consequent discourse—distinctive of gentrification has been constructed through the constructions and discursive strategies of the frontier myth (Smith 1996, 11). The neighborhood characterized by a consistent ethnic minority community represents a new frontier for Anglo investors to conquer, configuring otherness as a new wilderness and redevelopment as the regeneration of allegedly hostile—possibly uncivil and somehow savage—urbanscapes. The frontier ideology justifies the perpetuation of social differentiation and exclusion as inevitable (Smith 1996, 16), as well as rationalizes the structural violence intrinsic to gentrification and subsequent displacement. Aside from an entrepreneurial discourse that constructs civility on bases of class and ethnicity, gentrification is usually accompanied by a commodification of a culture that is other, and thus holds an exotic attraction in the eyes of affluent consumers. Allegedly harmonizing with the existing environment, the redevelopments aim at recapturing the history and imaginary of the neighborhood in a superficial, idealized way, according to an aesthetic contextualism that Deutsche has identified as "real estate aesthetics" (Deutsche 1996, 43). New types of business find

places in the renovated buildings, providing hip products and experiences, such as vintage ethnic accessories and fusion food, satisfying the relatively volatile demand of a consumerist cultural curiosity and longing for exoticism.

Underneath a discourse of urban renaissance, gentrification processes raise the value of real estate and expand the commercial scope of the neighborhoods, consequently mining the presence of supportive services for the local, consolidated working class population. Thus, the original inhabitants of the neighborhood lose non-profit support and cannot adapt to the consequences of the rise in property values caused by redevelopment. As a result, even entire families are dispossessed or displaced. Detailed data on displacement is often obscured, yet the increase in the presence of homeless ex-residents is an issue that many non-profit organizations have been trying to address, providing relief and support. The process of exclusionary displacement affects a variety of vulnerable actors such as low-income residents and immigrant families, as well as non-profit social services that are forced to relocate to peripheral areas, losing part of their efficacy and scope. Among active private residential strategies of resistance to displacement, the most common are overcrowding and enduring the increased housing costs (see Newman and Wyly 2006) with the harrowing consequences these solutions entail. The existence of social services that resist further displacement leads to a "rough co-existence" (DeVerteuil 2012, 214) generating conflicts between entrepreneurial and social oriented politics. Clusters of non-profit social service organizations can cooperate with individual actors, local business facilities, and clients, providing "a common front against gentrification-induced displacement and dismantlement" (DeVerteuil 2012, 209), as active resistance has proven to facilitate the persistence of service hubs in gentrified areas. Nonetheless, an effective contention of the consequences of gentrification requires the intervention as well of supportive local institutions.

Aside from residential resistance, neighborhood grassroots activism has a crucial role in the struggles against gentrification and for a more equitable urban development. As Edward Soja has underlined, since the 1992 riots, Los Angeles has seen the surge of grassroots movements characterized by a strong spatial consciousness and even

specifically seeking spatial justice (Soja 2014). Ethnic identity is exercised through continuity of cultural practices and political resistance. Especially in the wake of the civil rights and Chicano movements of the 1960s, Latinx barrios have developed a historical preservation of cultural identity, often expressed through public art directly connected with the struggle for social justice (Lin 2019, 25), but also through the preservation of everyday customs, intangible heritage elements, and shared sets of values and beliefs. The importance of defending the neighborhood space, reasserting the community's control and—at the same time—its belonging to it, represents a "reaffirmation of culture, a defense of space, an ethnically bounded sanctuary, and the spiritual zone of Chicano/a and Mexicano/a identity" (Diaz 2005, 3). The fight for spatial justice (Soja 2010) offers evidence that space and its (re)arrangement are strictly related to the sociocultural milieu and have a role in producing social injustice.

Since the turn of the century, several LA neighborhoods inhabited mostly by ethnic minority communities—including Boyle Heights—have seen the emergence of the phenomenon called "gentefication." The term was allegedly coined by Mexican American entrepreneur Guillermo Uribe in 2007, after establishing his wine bar in Boyle Heights amidst the spread of gentrification businesses, and it defines redevelopment projects and processes brought forward by Latinx. These operations are often carried out by actors who advocate for locally owned businesses and the creation of safe spaces for the community, fostering a revitalization of public space (Lin 2019, 36-38). Gentefying investors are mostly young, educated, upwardly mobile Latinx professionals, belonging to an emerging Latinx middle-class investing in the neighborhood, becoming commercial and residential property owners and exploiting the entrepreneurial possibilities the rezoning can offer. New generations of Mexican Americans have been relocating and dispersing, often due to diverse configurations of social mobility and change of socioeconomic status. Some have been moving to suburbs in which they represent the demographic majority (e.g. in Los Angeles County, communities such as Whittier and Downey) ranging from lower middle-class up to so-called upscale Latinx. Others return to their neighborhoods and participate in the efforts to revitalize the barrio, often trying to preserve its cultural heritage and yet opening it up to

gentrification mechanisms. An inevitable clash between different networks existing within the same community ensues: Latinx are both victims as well as agents of gentrification.

It is worth mentioning the existence of a few other recent popular culture products revolving around gentrification. The drama *Vida* (Starz, 2018-2020) focuses on the return of two Mexican American girls to Boyle Heights upon the death of their estranged mother. Its three seasons follow their personal issues and clashes, framed within the neighborhood's struggle against gentrification; dramatic conflicts ensue, touching the topics of queerness and rejection of cultural roots as well. Conversely, Netflix's approach to the topic has been marked by a shift toward comedy, often verging on camp, nevertheless tackling the related issues in a rather lucid and forceful way. Besides *Gentefied*, the platform has produced for example the horror comedy movie *Vampires vs The Bronx* (2020), whose protagonists are local teenagers fighting an influx of real estate speculators in the Bronx. The metaphor linking gentrifiers to vampires is quite simple and yet effective, as they lure locals into selling them properties with the promise of a new affluent life, only to suck their blood until death or, at best, convert them into vampires.

THE CHOLO AND THE STRUGGLE FOR POSITIVE MASCULINITY

Gentefied opens with vignettes introducing the protagonists, establishing right away the distinctive mood of the series and outlining the characters quite effectively. The first sequence builds a stereotypic cholo narrative and imagery: Erik rides his lowrider bicycle on the sidewalk and furtively approaches a woman, pulling something out of his backpack. Rapper Santi Mostaffa's "Intratable" is playing in the background and the tone is a subtle version of the stereotypic lo-fi filters often used in US film in the representation of Mexican and Latinx narratives. The dialogue between the two characters actually happens outside the local public library, as Erik returns some books and asks the librarian if any copy of Gary Chapman's *The Five Love Languages* is available yet.

Erik has been living with his grandfather Casimiro and late grandmother Fina since childhood, as his father was a petty criminal getting in and out of prison and he was estranged by his mother. Casimiro has owned the Mama Fina's taco shop for decades and has developed a more intense emotional connection with it since his wife died. Despite being fluent in English, he mostly speaks Spanish, facilitating most of the bilingual sequences in the series as his grandchildren converse with him in English or code-switch through the dialogue. The relationship he has with Erik is of the fatherly kind, characterized by intimate connection and reciprocal respect, responding to patterns typical of Mexican upbringing and so-called *familismo* (among many, see Rueschenberg and Buriel 1989; Cauce and Domenech-Rodríguez 2002; Crockett et al. 2007; Calzada et al. 2013). Gender role is a key aspect in the construction of both Erik's and Casimiro's characters. The latter represents the traditional set of values that characterize Mexican American communities, based on the centrality of the family and the notion of respect, whereas the former embodies the struggles intrinsic to Mexican American fatherhood in present times. Erik's estranged girlfriend Lidia (Annie Gonzalez) ended their relationship because she is pregnant and considers him not reliable enough to be at her side. Her life project is to move out of the barrio, accepting a job offer at Stanford; she is also a highly educated feminist, nagging him for his toxic masculinity as she seems to have lost any hope in the possibility that he could change and, overall, she is considered "too good" for him.

Within the quite limited representation of Latinx families in mainstream popular culture products, the representation of Latinx fathers is often omitted or generically connected to patriarchal simplifications (Hernández 2015, 247). Reduced to superficial characterizations, the father often embodies a stereotypically described masculinity situated within the family context, bereft of positive aspects and an affective role. The pathological, negative view of machismo is often imposed from agents external to the community and—as Mirandé among others analyzed thoroughly (1994, 165-182)— corresponds to a selective construction of machismo that focuses on negative, stereotypical aspects of Mexican American masculinity. A reassessment is necessary to discern false manifestations of machismo—connected to violent behaviors and toxic

masculinity—from genuine machismo values, such as generosity and courage (Mendoza 1962, 75-86), corresponding to an ideal of positive masculinity within the framework of the Mexican and Mexican American collective imaginary or "popular philosophy" (Paredes 1967, 73).

Latinx fatherhood and positive machismo are imbued with cultural expectations, work ethics, supportive presence, responsibility, dedication to one's own family, and a central importance given to education (Behnke and Taylor 2005). In fact, Mexican American adolescents have shown awareness and understanding of the nuances of the father-child relationship, identifying the expressions of paternal concern and the supportiveness intrinsic to the sacrifices a father makes to provide for the family (Crockett et al. 2007). These aspects are highlighted in *Gentefied*, as an indirect yet constant display of caring marks Erik and Casimiro's interactions and their sharing in daily activities, expressed through joking and masculine complicity. Also, the grandfather provides his grandchild with the keys to unlock such a configuration of fatherhood, as adult development and fathering styles are influenced by the intergenerational transmission of familial values (Behnke and Taylor 2005). For example, Erik is mistakenly ready to sacrifice his own salary to help solving the taco shop's economic issues, as "family comes first" (ep. 1); nonetheless, Casimiro's reaction corrects his misjudgment on the issue, reminding him that he needs to take care of Lidia and his unborn child. When a drunk Casimiro is arrested for breaking the windows of a gentrified property (ep. 1), a crack in his fathering role opens, as he used to take Erik to the same detention center to see his young father. His shame, though, is accompanied by the impotence gentrification is imposing on Casimiro, both as a business owner and as family head. Erik is the only person that he wants to know about his detention, asking him to find a solution even though the necessity to pay the bail worsens their economic problems. His grandchild scolds him and refuses to seek Chris's help, unaware that his cousin has some considerable savings set aside for culinary school. Erik does understand the struggle and suffering that lie behind Casimiro's situation, yet nonetheless he wishes to solve the situation by himself. This leads to a series of attempts involving Ana, then

Chris, until, eventually, his ex-girlfriend Lidia will lend him the money after he attends her ultrasound appointment (ep. 2).

A positive Latinx masculinity that is supportive and strengthened by notions of honor and respect, as well as generosity, courage, and stoicism (Mirandé 1997, 79) is possible, and it does exist in reality. Erik's resilient evolution throughout the series subverts the one-dimensional, stereotyped construction of Chicano masculinity, while he tries to find meaning and identity as a father. Yet, it does not need to be a radical evolution, as the positive aspects of machismo were already present in his character from a diegetic time before the narrated events. Possibly, the configuration of his relationship with Lidia was not allowing space for a change in his consolidated behavioral patterns, strongly influenced by social and cultural expectations as a Chicano raised in the barrio. The mutual understanding and communication between the couple evolves in the series, moving the relationship on from stereotyped patterns to an actually equal connection based on future plans. Something clicks for Erik when he attends the aforementioned ultrasound appointment, prompting him to seriously commit to Lidia and his unborn child. When she doesn't seem to believe in his stance, he asks her how she can expect him "to do better, if [she doesn't] give [him] the chance to be better" (ep. 3). In fact, he starts to approach the journey toward fatherhood with short, apparently insignificant steps, such as listening to Lidia's favorite feminist Chicana podcasts (ep. 3) to learn about toxic masculinity and reading books about maternity. Erik's strong—albeit at times misguided—connection with Lidia is also fundamental, as a definite correlation has been found between the positive involvement with the partner and the father's increased engagement with their children (Cabrera and Bradley 2012). In an intimate conversation with his grandfather (ep. 7), Erik confesses that he is afraid of not being "the man [Lidia] deserves." Casimiro prompts him to ask her to marry him and tells him to talk openly about committing to the family they can build together. After helping her out for a long, complicated day and preparing the baby's nursery, Erik accidentally finds out she has been granted the job at Stanford as assistant dean of student life (ep. 7). The news keeps him from expressing his proposal, as he decides instead—albeit heartbrokenly—to insist that she follows her

dreams, whereas his dream "has always been [her]" since they were high-school sweethearts. Erik is firm in his stance and even quarrels with her father Pancho (Rafael Siegler), who wants him to talk her out of the job (ep. 9). Eventually, upon the baby's birth, he decides to follow her to Stanford (ep. 10).

Meanwhile, Erik does contribute actively to the taco shop's cause, informing himself about related legislation and seeking the help of a pro-bono lawyer to resolve the lease situation. The lawyer succeeds in elucidating their position and rights as tenants and Casimiro rewards her support with some *burritos de carnitas*, abiding by a rooted Mexican American custom (ep. 5). Episode nine opens once again with a vignette protagonized by Erik playing with the cholo stereotype. The close-up shot shows his grave, menacing expression while he advances and Classik and Kidd Marley's "hood approved" rap track "Dope Boy" plays in the background, possibly as diegetic music. The frame changes and the viewer sees that Erik is pushing a library cart, part of his own "read a book, get a taco" program; at the shop, he has been lending books to undocumented kids, testing them to verify if they read the books, and awarding them some free tacos if they did. His program has expanded: it has been given the wordplay name "Li' Bro" and now he walks around the barrio lending books and providing recommendations to the local kids, promoting the shop's new activities at the same time. Erik is actually a keen reader of all sorts of books—his recommendations include a barrio-infused description of the plot of Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* in episode four—and a passionate reader of Cli-Fi essays (ep. 3), aside from delivering some of the most articulate and informed bits of speech in the whole series.

Episode six is dedicated to a subplot involving Javier, a friend of the Morales family and regular customer of the taco shop, who works as a mariachi to support his child Danny and their family back in Mexico. The business is stalling, as the local bars and restaurants look for different music genres to entertain their new, more affluent Anglo customers and those "hipsters no aprecian la música de mariachi clásica" [hipsters don't appreciate traditional mariachi music]. Despite trying to innovate his group's gig, Javier and Danny are forced to live in a van and to cut down on basic expenses to stay afloat. Javier tries to resort to social services and non-profit

organizations, but they will eventually have to move to Bakersfield, where his brother lives and can provide work for him at a local factory. Aside from his own sense of failure, Javier is struggling to force his son to leave his school and cut ties with the friends he has in Los Angeles, but their departure is inevitable, as they cannot continue to live in homelessness and uncertainty.

THE FRAGMENTED IDENTITY OF THE MODERN POCHO

The second introductory vignette presents Chris in his workplace: he is employed at a renowned luxury restaurant, owned by a demanding chef. The kitchen, though, is populated by Latinx employees, among whom Chris stands out for his culinary training and the shortcomings of his Spanish. He recently returned to Los Angeles after a decade spent working in various kitchens, lastly in Idaho, where there was "no real Mexican anything" (ep. 1). He struggles for most of the series to affirm his Mexicanness, while the people around him deprecate it and make fun of him throwing popular ethnic slurs at him. Ana's little sister Nayeli (Bianca Melgar) calls him "White boy" (ep. 1), while Erik calls him "wheat cracker" (ep. 5) and "Mr. Identity Crisis" (ep. 9). Even Casimiro repeatedly calls him *güero*, a term that in Mexico is not necessarily used to refer to someone actually blond or light skinned. It is, rather, a term of submission to address a person considered somehow superior, such as a customer could be; conversely, it can be used defiantly and to mock people who think themself superior.

Since its depiction in the golden age of Mexican cinema, a pocho is described as a person "who has forgotten [their] roots and who has exchanged the vitality of idiosyncrasy for the superficiality of Americanization" (Monsiváis 2005, 70), embodying the guilty conscience of people's voluntary or passive loss of cultural roots. Language is one of the keys to delineating the pocho, as their linguistic loss reveals their alleged status immediately; Chris's Mexicanness is put in doubt just as much as his linguistic knowledge. It is worth mentioning that even in the barrio there has been a progressive loss of the use of Spanish, partly due to the assimilative monoglossic policies that have characterized public education (among many, see García 1983; 2003). The development of an articulated bilingualism—or even effective translingualism—is facilitated by

adequate support in the educational system; when public education does not provide the opportunity of bilingual learning, an impoverishment of the linguistic resources accessible to the younger generations is inevitable. It is worth noting that, in recent years, the offer of TV broadcasts and popular culture products aimed at a Spanish-speaking audience has increased, as well as widened its generational scope, promoting a wishful return to bilingualism. Nonetheless, the rooted, nation-wide lack of support from the institutions to favor such a process impairs the development of an advanced command of Spanish; linguistic support in the barrio is usually offered by non-profit organizations offering bilingual spaces in the context of social justice grassroot activism (Marini 2019).

In *Gentefied*, the struggle and quest for identity and authenticity are constructed by means of humor, which is pervasive and helps in constructing the lucid awareness the barrio inhabitants have about the gentrification process as well. Chris's co-workers try his Mexicanness through a series of hilarious tests, including quizzes on Mexican telenovelas, geography, and candy (ep. 3). His heritage suddenly becomes credible, though, only when Erik storms the kitchen of the restaurant to collect the bail money and his co-workers see them together. Chris's relationship with his cousins is also very problematic, as Erik and Ana are wary of his attitudes and career plans. When he tries to give practical suggestions in order to keep the taco shop afloat, he misses the complex family bonds underlying the organization of Casimiro's business. Attempting to (re)connect with Erik, Chris cannot grasp the struggles his family is involved in, and sometimes his commentaries come across as condescending and out of place. Throughout the series, he manages to rediscover the intimate, familiar bond he has with his childhood and the members of his family.

Chris could be White passing, and it would be an attitude coherent with the colorist environment that characterizes luxury catering. It is evident that the Mangia kitchen is full of Latinx workers—mostly undocumented—who carry out most of the preparation and actual cooking, but none of them can be appointed to any higher position within the food industry. Chris has been pursuing a career in this sector and has secured his position at Mangia because the chef does consider him superior to the

rest of the crew. Executive chef Austin (Greg Ellis) is constantly nagging his Latinx subordinates for petty reasons, sustaining a rather discriminatory discourse that intertwines with his distinctive aggressive arrogance. The repeated racist remarks make Chris feel patently and progressively uneasy, until he confronts Chef Austin directly and gets fired (ep. 3). On the night he offered Erik and Lidia a dinner at the restaurant, the chef enters the kitchen and asks "who let the delivery guy [Erik] in," then proceeds to insult the whole staff and one Venezuelan member in particular. Chris reacts—triggered by the insults and fueled by his unrecognized Mexicanness—by lashing out at Chef Austin, calling him out for his racism and contemptible behavior. His boss threatens to call ICE on his own employees to show them "how racist" he can be, and Chris punches him before getting thrown out of the restaurant. From that moment, he will go through a depressive period and then start to help actively at the taco shop. After a long while, he feels accepted and his Mexican identity is somehow confirmed by the shop's regulars, who quit nagging him by asking if he can really speak Spanish (ep. 9).

The taco shop's landlord Roberto is another problematic pocho figure, embodying the aforementioned processes of gentefication. Erik calls Roberto "Rob-the-rent-hiker" (ep. 7), as well as "coconut" and "potato" (ep. 1) using derogatory terms usually directed toward people who are considered "White inside and Brown outside," as they allegedly deny their own ethnic heritage and assimilate the attitudes, values, and ideological stances peculiar to the White middle- and upper-classes. Once he starts to participate in the family business, Chris's suggestions to help are often too detached from the reality of the neighborhood. For example, he proposes a "tikka masala taco" that proves to be a failure, and yet the experiment prompts Casimiro to try something new (eps. 3-4). He also uploads videos online to foster the arrival of new customers, uses customer review platforms, and suggests the implementation of new decor (ep. 7). Chris's approach, though, often lacks tact. Casimiro discovers that his longtime friend Lupe has been able to exploit the gentrification process and was able to cut out a space for herself, taking advantage of affluent new customers. Thus, he accepts to try out new solutions, and yet he struggles when the grandchildren dismantle parts of the shop that remind him of his late wife. Despite being mostly Chris's doing, when he leaves

saddened and offended, it is Erik that follows him, and a meaningful father-to-son conversation ensues. Despite the awareness and understanding that children show toward the different upbringing and hardships their migrant parents endured, intergenerational differences inevitably lead to conflict, and they are at times perceived as disrespectful to the elder members of the family (Crockett et al. 2007, 656).

Crucially, the main struggle for the shop is that the implementation of changes to attain new, more affluent customers implies the loss of its barrio regulars, who cannot afford higher prices for their everyday meals. Eventually, Chris proposes participating in a food tour through Boyle Heights organized by *LA Weekly*, around which episode nine revolves. Yessika confronts him about this decision, claiming that he doesn't understand the repercussions of "welcoming outsiders *en masse*" which leads to "pushing people out of their homes and into the tents around every corner." The topic of homelessness caused by gentrification is partially shown in episode eight, although it is not explained exactly why some people live in tents until her dialogue with Chris. Displacement is one of the most evident consequences of gentrification, and yet not all local inhabitants can afford to move to a different part of the city or a suburb. Just as Javier was living in a van with his child, many people are forced to find unstable alternatives while waiting for possible opportunities with the support of the surviving social services. Nonetheless, bureaucratic procedures can take a very long time and often cannot guarantee a positive outcome for the applicants. Yessika proposes looking for "other ways to fundraise for Pop," but she cannot really offer a feasible way to raise the money the shop needs in order to survive. She plans a protest against the shop on the day of the food tour and the Morales family needs to make a counterplan. Even though Casimiro believes that she won't create problems as "Yessika es como de la familia y no va a venir aquí a protestar" [Yessika is part of the family and she won't come here to protest], he, Chris, Erik, and Nayeli reunite and discuss the issue to avoid the protest damaging their event. Erik states that "there's nothing gentrifiers hate more than be called gentrifiers" because of White guilt; the solution he offers is to make the protest seem part of the experience, as a "piece of next-level immersive performance art" and thus a "reclaiming of the narrative." To do so, they produce a comic advertising

video exploiting stereotypes, in which Chris plays the Anglo hipster coming across the shop, Erik plays the cholo thug—with a fake, black marker executed teardrop tattoo on his cheek—and Nayeli joins the regulars in a fake protest (ep. 9). Yessika and her friends expect Ana to address the situation—considering her and her cousins as "sellouts"—but she says that she won't stop her grandfather from trying to save the shop at all costs. The counterplan actually works and the shop is stormed by affluent Anglo customers, dressed up with Mexican hats and accessories embodying the existing commodification of Mexican heritage in the US leisure industry. It is worth noting that the customers mention the Taco Tuesday custom that has become popular since the 90s, offering special taco menus on Tuesdays. If on the one hand it is a sign of appreciation and some Latinx customers indulge in it as well, on the other hand the custom holds a controversial, underlying sense of appropriation and commodification.

QUEERING THE BARRIO AND THE EXPLOITATIVE ART PROMISE

The third vignette opening the series is an intimate scene with Ana and her girlfriend Yessika as protagonists, interrupted by an offstage sneering remark by Ana's mother, reminding her to tell her *negra* that there is coffee and *pan dulce* for both. Despite its apparent courtesy, the remark instantaneously introduces some of the topics of criticism that characterize the series, such as homophobia and colorism internal to the community, but also gentrification. Ana is an emerging, striving artist wishing for her work to be recognized, whereas Yessika is a grassroots activist against the gentrification processes that are imposed on the neighborhood. In the opening sequence, the latter warns the former that she is not "dating a *vendida*," anticipating the core issue that their relationship will face throughout the episodes.

Ana's life is characterized by the conflictive relationship she has with her mother Beatriz (Laura Patalano), who does not approve of her lifestyle and lashes out that she kills herself working to support her "mientras que [Ana] juega al artista" [while Ana plays artist]. Episode eight is dedicated to a subplot starring Ana's mother and her struggle against her exploitative boss. She works at a *maquiladora* where female workers are treated inhumanely, and forced to work in conditions violating labor laws and

human rights, while under the constant threat of dismissal; the workers evidently cannot refuse to suffer these conditions as they have families to support and some of them are undocumented. The issues related to intergenerational conflict and the possibility of change permeate her relationship with her daughters, as she is sacrificing her own life to support them and struggles to admit the acceptability of lifestyles different from hers. Clearly, she doesn't want that same life for her daughters but cannot figure out any valid alternatives; she works overtime and even brings extra work home to give them anything they need, but it never seems to be enough. Beatriz lives her life pervaded by hardship and despair, paralyzed by the sense of impotence and loss of dignity that the work at a *maquiladora* entails. Change will come when she successfully manipulates her overbearing boss in order to have the work reorganized in a more efficient way and stops him forcing the workers to work at home as well. In the same episode, Nayeli attempts to run away to visit her friend Danny in Bakersfield and is retrieved by Casimiro, who has a meaningful talk with her and, once again, plays the fathering role that is missing in his grandchildren's lives.

Ana as well is conditioned by *familismo* and the notion that family comes first. For example, to help Erik raise the money to pay for Casimiro's bail she throws away a chance to get a job as assistant to a renowned artist, which could have been a concrete development in her career. Later on, she gets hired by Tim, an Anglo gallerist, to work at a party, where she and Chris enjoy a night of fun and relief from their struggles; nonetheless, the party is populated by White people dressed up as Native Americans (ep. 4). The barrio represents a physical, spatial Latinx cultural milieu (Sandoval 2018), corresponding to a heterotopia where the Latinx community can thrive and retain its cultural heritage. Social justice activism—such as the movement Yessika leads—has been developing in order to reassert control over the neighborhood, which is also an attempt to preserve the immaterial heritage that characterizes it. The penetration of gentrifying gallerists and urban developers that promote an imposed "artification" of the barrio have often instrumentalized subjects like Ana, local artists who would accept their conditions in order to survive while pursuing their artistic path.

Figure 1. Ana's mural (Gentefied, Season 1, Episode 5, 10':30") © Netflix

Ana is commissioned to paint a mural in the barrio, on a wall of the building the gentrifying gallerist bought to set up his art market aimed at affluent buyers (ep. 5); her task is to "beautify the location" in order to attract people and other artists from outside the community. Her final artwork represents two male luchadores making out (fig. 1), sparking controversial reactions among the locals. Besides the economic problems she has been dealing with because of gentrification, old Ofelia, the tenant of the corner shop next to the mural, is harassed because of it and her customers threaten to buy their groceries at the 7-Eleven nearby if that *cochinero* [obscenity] remains on the wall. When she attempts to paint over it, Tim intervenes saying that if she does, she would owe him thousands of dollars. Furthermore, his discourse is based on the legitimizing notion that he engages in gentrifying activities for her and the local community's good. He states that he is "raising property value[s]" and he doesn't need to ask for Ofelia's permission to do whatever he wants with the building, because "she doesn't know what is good for her." This kind of condescending, overbearing discourse is supported by a delegitimization of the original barrio inhabitants, constructing them as an opposing, generalized collective not civilized enough to know what is better for them. Once again, the new frontier ideology is applied to a whole community, depicted as a group of good (or bad) savages living in an urban wilderness that it is right to conquer and subdue. The gentrifying actors only accept those inhabitants who willingly accept their

impositions, and it doesn't matter whether they do so to embrace the gentrificatory 'vision' or to try surviving the regeneration process. The diegetic connotation of the Anglo gallerist is composed of many telling elements, among which it is worth noting his car's license plate spelling "RU4SALE," reminding the viewer of the opening vignette in which Yessika made fun of Ana calling her a *vendida* [sell-out]. Ana tries to make up to Ofelia by organizing a cash mob—inviting people to buy all the inventory—but she fails again at dealing with the locals, condescendingly imposing a solution that would only put a temporary patch on the shop's economic situation and cut out her regulars. Even though Ofelia seems partially to understand what Ana is trying to accomplish, she expresses harshly realistic remarks and insists that the image has to be erased.

The mural is vandalized and then painted over, crushing Ana's expectations and artistic aspirations; what is most interesting, though, is the issue intrinsic to the representation of Brown bodies and their queering. On the one hand, the locals' reaction is understandable, as the art-related gentrification is problematic and characterized by galleries and artists who seem to assume a role as "the 'shock troops' of gentrification [...] [depicting] the transformation of the declining neighborhood as romantic bohemia permitting the flourishing of individual freedom" (Deutsche 1996, 151). On the other hand, it seems impossible for Ana to express her identity as a queer Chicana within the barrio. Aside from her participation in the gentrifying process, an internal regeneration is needed to allow the creation of a space for her in her own community; the representation of overtly queer Brown bodies is a crucial problem in itself within the Chicanx milieu. In the 80s, the otherwise circumscribed Chicanx movements saw a breakthrough thanks to openly queer intellectuals and creators such as Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Francisco Alarcón among many (Aldama 2005, 21-23). Aztlán—the mythic locus of Chicanx resistance—became also a queered, inclusive heterotopia where colonial oppression, racialization, patriarchy, and homophobia could be remapped. Nonetheless, the queering of the Chicanx heterotopia remains a terrain where old and new perspectives clash. Queer Brownness is also embodied by Norma (Brenda Banda), the shop's Salvadorean employee who is often keeping things together while the family argues and clashes. Her characterization is that

of a butch lesbian, even though she is depicted as caring, fun, and understanding, rather than through common stereotypes.

Yessika is very proud of Ana's work, although it represents yet another struggle. Within her social justice activism, she fights for queer rights, and yet there is a highly conflictual opposition in her stance. Her approach to contesting gentrification processes is often rather Manichean, averse to any kind of innovation that both the external gentrifying agents and the local business actors might invest in. Nonetheless, the barrio's conservative attitudes imply a certain degree of exclusion and negation of diversity affecting her own identity and rights. The mural issue also raises a core conflict around the notion of respect and its centrality in the Chicanx community culture: the landlord has all the legal rights to paint on his property's walls without asking permission to the tenants, and yet he should have asked out of respect. Moreover, the possible alternatives to help local businesses to survive and thrive are not very realistic, effective, or feasible. Yessika clearly feels impotent and transfers her frustration to her fighting activism, creating further problems for the owners who are striving to find actual solutions. She comes across as almost obsessed by the fear of losing her community, yet it is also evident that she purposely doesn't want to listen to her barrio peers who are actively trying to avoid displacement. The lack of the necessary institutional support for opposition to the gentrification process is patent, leading to ineffective protests and—even more critically—to conflicts internal to the community, which inevitably contribute to a further weakening of the barrio's social fabric. Casimiro's conversation with Yessika during the protest against the shop (ep. 9) bares the quintessential conundrum: while she states that she cares for the community, accusing him of "selling [its] soul," he reminds her that he too is part of it. Erik chimes in and tells her that if they have to choose between the gentrifiers and themselves, he chooses "us." Yessika then quarrels with Ana, both about the shop issue and because she is going to hold a personal exhibition supported by Tim (ep. 10). Her show is a success and even her mom attends, showing her appreciation; as Erik comments, the meaning of her art is that their "*gente*'s joy deserves to be captured." Nonetheless, Ana gets fed up with the exploitative discourse characterizing the gallerist and the Anglo

public; upon hearing the news that another gentrifier investor has already bought the building where the taco shop is, she spray paints all over the show's main wall "*raza* not for sale!" and leaves to go visit Erik's newborn daughter at the hospital.

CONCLUSIONS

Without taking a defined position on the conflicts, the series succeeds in conveying the complexity of the intersectional struggles internal to the neighborhood community and, in fact, the impossibility of leaning starkly to one side or the other. It also effectively stages the underlying sociocultural and economic contexts in which—even without the intervention of gentrifying agency—a reconfiguration would have been inevitable for the neighborhood to adapt to current times and thrive, overcoming its marginalization. Spatial and cultural consciousness, as well as survival, reveal the necessity of not falling into overbearing, commodifying mechanisms. The core theme at the base of ethnic resistance to external gentrifying actors and capricious hipster appropriation lies in Yessika's words, as she states that "they may love all our shit, but they don't love us" (ep. 1). The series ends with Casimiro being stopped due to the fine he must pay for his initial vandalism charges and thus, getting detained by ICE agents. Gentrification has indirectly led to an even more dramatic displacement: most likely, he will be deported to Mexico. Scourged by issues related to unjust urban development practices, the family splits and is forced to move in new directions. Despite the bittersweet ending, their hope is resilient; as Casimiro tells Ana in episode one, "somos pinches pobres, pero con un chingo de sueños" [we are damn poor, but with lots of dreams].

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MOVING TOWARD WHITENESS. URBAN CHANGE, SOCIAL HOUSING AND ETHNIC RELATIONSHIPS IN CHICAGO AFTER WWII

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ABSTRACT

"All the riots that I unearthed in the immediate post-war period had a common impulse: each result from the shifting of racial residential boundaries" (Hirsch 1983, xii). The history of Chicago after WWII was characterized by two main issues: a series of new urban plans and vigorous internal mobility. Immigrants from Europe and African Americans from the rural South needed 'spaces' to inhabit. Thus, many agencies, like the Chicago Housing Authority, designed a series of interventions that, in addition to changing the pattern of the city, deeply influenced the relations between ethnic communities. Moreover, the heavy industrialization of the city, with the consequent need of low-cost housing, transformed the urban landscape. This paper aims to reconstruct how the gradual changes in the urban environment have had a direct impact on relationships between ethnic groups. Thus, fuel was thrown onto the fire of social struggles and reactions such as "white flight" took hold.
Keywords: Immigrants; African Americans; Ethnic Minorities; Urban History; Chicago.

You asked me earlier, how did they [the Americans] treat you?

[Interviewer]: Yeah.

Well, the way they treat the blacks several years back was the way they treated the Italians. If you were Italian, you were the scum, you know. Why, because you came in and you worked the lowliest job, you did the ditch digging and toilet cleaning and so on and so forth, where the group before that, by this time, became a little more educated and made a little bit more money, was able to afford a little better houses and you would move into where they moved out of, just like the blacks moved in where the whites moved out of for a while ...

(CMS. 114, BOX 6 PAN-98, 27-28)

*M*oved in where the whites moved out. But the Italians were white, weren't they? So what do the words of Angelo Pane, an Italian immigrant from Chicago,

interviewed by a researcher from Dominic Candeloro's crew in 1980 mean?[1] The aim of this paper is to investigate the relationships between Chicago's immigrant communities and the urban renewal plans effected by the city in the 1940s and 1960s, highlighting the role played by the processes of urban expansion in creating an increasingly wider and irreparable fracture between some ethnic communities—namely the Northern and Central European immigrants—and others, such as Latino and African American. In order to do so, the two key issues underlying this study need to be analyzed. The first one is the urban development that Chicago has been dealing with since the end of the 1800s, through a series of interventions in the city layout that had as goals, on the one hand, the expansion of the city's boundaries and, on the other, an improvement in the quality of life. The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 was intended to go precisely in this direction, proving that Chicago could become the capital of the Midwest. This was also the objective of the Plan of Chicago, a renovation project through which the architects Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett in 1909 wanted to transform the city from an industrial outpost into a model for the new modern middle class. Partially failing in the mission, Chicago was instead overturned by new infrastructures for the mobility of workers and goods, infrastructures that were real barriers of social separation. Alongside this, and perhaps partly as a consequence, a strongly accelerated expansion of public housing projects occurred: in effect, a large number of workers corresponds to a considerable need for housing. This issue constitutes the second and most important aspect which will be analyzed in this paper.

The public housing projects that began to characterize Chicago in the transitional years of the 19th and 20th centuries were intended for an economically fragile social class. Moreover, among the many objectives that were set, one of these was to favor the coexistence of different communities. Since the ethnic structure of Chicago

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[1] The *Italians in Chicago Oral History Project* was a study about Italian Immigrants in Chicago in the twentieth century. Brought on by professor Dominic Candeloro at the Department of History at the University of Illinois with funds from The National Endowment for the Humanities, the aim was to document the Italian American experience in Chicago. The outcome was 114 interviews, recorded in the years 1979-1981 and then transcribed and analyzed by the researchers themselves. The interviews cited in this paper are from the archive of the Center for Migration Studies of New York. The catalogue code of all the interviews is CMS.114 BOX, following item nr.

was already in those years strongly characterized by European immigrants and, after the 1920s, by an increasing number of African Americans, the first consequence was that public housing and social settlement ended up becoming a 'laboratory' for interethnic coexistence. From here, we can then begin to reason about the central object of the article. Can it be argued that Chicago's urban renewal and expansion projects influenced community relations? If so, was there or was there not an intentionality in public and private agencies to foster rather than hinder these relationships? Or could the opposite have occurred? Friction between ethnic groups certainly has the power to alter *social* boundaries. But can this influence the modification of *residential* boundaries? The racial covenants that will be discussed below were one example. Theser, strongly supported by associations of property owners and local politicians, being legitimized by legislation that was still segregationist, demonstrated that where the law did not arrive, direct relationships between communities could do the rest. The words of Angelo Pane that open this article are an example of this.

Finally, why Chicago? The theme of gentrification, the 'white flight' phenomenon—the flight to the suburbs of the white middle class in the second half of the twentieth century—as well as the relationship between ghettoization and ethnic minorities, are issues present in other US cities throughout the twentieth century.[2] Newark, Boston, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles have had a similar history, but specifically Chicago was the most important destination of a strategic emigration of African Americans from the rural South, and it is behind these strategies that we can find Chicago's paradigmatic role in studying the relationships between social mobility, segregation, and conflict within public housing programs.[3]

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[2] About this question in other US cities, see Carnevale 2014, Nicolaides 2019, and Stanger-Ross 2009.
[3] For further studies see Grossman 1991; St. Clare Drake and Cayton Horace 1945.

FROM SETTLEMENT TO PUBLIC HOUSING

In the late 1700s, Baptiste Point du Sable decided to establish his own business near the mouth of the Chicago River. DeSaible was a free man of Dominican origin, a "handsome negro, well educated" (Andreas 1884, 71), of African ancestry through his mother. We can therefore say that the history of Chicago as a paradigmatic city of the Midwest began with an immigrant, one, moreover, belonging to a minority.
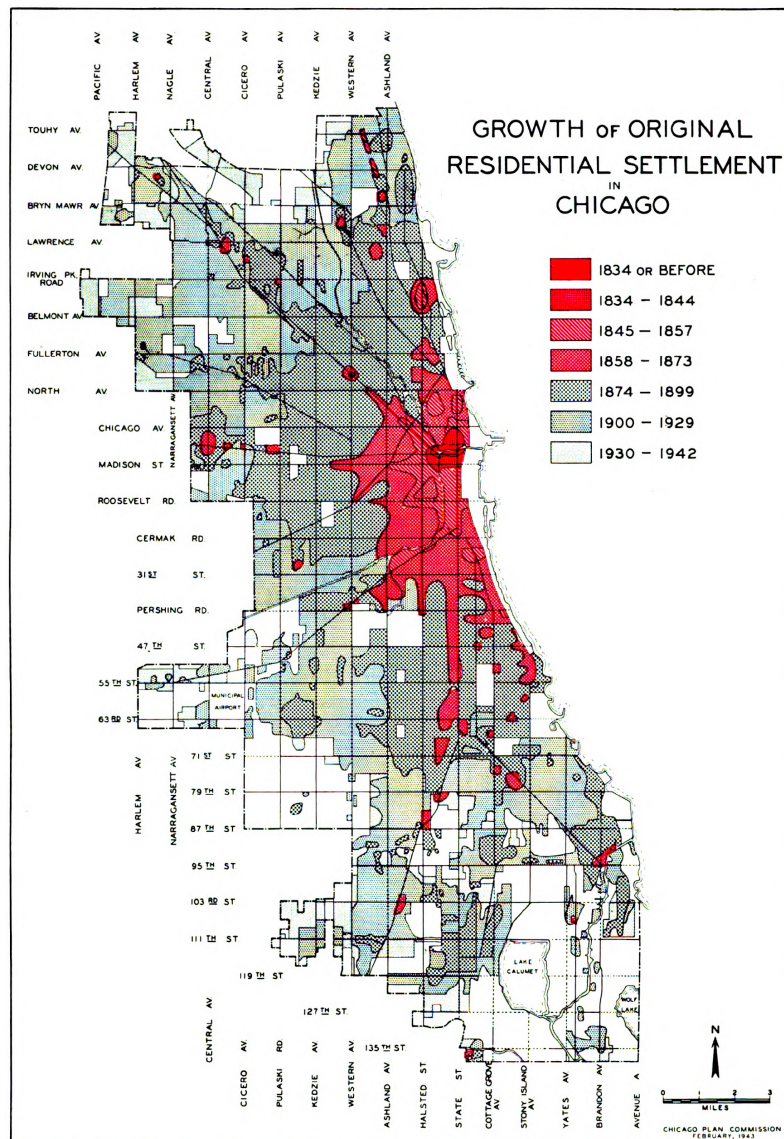

Figure 1. Growth of Original Residential Settlement in Chicago. (Chicago Plan Commission 1943, 22)

Marco Moschetti |
Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the urban structure underwent significant expansion, which increased exponentially between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Plan of Chicago, for example, fell squarely within this ideal of improving the quality of life by modernizing the urban structure. This development had two main directions. The first was linked to the private market, for many decades the main agent of expansion of the city boundaries. The second, with greater social impact, was instead the beginning of a long process of public building, which radically changed various social relationships. In particular, this second aspect was part of a larger project in which many American cities were involved, starting in 1918, when 16,000 housing units were built for war workers across the country. In 1932, the government passed the Emergency Relief and Construction Act as a response to the Great Depression, and the following year the National Industrial Recovery Act initiated major urban redevelopment projects. Specifically, this was implemented through a policy of slum clearance, ultimately established in 1937 with the National Housing Act (Meyerson and Banfield 1969, 17-18). The idea that the elimination of low-cost housing, replaced by new housing and infrastructure, could lead to an improvement in the quality of life and, above all, to an improvement in civic values, was for several decades one of the most frequent debates. Through a process of urban renewal, the goal was to cleanse the community of harmful elements, thereby reducing crime, violence, and degradation.

Since its foundation in the mid-1930s, the Federal Housing Authority has emphasized the correlation—first presumed and then gradually taken for granted—between minorities mixing and social risk. After WWII, the guidance FHA evaluators received before designing new typology of construction was, in fact, intended to prevent racial coexistence:

> By underwriting mortgages issued by lending institutions, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) made it possible for a larger share of working and middle-class individuals to own homes, but arguably exacerbated racial disparities: the property-owning majority that was created in the period after World War II was white. There is general agreement that FHA underwriting criteria played an important part in this story. (Tillotson 2014, 25)

If we look at Chicago's urban redesign under the lens of what Tillotson suggests about the FHA, we can observe the emergence of what Hirsch masterfully defined as *racial geography*: "The peculiar characteristics of Chicago's racial geography—the Black Belt's concrete northern end, the white thorn in its flank, and its newly occupied southern and western provinces—were all, in some measure, acquired through government action after World War II" (Hirsch 1983, 10). There is, however, a next step, a sort of "evolution" of urban redevelopment involving Chicago and other US cities. If, in fact, it was necessary to rethink the urban model, from housing to infrastructure, due to the large flows of internal and external immigration that had considerably increased the population in almost all the industrial cities of the Midwest, it was equally important that housing be affordable. The demolition and subsequent reconstruction of entire neighborhoods was one of the most frequently followed paths, despite having a direct impact on community equilibrium. In fact, the areas considered most difficult were almost always inhabited by immigrants and, especially after the 1930s, by African Americans. This meant that redrawing the boundaries between blocks equated to redrawing the ethnic boundaries of Chicago:

> The ground plan of most American cities, for example, is a checkerboard. The unit of distance is the block. This geometrical form suggests that the city is a purely artificial construction which might conceivably be taken apart and put together again, like a house of blocks. The fact is, however, that the city is rooted in the habits and customs of the people who inhabit it. The consequence is that the city possesses a moral as well as a physical organization, and these two mutually interact in characteristic ways to mold and modify one another. (Park, Bourgess and McKenzie 1925, 4)

Hence, when the FHA decided that this checkerboard needed to be changed, the first consequence was a crisis in Chicago's very racial geography. This was due to a shift in the delicate balance that had developed over decades of overlapping and alternating ethnic communities:

> The city's streets can be read as can the geological record in the rock. The old stone fronts of the houses on the side streets; old residences along lower Rush and State, crowded between new business blocks, or with shops built along the street in front of them; … "Deutsche Apotheke" on the window of a store in a

> neighborhood long since Italian. These are signs that record the changes brought about by the passing decades, changes still taking place today. (Zorbaugh 1929, 4)

The development and planning of boundaries pre-eminently of ethnic significance, capable of defining which areas could be considered high or low risk, highlighted another element. In the years when Chicago was taking the form of a mosaic, each tile represented a neighborhood and, more importantly, its predominant ethnicity. Deciding where to live could mean social mobility or being relegated to constant ghettoization: people, by choosing their place in the city, could define themselves, their personal and collective identity. Positioning oneself beyond an urban geographical boundary—for example between the Gold Coast and the slums of Little Sicily—was a clear affirmation of belonging. The main problem, however, was whether immigrants, and even more so African Americans, could make such a choice. Were they then free to decide? And if they were, could all immigrants do so?

In 1939, the Chicago Plan Commission explained that compared to 603,000 native-white homeowners, there were 264,000 foreign-born white and only 71,000 African Americans (Hirsch 1983, 190). In addition, imbalances between white and black Americans were also evident in details such as the interest rate charged by banks, the term length of loans—very short for African Americans—and, more broadly, the ability to purchase a home (Tillotson 2014, 29-32). It should be clear, therefore, that it was in this setting that Chicago's long process of building renovation took shape. In this sense, two important events occurred in 1937. The first was the passage of the National Housing Act, which aimed to "encourage the creation by communities of independent, special purpose authorities chartered by the states and empowered to receive Federal grants and to build and manage housing" (Mayerson and Banfield 1969, 18). In connection with this, the Chicago Housing Authority was created in the same year, with the role of promoting public housing as envisioned by the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration of 1933, to "(1) provide decent, safe, and sanitary housing to poor families and individuals who live in substandard dwellings and cannot get adequate housing in the private housing market, and (2) to remove slums and blighted areas" (Deveraux 2012, 17). In this political and social climate, Chicago became a

significant theater for the development and growth of subsidized housing and settlements in the early 20th century.

The "settlement culture" had actually originated in Britain, where welfare policies were already active in the late 19th century. In both Europe and the United States, however, it was with the First World War that, due to housing projects for war veterans and their families, construction volumes became significant. In the United States specifically, it was not until the beginning of the 20th century that public housing gained a prominent place within urban redevelopment projects. But even in this case there was a peculiarity, since the emergency shifted from veterans to immigrants: if in Europe the cities and countryside were emptying, on the other side of the Atlantic they were filling up. In Chicago, this alternation between the war emergency and the migration emergency had a significant weight precisely because of the large number of foreign citizens coming in particular from Europe. The settlements thus became a laboratory of coexistence, where friction and conflict alternated with positive relations; moreover, the urban expansion of the city began along two different tracks. The first involved the construction from scratch of public housing and, to a lesser extent, residential. At the same time, on another track, a wide-ranging slum clearance operation was carried out, through which several neighborhoods were demolished to reconfigure them as places of settlement. The only link that reform policies took into account in both cases was the intention to pursue the FHA's idea of security improvement through slum clearance. In truth, the opposite result occurred: "All the riots that I unearthed in the immediate postwar period had a common impulse: each resulted from the shifting of racial residential boundaries in modem Chicago" (Hirsch 1983, xvi). The first 'battlefields' were, as I have said, the more than thirty settlements that sprang up between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in a city in continuous growth. Among these, the most relevant were certainly the Jane Addams Hull House Project, born from the will of Addams, a leading woman of the American bourgeoisie and a convinced social reformer. Her idea was to create a place of sharing that would provide, in addition to housing, spaces for culture and integration such as a library, an art gallery, youth centers and schools. The settlement, born in 1889 in the Near West

Side—a neighborhood with economic and social difficulties—in about fifteen years acquired the extension of more than 10 buildings, becoming a point of reference for the whole country. Naturally, since the Near West Side was an area densely populated by European immigrants, the experience that resulted was significant.
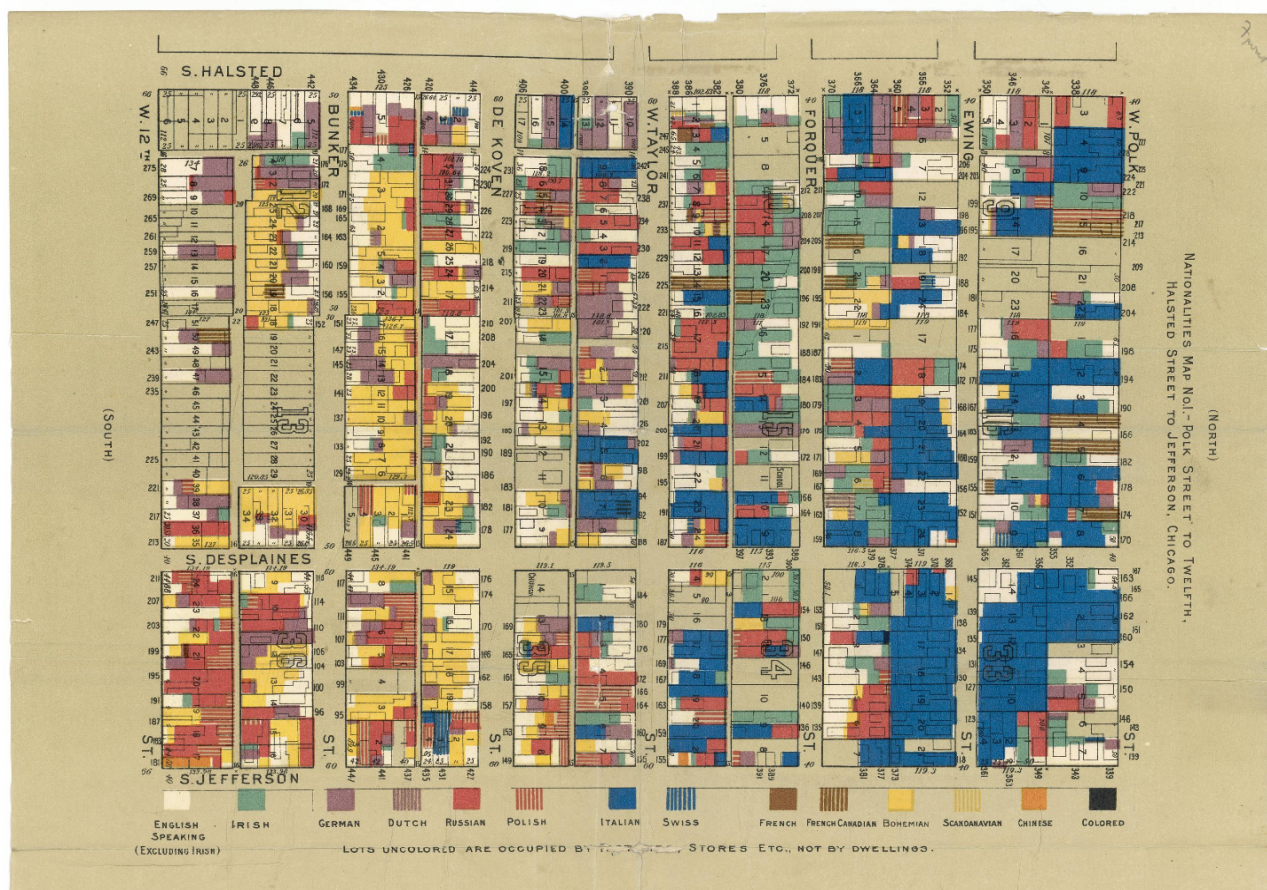
Figure 2. Nationality Map n°1. (Addams 1895)

In the late nineteenth century, shortly after the project began, a volume was produced by residents that collected some reflections on Hull House. This, in addition to being a work "on the wages and conditions of the working poor in the nineteenth ward" (Schultz 2007, 1), provided some maps of the racial geography of this settlement. In the first four, there was an example of how, replicating what was happening outside the settlement, communities lived together but divided. The year was 1895. For many immigrants, therefore, the experience of settlement represented their first opportunity to relate to cultures different from their own but, at the same time, distant from the American one, which was the paradigm of reference to which they had to adapt.

The difficulty of emancipation lay in the fact that the US social structure was based not so much on class differences as on race/ethnicity differences, in which skin color played a key role. More clearly, class hierarchy was directly influenced by race, and individuals based their dynamics of affiliation to social groups also considering this categorization. The arrival of many European immigrants, however, brought turbulence to the system, as the entry of 'hybrid' individuals had further complicated the issue of *whiteness.*[4] Roediger and Barrett had identified them as 'in-between people' (402-406), thus suggesting that the entry of outsiders into a subdivision that was incomprehensible to them had implied a rethinking of the hierarchies themselves. Thus, a short circuit was triggered when the new immigrants could no longer be identified as a homogeneous alien group. *Whiteness* was/is not an objectively established element, but rather a status, which can be achieved. In fact, as James Baldwin suggests "No one was white before he/she came to America" (1998, 178). The breakdown of the system occurred especially when, contrary to expectations, the situation took an unexpected turn. One of the most relevant examples is what we can call the 'involuntary' boycott at the expense of white supremacists, due to the presence of Italian immigrants in Louisiana in the late nineteenth century. The supremacists, by sponsoring the massive arrival of new whites, wanted to swell the ranks of their followers. What happened instead was the arrival of a mass of "almost black" people, unsuited to intolerance and therefore difficult to co-opt as allies.[5] Maybe due to this, in the first half of the 20th century we had what Jacobson called a "dramatic decline in the perceived differences among these white others" and this because "Immigration restriction, along with black migration, altered the nation's racial alchemy and redrew the dominant racial configuration along the strict, binary line of black and white, creating Caucasian where before had been so many Celts, Hebrews, Teutons, Mediterraneans, and Slavs" (Jacobson 1999, 14).

[4] See Jacobson 1999.
[5] For further reading, see Scarpaci 2006 and Scarpaci 1975.

As for the windy city, it is fair to say that the Chicago Commons, from the founding of the first settlements, was the ideal 'battlefield.' Hull Houses, Graham Taylor's Commons, and above all what was Little Sicily and only after became Cabrini-Green saw on the one hand, as I previously mentioned, the first experiences of ethnic coexistence between immigrants of different nationalities; on the other hand, they were also the scene of the first encounter between immigrants and the American lower working class, represented by African Americans. This allowed aspiring US citizens to understand how the social structure was hierarchical and, above all, revealed to them the racial geography that characterized the relationships between communities. The settlements thus provided a first opportunity to understand how housing choices could result in a facilitation of social integration or, on the contrary, into the risk of remaining in a situation of exclusion and ghettoization, both residential and social. The other truth that immigrants had to face was that that hierarchy was not always stable from birth. Such a position in this sense could/must be conquered, so "to become 'Caucasian' in the 1920s and after then, was not simply to be 'white'. ... it was to be *conclusively, certifiably, scientifically white*." (Jacobson 1999, 75). And further, Jacobson suggested that in doing so, immigrants had to understand that "Southern Europeans were so dark ... that they can be termed 'white' not in the ordinary sense, but only in contrast with the African negro." The collision with these unwritten rules often occurred at the time of understanding the practices through which admission to the settlements took place. In the case of the Jane Addams Project's, for example, almost only European immigrants and lower-class whites participated. The HHM&P maps show this clearly, and settlers' recollections underscore this issue:

> Black people didn't go in that neighborhood. They didn't walk around Taylor Street They were on Roosevelt Road, lived there on the other side of project. ... We had them right next door to us and then they were having these parties every week and we started getting bugs and mice and rats. So we finally moved out. The first black man that moved in, they busted his windows and rioted everything else. He was a nice man, finally he wound up managing a basketball team with the white guys and you look back at it and it was well move to get the blacks in. Very sneaky you might say, not sneaky, but that's the only word I can think of now. To get one nice black person in and accept him and then sneak the rest in. Well, they snuck in so much that the white moved out, because of the

culture and different living style were too different and the whites that were in the project loved it. We used to have as I said, the project would take care of everything very good ... (CMS.114, BOX 4 FUM-69, 30-31)

It was a kind of informal 'segregation.' Here, too, the settlements were not an exception, but a reconfirmation of what was happening outside. There, due to the *racial covenants* that remained in force in Chicago until 1948 when the Supreme Court ruled these restrictions unconstitutional, there have been significant inequalities between communities. Moreover, these inequalities also had a direct influence on the city's renewal projects, including those for public housing, so much that "if the law could not be invoked to enforce discriminatory covenants against Negroes, what justification was there for discrimination by public agencies?" (Meyerson and Banfield 1955, 23) Following this mined path, immigrants and other ethnic groups gradually chose to leave the settlements, thus bringing new relationships and especially struggles to the streets of Chicago. The architectural landscape of urban Chicago from the late 19th century to the 1960s grew exponentially due to an increase in urban population and the growth of industry and the commercial market in the Midwest area. The city's structural layout changed from a few single-family homes in the mid-1800s to row houses and apartments at the turn of the century.

The emergence and expansion of manufacturing districts brought large numbers of workers and their families to Chicago: the rise of the working class meant a growing need for affordable housing. But because those social groups included white European immigrants, poor white Americans, and African Americans moving in from the rural South, racial confrontation was inevitable. Immigrants learned not only to become white, but also to coexist in the name of whiteness. One of the few settlements to which Americans of African descent had access was the Ida B. Wells Homes project. The Wells Homes' construction began in 1939 on the South Side of Chicago, in the area between South Parkway and Cottage Grove. This side of the city was called the Black Belt, and the idea behind the Ida B. Wells project was a cynical strategy to "keep the city safe," keeping the African American community out of Chicago's middle class areas; in doing this, public agencies aimed to preserve the ghetto. What in the reformers' intentions initially represented a housing opportunity for the vulnerable, promoting their

inclusion and encouraging positive community relations, eventually became a context of friction and intolerance in Chicago's history. Thomas Guglielmo, referring to the Francis Cabrini Homes, a settlement with a large Italian Catholic community, writes:

> Father Luigi Giambastiani, long-time pastor of the nearby St. Philip Benizi Church, had grown increasingly bitter about the project in these months. In a letter to the Chicago Housing Authority, he explained why: "The cohabitation or quasi-cohabitation of Negro and White hurts the feelings and traditions of the White people of this community." (Guglielmo 2003, 146-157)

And further:

> By this cohabitation, the Negroes might be uplifted but the Whites, by the very laws of environment feel that they will be lowered. ... separation of the two groups ["whites" and "negroes"] ... is the only practical road to community brotherhood. Negroes have the Ida B. Wells project. Why do they want to come into this project where they are not wanted? (Guglielmo 2003, 146-157)

Italians were also part of a new and growing white consciousness that involved all immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. So, it becomes essential, as Fred Gardaphé suggested about Italian Americans, to understand why those who had long been discriminated against, became discriminators within the span of just a few years. Above all, it is important to understand why they never advanced alternative hypotheses of bonding with the African American communities (Gardaphé 2010, 2).

BATTLEGROUND CHICAGO

On July 27, 1919, a white mob attacked a group of young African Americans who had mistakenly entered a beach for the exclusive use of whites. One of them, Eugene Williams, died. The consequences were a long series of clashes with 38 dead and more than 530 injured, in what is known as the "Chicago Race Riot." This well-known fact reminds us that while the history of Chicago in the 19th century is the story of a city that grew rapidly as well as the story of an important place of arrival for immigrants, it is also the story of deep and divisive struggles. As I mentioned earlier, conflicts often occurred, to the extreme, in wanting to prove that one could or could not 'become

white.' To move from in-between people to the American ethnic middle class, a migrant had to prove that he/she was not part of a minority. Hence, the choice of the right school, the right youth club and, most importantly, the right neighborhood in which to live, became an essential aspect of this ethnic transition. However, assuming that the main problem was the choice of the neighborhood may be simplistic and misleading: in fact, the actual issue was the possibility of gaining access to such choice. This was also the reason that, even after World War II, lay behind a series of clashes generated by the assignments of public housing even after World War II: when a family was assigned an apartment in an area with a fragile community equilibrium, the consequences could be tragic. The main issue thus remained the substantial segregation between whites and African American communities: such an urban configuration, the whites argued, would help prevent the escalation of conflicts. To achieve this, it was necessary for those who felt part of the 'white ethnic majority' to be fully aware of their great privilege, in order to unite and mobilize the members of their own community to their advantage.

Early on, opposition to the admission of African American families into white neighborhoods—both in the case of settlements and public housing—took the stage violently, with direct attacks on properties. Arson was an everyday occurrence. This had a twofold purpose: the first was, obviously, to scare away potential African American tenants, while at the same time preventing the mob from falling into criminal acts such as murder. The second purpose was to reduce the attractiveness of the buildings themselves. Inherently, this violence had a significant weight on the decision of the assignee families to accept the house and, above all, influenced another type of struggle, this time of an economic nature. Racial covenanting was not enough to cope with the reception of African Americans: an important role was played by citizens' and developers' associations, such as the Southtown Planning Association (SPA), "created in 1939 to manufacture ingenious ways of preventing Negroes from moving into the area." The SPA, and others such as the Southtown Land and Building Corporation and the Oakland-Kenwood Property Owners' Association, pursued the common goal of maintaining the white predominance in the neighborhoods they dealt with, opposing any real uplift for the black community (Hirsch 1983, 37-38). These associations acted

astutely, purchasing areas which were soon to be demolished or collapsing in their economic value, and tore them down. In doing so, they could deprive African Americans of housing opportunities by reducing the number of available housing units; in addition, by building new but higher-value housing, these associations invalidated the possibility of housing access at its outset, acting at the economic level. This practice excluded the less well-off families which could not compete for housing, forcing these families to move into the only neighborhoods which allowed the admission of blacks and that consequently became inhabited exclusively by the latter. European immigrants, now aware of their socially acquired white status, stood up together to defend their borders.
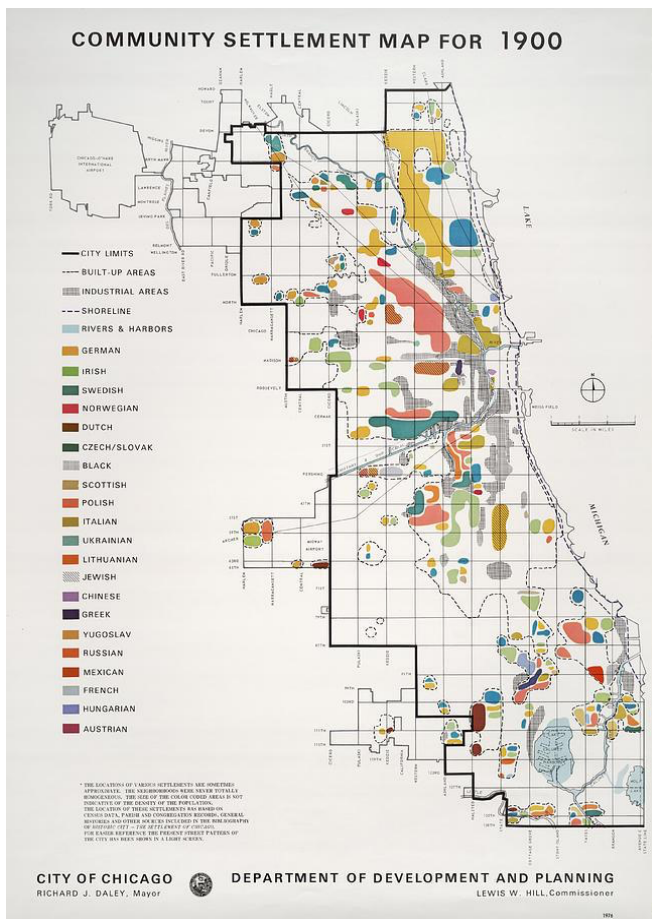

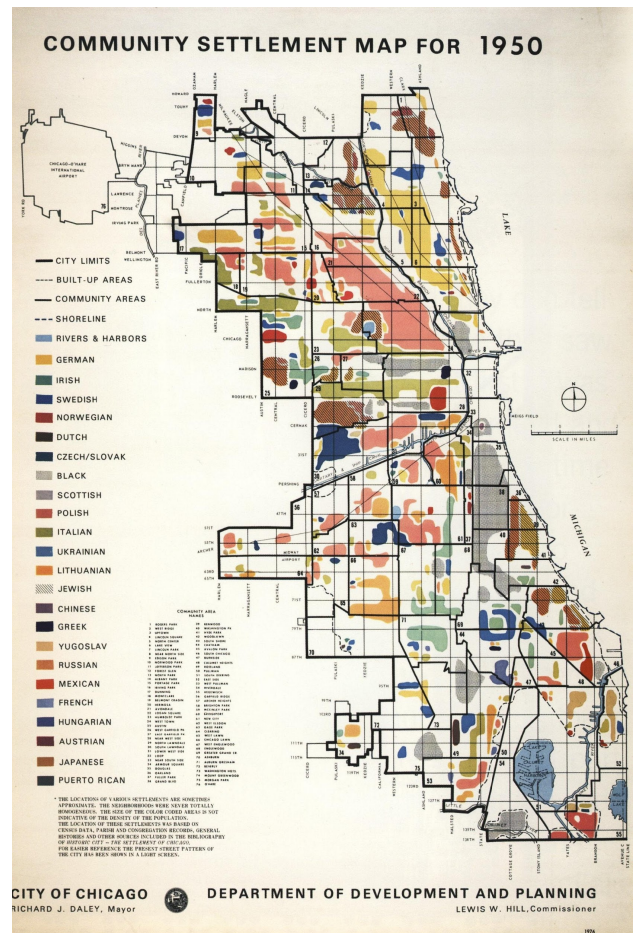*Figure 4. Chicago Community Settlement Map for 1900*

Figure 3. Chicago Community Settlement Map for 1950 (Chicago Department of Development and Planning 1976)

Public housing redevelopment plans were heavily involved in this phase of the struggles, and Chicago's racial geography was once again redrawn, as evidenced by maps published in 1976 by the *Department of Development and Planning* show. However, the housing problem, while remaining the central issue in triggering ethnic conflicts, was only the tip of the iceberg: the different conditions in which Italians, Irish, Swedish and other immigrants interacted with African Americans opened up much more complex scenarios of this struggle. By the end of the 1920s, the same reasons that made the configuration of Chicago resemble the multi-faceted structure of a mosaic, in relation to its ethnic communities, affected the presence of youth gangs in competition for territorial dominance across the city, shaping its appearance into that of a collage. Most of the members of these formations were in fact second-generation immigrants; moreover, there were 369 gangs with a mono-national structure. Italians made up 11.3%, Poles 16.8%, Irish 8.5%, and African Americans 7.2% (Trasher 1927, 130-131). What had happened in the settlements, which became the scene of both conflict and dialogue, reappeared with dance halls, brothels, and everything involved in the entertainment industry. A distorted condition could be witnessed in which there was both a facilitation as well as an impediment to ethnic relations, so much so that Diamond suggests that: "This centering of youth culture is indeed a useful analytical move to understanding American political culture from the 1940s to through the 1960s" (Diamond 2009, 130). Hence, the ongoing numerical growth of the African American community played a major role both in the issue of public housing and, at the same time, in the definition of white immigrants through these "immoral" leisure activities:

> Such evidence suggests that even in the midst of widespread resistance to racial integration, an ambiguous fascination with black bodies and a desire for racial mixing prevailed among many white young men. Although this was not a phenomenon restricted to the terrain of youth subculture, the world of youth leisure offered unparalleled possibilities for the production and indulgence of such forms of fascination and desire. (Diamond 2009, 132)

Considering this, there can be identified three changes in ethnic and social relationships. The first was the increase in the proportion of prostitution managed by the African Americans; the second, directly related to the latter, occurred with the

transformation of sex districts into 'interracial' districts; as a consequence, the third and last change was a substantial increase in the presence of whites in black neighborhoods. In this way, nightclubs fostered a new awareness. Immigrants, having to deal with a range of environments in which African Americans were "dealers" of illegal and dirty pleasures, could observe first-hand the praxes that had to be avoided in order to become respectable citizens:

> The presence of racial others in and around clubs, bars, theaters, and dance halls marked them as what Turner refers to as "liminoid spaces"—domains set apart from the productive and normative worlds of work, school, family and ethnic community. ... Such rituals thus transformed taxi-dance halls into forums where young, mainly second-generation ethnics and immigrants could, via "detours to others," develop a vision of themselves as white ethnics not vulnerable to the same forms of degradation suffered by nonwhite groups. (Diamond 2009, 79-80)

However, there was a substantial difference between conflicts for the control of the fleshpots of the city and those for the right to housing. While in the first case the level of struggle remained very much linked to crime and illegal trade, in the second half of the 20th century there was a shift towards the question of the right of access to public housing. To that very end, African Americans gradually shifted this struggle into the broader field of civil rights. This does not mean that the fighting slackened, but rather that its ultimate goal changed: for the black community, the latter became the affirmation of different demands enriched with political meanings. The clashes between different ethnic communities in Chicago must be read in this perspective: on one side of the barricade were the European immigrants, on the other the African Americans. In the first trench, immigrants fought because, from their point of view, the control of the territory—first and foremost through control in the allocation of public housing—represented the affirmation of white supremacy. On the other hand, the same objectives were pursued in a broader project of recognition of the civil rights of blacks and other minorities. Apparently, different goals shared the same approach.

HOUSES, SCHOOLS, AND GARDENS. FROM RACIAL GEOGRAPHY TO A
GEOGRAPHY OF STRUGGLES

> ... in the years to come, Chicago's parks, beaches, and schools would become the
> principal arenas of racial conflict. If youths had taken the lead in patrolling
> neighborhood boundaries and spearheading campaigns against integration in
> the past, they would be even more at the forefront of efforts to bar African
> Americans from such leisure spaces in the late 1905s and early 1960s. (Diamond
> 2009, 223)

Between 1945 and 1965 the clashes thus entered the sphere of public space, taking the struggle to a higher level. In this way, there was a reiteration of racial geography that, however, developed in an increasingly political way. In 1945, a series of strikes aimed at preventing an increase of admissions of African Americans in schools, testified to the widening of the conflict to the youth; thus, struggles could no longer be identified as specifically "national," as they had been among gangs in the early 20th century. European immigrants, who were occasionally joined by Mexicans from the mid-20th century, became a 'social subject,' which aimed to shift the question of conflicts on the black/white antinomy. What is interesting to note is that, until the early years of the 20th century, this ideological clash was almost exclusively the prerogative of the old Anglo-Saxon white immigrants: Irish, Germans, Scandinavians. The politicization of the conflicts, a greater involvement of youth and students, and the opening of the conflict to a more 'social' dimension, were further exacerbated by what was happening at the national level.

A key example is *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 US 483 (1954), in which the Supreme Court definitively established the unconstitutionality of school segregation. In June 1962, a series of attacks were launched against African American students at Crane High Schools on the Near West Side. The attacks, made mostly by Italian Americans and Mexican Americans, raised fears of a new escalation of violence, but the new political sensibility channeled by the Civil Rights Movement was at that point pervasive in the African American community, absorbing its attention. The reaction was part of a stream of strikes that in those years had involved many cities, including Chicago. In the wake of this new course of inter-ethnic conflict, attacks on

African Americans took shape in various recreational areas of the city between 1957 and 1961. These were no longer just gang-related clashes or attacks on youth and students: for instance, the episode occurring in Calumet Park in 1957 represents just one of the conflicts aimed at removing blacks from all those areas considered zones of white privilege. Here, a group of picnickers was brutally attacked by a crowd of whites. Since this was not an isolated event but occurred after others with similar content, its social and political significance was considered so important that the British Consulate in Chicago wrote a confidential note, also emphasizing the indifference of the press:

> On Saturday, July 28, another negro group numbering about 100 had a picnic in Calumet Park. As in the previous week, they were attacked by about 100 white people who threw stones, bottles, etc. and also physically attacked the men, women and children. The police sent for reinforcements. According to the report of the police sergeant who was in charge of the detachment, the white mob finally increased to about 5,000 or 6,000. As squad cars entered the Park they were stoned by the white group. … according to the sergeant's report, at least 23 negroes were taken to hospital and five white men were arrested. … As far as I know, not a line about any of this trouble has appeared in any of the Chicago newspapers (BCG of Chicago, BE.2/50101).[6]

The clashes that involved the schools, as well as those that occurred in public areas, however, remain linked to the processes of development and modification of Chicago's urban structure. In redrawing the structure of the city's racial geography—which was clearly the ultimate goal of public housing agencies such as the CHA—all circumstances for peaceful interaction among communities were taken into account. In doing so, preserving separation was encouraged—intentionally or unintentionally—instead of facilitating dialogue. Beginning with settlement planning, which somehow renewed boundaries between old neighborhoods, the evolution of public housing also perpetrated this ghettoizing model, thus completely failing in its initial mandate. Moreover, instead of fostering alliances between different ethnic groups, friction was

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[6] Available at URL https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/leaders-and-controversies/g6/cs1/g6cs1s5.htm. Last accessed 12 December 2020.

fomented. Of course, it is not possible to find official proof of the CHA policies' intentionality in igniting the conflict, just as it would be hazardous to identify the presence of racist instances in the planning itself. But what was put into practice had, unfortunately, precisely these devastating effects.

Precisely because of this, one of the consequences that occurred in the period straddling WWII was the replacement of ethnic communities in neighborhoods due to the arrival of African American families. The arrival of lower class minorities—blacks, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, and others—had led to an increase in the demand for public housing. Moreover, the same neighborhoods that had hosted European immigrants in the early 20th century were home to gradually increasing numbers of these new immigrants. What is called "white flight" was a direct result of these changes. The new American middle class, largely characterized by European immigrants, had no intention of living alongside blacks. As it turned out, for example, in the Cabrini-Green projects, coexistence was not considered positive and was therefore unacceptable:

> [I] ... why did you leave Monroe and Cicero?
>
> Because the Blacks moved in. And we were the last two families on the block to move. My husband tried setting up block clubs, and opened up a youth center on the corner of Monroe and Cicero. And he got Mayor Daley to sponsor it. And we tried getting the churches involved in accepting the Black people. And it didn't work out. It got so that you'd walk down the street ... and I had my purse taken away from me twice. I didn't mind if they'd just take the purse away, but they'd knock me on the floor. That I didn't like. So after the second one I said to my husband...That's it. Do gooder or not. No more. And he consented to it. And then we moved out to Downers Grove. Now we're living in a condominium. (CMS.114 BOX 4 DEF-60, 33)

The post-war period saw an implementation of housing construction in Chicago's suburbs:

> In 1947, only 5,968 new homes and apartment units were constructed in Chicago, whereas 24,744 units were built in the metropolitan area outside the city. By 1956, the Chicago total had risen to only 13,625, but the suburbs built 48,632 units that year. The postwar construction in Chicago's suburban areas did much to alleviate the housing shortage of the middle class but not of the poor, ... It also signaled

> the loss of a great deal of the middle-class population of the city. (Deveraux 2012, 49)

However, many white dwellers must have thought that a peaceful relocation could not be the solution. At the same time, the growth of housing built by the CHA was not enough. This was the background to what happened in Trumbull Park in 1953, a clear sign of how the new middle class was exclusively white and without any intention of inclusive social interaction. A couple of years earlier, in 1951, a violent attack on the Clark family had already occurred in Cicero: the presence of a significant Italian American community in what had been Alfred 'Al' Capone's home had undoubtedly played a fundamental role. The defense of a laboriously acquired whiteness could not be disregarded, so much so that the Clarks were not allowed to move into a white neighborhood that wanted to keep its separation from the suburbs (Bernstein 1999, 13-27). Trumbull Park, however, represented something even more troubling. The Howard family had received approval for housing in this public housing project: the reasons for this were both that Mr. Howard was a veteran, and more importantly that his wife, Betty, was apparently light-skinned. Although the CHA no longer had discriminatory policies for access to housing, there was still hesitation to let African American families move into Trumbull and other areas 'run' by a white majority. If the agencies did not impose a ban, citizens did it, so much so that "as Betty Howard had 'not the slightest physical characteristics of a Negro,' the neighbors did not immediately ascertain the racial identity of the family. By August 5, they did. The result was nearly a decade of sporadic violence" (Hirsch 1995, 523).

Nonetheless, the Howards were not a problem per se. Rather, the issue was perceived as an attempt to systematize the inclusion of African Americans into white neighborhoods. Since that area of Chicago already had a significant presence of African Americans—as they were among the largest workers in the various industrial districts in the area—the CHA probably considered it logical to include other African American families. This attempt took place both in the few weeks the Howards spent in Trumbull Park and in the months that followed. Grievances, almost always violent, were directed at both black citizens and to those whites who hid their hostility towards CHA's new

policies. After Betty and Donald Howard's family was evicted for 'alleged violations' to the rules on access to housing, the conflict did not subside, precisely because Trumbull was only its trigger. For a long time, violent attacks, fires, and bomb explosions followed one another, with the general aim of boycotting every attempt to favor the integration of African American citizens. And even when, afterwards, things seemed to calm down, this was merely superficial (Hirsch 1995, 329-531):

> By mid-1960, liberals applauded the fact that the area had been 'generally quiet' for the 'better part of two years.' But there was little else to cheer. One close observer of the neighborhood noted that the expression of anti-Black attitudes was merely 'less overt and violent than in the past.' The *South Deering Bulletin* illustrated the soft articulation of the hard line on race when it changed its slogan from '*White People Must Control Their Own Communities*' to '*Boost Your Community, Preserve Your Community*' in the early 1960s. The simple fact was that violence had already triumphed. The CHA's determination to maintain a token Black presence in the project meant that local residents could not restore the area's racial homogeneity. But by the 1960s, they maintained the neighborhood as a 'white' community. (Hirsch 1995, 548-549)

CONCLUSIONS. WHETHER POSSIBLE

> When writing ethnic history scholars have all too often focused solely on relations between WASPs, who represent the dominant group in the United States, and one or more of the nation's many minority groups. Ethnic relations, however, are pluralistic rather than monolithic; that is, just as WASPs interact with various ethnic groups, so too do ethnic groups interact with each other. This has been particularly true in the case of blacks and Italians. Curiously, historians have given this subject only minimal attention. (Shankman 1978, 30)

What Shankman wrote is broadly applicable to other immigrant groups, not just to Italians. The path taken by many of them, especially those from Eastern and Southern Europe, but also from Asia and South America, was similar. In many cases it was not only a process towards social integration, which involved learning a language, laws, and cultural practices. In fact, with this article I have tried to show how issues such as skin color and whiteness—in the sense proposed by Jacobson—were fundamental. But if it is clear how essential it is to be considered "white," beyond the color of one's skin, the process to acquire this status has not always been clear, and Chicago represents a telling

paradigm in this regard. The complexity of its social structure throughout the 20th century was epitomized by its racial geography, whose mosaic overlapped with the urban landscape: as one element changed, so did the other element in the equation. The possibility of self-determination as a dweller of a settlement or, more generally, of a neighborhood, was the discriminating factor in achieving full citizenship rights. By being able to choose where to live, a dweller could choose whether to be part of the blessed majority or of the unprivileged minority. The key point is: did everyone really have a choice? The long history of Chicago's urban evolution, with the dual presence of social settlements and public housing projects, proved to be the ideal context to show how urban mobility went hand in hand with social mobility: in this context the opportunity to choose meant having the chance at civic equality. The role played by some actors external to the communities, such as the Chicago Housing Authority since the early 1930s, showed that both the abolition and the construction of ethnic boundaries cannot have been a responsibility left solely to citizens. These balances were played out on a more complex proscenium, in which the various actors on stage were not able to put an end to conflicts and iterations of intolerance for almost a century, highlighting an issue which is still delicate and relevant in 2021.

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PERSEPHONE'S DESCENT: PLACE, RACE, AND DIASPORIC SELF-FASHIONING IN *THE SKIN BETWEEN US*

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that *The Skin Between Us* (2006), Kym Ragusa's memoir of her dual heritage as the daughter of an African American mother and a working-class father with southern Italian roots, ventures beyond a patchwork heritage account of identity, uniting the global with the local and the mythic with the historical. Drawing from Dalia Kandiyoti's concept of migrant sites and Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space theory, I show how these competing models of diaspora inform Ragusa's memoir. While its Harlem chapters emphasize enclosure within racialized, gendered boundaries, the Mediterranean prologue and Sicilian epilogue highlight transculturation, or mutually transformative encounters between different ethnic groups. As a crossroads between Europe and Africa and the site of Persephone's descent to the underworld, Sicily constitutes an imaginary space of belonging, enabling Ragusa to link women from both sides of her family through their shared experience of loss and displacement and to affirm her agency as a storyteller.
Keywords: Female Diaspora; Kym Ragusa; Italian American; African American; Mixed Race Memoir.

INTRODUCTION

Does multiculturalism in the US require black erasure? The mixed race memoir seems uniquely suited to explore this question. Yet some of the most famous examples of the genre have fallen prey to the colorblind tendencies of the American patchwork heritage narrative, even as they depict how racialized struggles shape becoming. Take, for instance, James McBride's widely acclaimed memoir, *The Color of Water* (1995). The title recalls Ruth McBride's statement that "God is the color of water," an image that serves not only as a metaphor for racial fluidity, but also as a reference to Ruth's belief that the color of her children's skin does not have to hold them back in life. In valorizing a white mother for whom social mobility depends solely on educational accomplishments, McBride leaves unquestioned a colorblind sentiment that is now widely recognized as a denial of institutionalized racism.

Victoria Tomasulo |

Obama's memoir, *Dreams from My Father* (1995), is another example of a mixed-race memoir that gives readers hope that racial tensions in America could be transcended. It ends with an image of Obama standing between his black brother and his white mother at a wedding that unites people from different ethnic backgrounds, illustrating the extent to which its principal theme—racial conflict in America—has been subordinated to a multicultural ethos. Instead of identifying himself as black, white, or multiracial, Obama refers to himself as "the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas," just as he would later do in his famous "Race" speech in 2008. His ambiguous self-representation influenced autobiography studies. In an essay on *Dreams from My Father*, Justin Ponder praises Obama for obscuring his racial subject position, reading it as a subversive narrative strategy. Using patchwork as a metaphor for autobiography, he refutes the assumption that autobiographers can "undo racial stereotypes with seamless self-representations," arguing that "the best autobiographers are those that allow indeterminacy, that permit frayed edges where others can stitch on their own scraps" (78). Citing the reference to the patchwork in Obama's inauguration speech, he concludes that it is a strength rather than a weakness to yield narrative control to others.

Although *The Skin Between U*s (2006) is not nearly as well known as *The Color of Wate*r and *Dreams from My Father*, its arrival on the literary scene marked a turning point in the history of the mixed-race memoir as one of the few to venture beyond the patchwork heritage model. Published two years before Obama would be sworn into the Oval Office, Kym Ragusa's memoir reflects on her dual upbringing as the daughter of an African American fashion model and a working-class father with Southern Italian roots. While McBride and Obama privilege one parent's story at the expense of the other's, Ragusa weaves broader swathes of her cultural legacy into her narrative, reconstructing both her African American maternal genealogy and her Italian American paternal genealogy. Set in Harlem during the 1970s, the first four chapters tell the story of Kym's upbringing by her African American grandmother, Miriam, a former actress turned neighborhood activist who raises Kym after her daughter moves to Milan for her modeling career. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, Ragusa's focus shifts to the Italian American

side of her family, to East Harlem, the Bronx, and New Jersey. Both the prologue and epilogue are set in Sicily, home of Ragusa's paternal ancestors and setting of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, the mother-daughter narrative of reunion and separation that has fascinated the author since childhood.

Ragusa began her career as a documentary filmmaker. *The Skin Between Us* can be seen as the synthesis of themes she had explored in her films: *Demarcations* (1991), which Edvige Giunta has called "a visual meditation on personal and cultural boundaries" (2003, 225); *Blood of my Blood*, which juxtaposes her maternal ancestors' forced migration from Africa with the transatlantic journey of her Southern Italian paternal ancestors; *Passing* (1996), her African American grandmother's story of her defiant refusal to pass as white in a diner in North Carolina; *fuori/outside* (1997), Ragusa's first foray into autobiographical terrain, in which she both confronts her Italian American grandmother Gilda about her racism and explores Gilda's memories of her past. Giunta has written that, in Ragusa's films, "race does not solidify as a physical reality" but "takes shape as a constellation of exploratory moments, all interconnected, all equally elusive" (2003, 226). In *The Skin Between Us*, the protagonist's relationship with race vacillates between her desire to escape her skin, an object of perpetual scrutiny, and an acceptance of her multiracial identity, which includes her maternal grandmother's Native American, Chinese, and German ancestry.

Initially, like Obama, Ragusa seems to embrace indeterminacy. In Chapter One, in response to the perpetual question, "What are you?," she juxtaposes neutral markers of racial and ethnic identity with derogatory stereotypes of African Americans and Italian Americans, leaving a space between the two:

> Black and Italian. African American, Italian American, American.

> Other. Biracial, Interracial. Mixed Blood, Half Breed, High Yellow, Redbone. Mulatta. Nigger, Dago, Guinea. (25)

Ragusa will write from within that space, fashioning a diasporic self through myth, metaphor, and descriptions of place. Indeterminacy is hardly a subversive narrative strategy for her. There are moments when Ragusa gives incomplete accounts of an event

or reflects on the unreliability of her memory. However, these are counterbalanced by her tendency to compensate for the limitations of her knowledge of the past by retelling the stories of her female ancestors, filling in the gaps with her imagination. Rather than allow readers to stitch on their scraps, she prefers to create her own designs. Impatient with how her African American grandmother Miriam tells the story of their ancestor Sybela Owens, a runaway slave, she reimagines it, restoring agency to the woman who had been reduced to the status of an object trafficked by a plantation owner's son. In Ragusa's retelling, Sybela has survived the hell of plantation life and chooses flight, determined to protect her children; she is no different from Persephone, who in Ovid's retelling, chooses to eat the pomegranate seeds that will turn her from "captive girl" into "queen of the underworld," the image with which Ragusa's memoir ends.

The Skin Between Us is also one of the few memoirs to trace relations between African Americans and Italian Americans, two ethnic groups who share a history of racial discrimination in the US and whose affinities in cultural expression and cross-cultural influences have been traced by John Gennari in *Flavor and Soul: Italian Americana at Its African American Edge* (2017). Although in theory Southern Italian immigrants' experience as America's 'dagos' should have prepared them to become allies with African Americans, in practice it did not work that way. As Toni Morrison observed in a now famous essay, "On the Backs of Blacks" (1993), "negative appraisals of the native-born black population" were "the most enduring and efficient rite of passage into American culture" (98). Immigrants from Calabria, Ragusa's paternal grandparents participate in the standard rite of passage to assimilation for non-white immigrants: white flight. They flee from East Harlem to the Bronx and from the Bronx to the suburbs of New Jersey, bringing along Kym and their Puerto Rican daughter-in-law on the last of these migrations without any sense of irony.

For postcolonial scholar Annamaria Scorza, Ragusa manages to heal the rift in her cultural identity by celebrating her hybridity. The photograph of the two grandmothers at a Thanksgiving dinner that frames the memoir, the subject of a lyrical meditation on skin in Chapter One, facilitates the recognition of identity-in-difference,

underscoring for Ragusa and for the reader how both women belong to the same community:

> In the photo that Kym holds in her hand, the reaching of her goal is revealed: for them to recognize each other, notwithstanding their differences, through which that skin that at the beginning was the cause of a separation and a division now becomes a shared skin through which the epistemological process is inaugurated that leads us to understand themselves and each other through the contact and the epidermal recognition that confirms belonging to the same community. (122) [author's translation][1]

Scorza, however, ignores the photograph's status as a fantasy of racial harmony that would never be achieved in the author's lifetime. Soon after describing the dinner with her two grandmothers, an anomalous event in her lifetime, Ragusa reflects that "There were storms behind us and there would be darkness ahead of us, but in the photograph all that is held at bay" (25). No mutual recognition or understanding between the two sides of her family had been achieved before the deaths of her two grandmothers, and racial tensions would persist between Italian Americans and African Americans long after the photograph was taken in 1996. *The Skin Between Us* is less the narration of an identity quest than it is a reflection on its transformation through writing: the hybridity Ragusa celebrates, the cross-cultural connections she traces between her Italian American and her African American female ancestors, are products of a journey of memory that is associated with Persephone's descent to the underworld at the end of the book.

Rather than emphasize a fundamental unity that persists despite differences, Ragusa's ekphrastic meditation on identity underscores racial divisions. Staring at the photograph of her two grandmothers, Ragusa thinks:

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[1] "Nella foto che Kym tiene in mano viene svelato il raggiungimento dell'obiettivo: riconoscersi, nonostante le loro differenze, per cui quella pelle che all'inizio era motivo di separazione e divisione ora diventa una pelle condivisa, attraverso la quale si inaugura un processo epistemologico che porta a comprendere e a comprendersi tramite il contatto e il riconoscimento epidermico che confermano l'appartenenza a una stessa comunità."

> We have *almost* the same color skin. Our skin is the truth that this image has captured. Gilda's thin, wrinkled skin like paper left out in the sun, Miriam's plump, barely lined, mine *always a mark of difference, even here, even though it's not all that different*. Three variations on ivory, yellow, olive, refracted between us like a kaleidoscope. The skin between us: a border, a map, a blank page. History and biology. *The skin between us that kept us apart, and sheltered us against the hurt we inflicted on each other*. The skin between us: membrane, veil, mirror. A shared skin. (25) [author's emphasis]

Skin is also metonymically linked to the geography of a Harlem divided into ethnic zones, with Italian Americans in the east and African Americans in the west: "Its topography is mapped on my body: the borderlines between neighborhoods marked by streets that were forbidden to cross, the borderlines enforced by fear and anger, and transgressed by desire. The streets crossing east to west, north to south, like the web of veins beneath my skin" (26). Through the topoi of skin, place, and myth, Ragusa fashions a diasporic self that supersedes the logic of the one and the many implicit in the patchwork heritage narrative, connecting the global with the local and the mythic with the historical.

Since place plays a crucial role in Ragusa's project of self-fashioning, I use Kandiyoti's notion of "migrant sites," as well as Homi Bhabha's notion of a Third Space, to explain how Ragusa creates diasporic alternatives to the patchwork heritage narrative. Kandiyoti has noted that the term "'diaspora' evokes translocal and transnational connectivities that 'ethnic' does not in the US," as the latter "presumes settlement and integration with a 'difference' that does not exceed or challenge US boundaries" (9). Arguing for the centrality of place in diaspora narratives, Kandiyoti uses the term "migrant sites" to refer to an irreconcilable tension between enclosure, "the confinement and containment of ethnoracialized diaspora populations in bordered areas," and translocality, "a sense of place produced by the imagining of overlapping locales" (6). While Harlem functions as a migrant site in Ragusa's memoir, Sicily is represented as a third space of hybridity. By framing the story of her biracial upbringing in the US with evocative descriptions of Sicily, a crossroads between Africa and Italy, Ragusa maps affinities between Italian and African diasporas and reconstitutes her relationship with each, undermining Justin Ponder's assumption that the multiracial

autobiographer's agency is necessarily limited by the stereotypes constitutive of all racial identities.

Much of the literature on Ragusa's memoir focuses on the significance of her return to her ancestral homeland. Citing archival evidence that Italian emigrants traveled on former slave ships,[2] Teresa Fiore historicizes the connection Ragusa makes in her prologue between the forced migration of her African ancestors and the "barely voluntary" migration of her Italian ancestors (121). For Fiore, the Strait of Messina through which Ragusa's ferry passes in the memoir's opening scene functions as a "pre-occupied space," or a space of re-memory that links old with new histories of Italian migration while reading both through the lens of Italy's postcolonial past. While Fiore is interested in the memoir's historiographic implications, Annamaria Taronna and Evelyn Ferraro take ethnographic and philosophical approaches, respectively. Taronna relies on the trope of the writer as translator to describe Ragusa's aims as a memoirist. She emphasizes how Ragusa transcodes ethnicities by making her hybrid subject position legible within the discourse of the dominant culture, so that the ethnic could no longer be seen in opposition to the American. Ragusa's work counters racist stereotypes through scenes that force the reader to confront the status of race as a social construction and through "ethnographies of Southernness"—motifs of blood, skin, and hair, but also food, accents, and languages (118)—that attest to cross-cultural influences and racial fluidity. In emphasizing the transcultural dimension of Ragusa's memoir and its subversion of generic boundaries, Taronna implies that Ragusa's memoir cannot be categorized as a multicultural memoir, or as a product of two 'minor' literary traditions, Italian American and African American.

In "Southern Encounters in the City: Reconfiguring the South from the Liminal Space" (2020), Evelyn Ferraro invokes Italian sociologist Franco Cassano's concept of "*il pensiero meridiano*" (meridian thinking) to explain the significance of place to the

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[2] Fiore cites a 1898 report on early Italian migrant ships produced by Nicola Malnate, the Inspector of the Port of Genoa. References to this document can be found in Gian Antonio Stella's *Odissee* and in Rosoli's and Grossi's *Il pane duro* (1976).

rewriting of identity in *The Skin Between Us*. The starting point of Cassano's theory is that the South of Italy is capable of self-reflection and should not be viewed solely in relation to the North; its epistemology, values, and relationship with time and space are fundamentally different. He uses the metaphor of the shoreline to describe the style of Southern Italian thought. Unbound by ideological formations that create a sense of cultural belonging, meridian thinking situates itself on the limit of the known world, where a relationship with the other becomes possible: "differences touch each other and the game of the relation with the other becomes difficult and real," (6) [author's translation].[3] Ferraro appropriates Cassano's idea of meridian thinking as an encounter with alterity but departs from his exclusive focus on the Mediterranean, tracing connections between southern Italy and other global Souths in Ragusa's memoir. Instances of meridian thinking include dynamic moments of cross-cultural exchange in Harlem and Palermo that destabilize ethnic and racial boundaries (224-225).

While I arrive at the some of the same conclusions as Taronna and Ferraro, my intersectional feminist approach distinguishes my argument from theirs. Both critics overlook how Ragusa's privileging of diasporic female experience enables her to renegotiate her relationship with her roots. Ragusa mobilizes cross-cultural identifications through the third space of gender, linking women on both sides of her family through their shared history of familial oppression as well as through the myth of Demeter and Persephone, whose separation and reunion resonates with the experience of migration and resettlement of women across various diasporas. Fiore's analysis attends to Ragusa's privileging of female identity, but its exclusive focus on the Sicily chapters seems to reify a black Italianness while passing too quickly over Ragusa's Harlem upbringing and her identification with Persephone. Unlike Caterina Romeo, whose afterword to her Italian translation of *The Skin Between Us* explores at length Ragusa's writing of Harlem and Persephone, Fiore subordinates place to space, minimizes the significance of the Greek myth in the novel, and thus misses Sicily's

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[3] "I diversi si toccano e la partita del rapporto con l'altro diventa difficile e vera."

metaliterary function. Fiore seems to forget that Ragusa returns to Sicily not to reconstruct her roots, but to work on a literary project: she wins a grant to create a film based on the story of Persephone. Since Sicily is the first stage in her journey as writer, her epilogue is highly self-reflexive, culminating, through a reflection on Ovid's representation of Persephone, in an insight about the power of the diasporic woman writer to transgress cultural taboos.

Against the above-mentioned scholars, then, I argue that the Sicily chapters constitute less an ethnographic or historiographic project of revision than they serve as a means for Ragusa to restage her cultural in betweenness and to enact a feminist fantasy that unites her two grandmothers, and by extension, her Italian self with her African self. Perhaps more importantly, as the site of Persephone's alleged abduction by Hades, the setting permits Ragusa to affirm her own agency as a diasporic woman writer by imagining Persephone as a subversive border crosser who chooses her own story. In what follows, I offer a gendered analysis of the dynamics of place, race, and diasporic self-fashioning in *The Skin Between Us* in the hope of complicating the popular conception of the memoir as a tribute to a multicultural, biracial identity.

HARLEM AS A MIGRANT SITE

In *Migrant Sites*, Dalia Kandiyoti identifies enclosure as "the predominant theme and literary form" of most diasporic narratives and "the representation of 'migrant' or translocal consciousness its constitutive counterpoint" (6). Enclosure "encompasses racialized spatial segregation and immobilization and literary modalities that 'enclose;' that is, they center around discursively bordered, particularized loci, such as regionalism and urban writing" (10). Ragusa's memoir exemplifies Kandiyoti's theory. Enclosed by a prologue and epilogue set in Sicily, most of the chapters are set in Harlem, an isolated, racially segregated zone within New York City. Having come of age in Harlem of the 1970s, after "Italian Harlem" (East Harlem) had moved north to the Bronx and black Harlem (West Harlem) had experienced a steep decline in revenue, Ragusa locates racism as the source of antagonism between the two communities: Miriam "believed, as many other black people did, that Italian Americans were nothing but

mafiosi, racists, and republicans" and Gilda cries out in shame when she realizes that her son is dating "a nigger, a *moulignan*" (29). Reflecting on her parents' courtship in 1964, Ragusa recalls that interracial marriage was illegal in some states and "even in New York City, neighborhoods, schools, and social scenes were still resolutely segregated" (28). The other history of Italian American and African American relations in Harlem is elided in Ragusa's account: one would never know that Italian American antifascists had once marched alongside African Americans in protest of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

Harlem is represented as a dynamic place that has been transformed over the course of the twentieth century into a site, a term Kandiyoti uses to denote both a unit of space "prefigured and maintained to legitimize a particular order, whether of empire, nationalism, or social hierarchies" and "the transformation of a dynamic place into a site of fixed content in the dominant imagination" (40). While her two grandmothers still relish their memories of Harlem—Miriam associates it with the glamour, creativity, and wealth of certain black individuals during the Harlem Renaissance; Gilda, with a cultural and familial belonging rooted in *campanilismo*—Kym and her mother see in Harlem stereotypes of the urban ghetto: bodega counters encased in Plexiglass windows; courtyards strewn with glass and junk; double-locked, bolted doors.

Place as a container of a class is as important a motif in Ragusa's memoir as it is in *The Great Gatsby*, a novel that explores the seductive effects of the American Dream on those for whom it was never intended. In Harlem, as in Fitzgerald's infamous valley of ashes, beauty is "a means of transcending mere survival" for working-class women (Ragusa, 75). Along with a voracious appetite for literary classics, Miriam and her daughter also share a predilection for fashion and use their beauty to "seek out their dreams, to live those dreams, however partially and temporarily" (Ragusa, 75-76). Unlike Fitzgerald, Ragusa shows the positive side of this fantasy. The beauty of the racially mixed women on the African American side of her family allow the latter to breach racial taboos by imagining possibilities for themselves that were not supposed to exist for women of color before the Civil Rights Movement.

As imagined places of community, West Harlem and East Harlem exist in a tension that is analogous to the one that existed between West Egg and East Egg in *The*

Great Gatsby. West Harlem, like Fitzgerald's fictionalized West Egg, was produced by an influx of new money and ideas in African American society. Observing how Mae's stories omitted Harlem's decline after the stock market crash of 1929, Ragusa writes that "it existed for her, and for her impressionable daughter, in an eternal present of tuxedo-clad trumpet players and pale yellow chorus girls, literary salons in grand apartments, women in furs strolling down Lenox Avenue" (63). On the other hand, East Harlem, like East Egg, represented the triumph of blood ties and the continuity of Old World European traditions: "The mythology of East Harlem, Italian Harlem: it was safe, it was clean, it was ' our' place, the family was together, everybody looked out for each other, so safe you didn't even have to lock your door" (119). Ragusa deconstructs this mythology by recognizing East Harlem's racialized dynamics of inclusion/exclusion. She remembers the refusal of Italian American landlords to rent to Puerto Rican tenants in the 1930s and the eruption of race riots when schools began to be integrated. Her own family's betrayal occurs in the economic boom after World War II, when Italian Americans were considered white enough to be offered bank loans. Her great uncles buy a two-story family house in the Bronx, and are joined by her grandparents a few years later; yet it is they who feel betrayed when working-class black families move into the low-income housing projects built after their tenement buildings had been razed to the ground. Later in the same chapter, she recalls how, during her and her father's visits to Luisa's apartment in East Harlem, Italian American residents cast disapproving looks at her, muttering "*vergogna*" (133).

Enclosure also manifests itself in gendered spaces of segregation within African American and Italian American communities. In Ragusa's memory of her early childhood in Harlem, men are largely absent while women are the pillar of the community: they take care of each other's children, run errands for elderly tenants, scrub stairwells, hold multiple jobs, and gather in Miriam's apartment to discuss strategies for dealing with recalcitrant landlords. They also protect girls from male predators. Kym and her friends' burgeoning awareness of their sexuality coincides with their awareness of the danger lurking outside, in streets dominated by men:

> We girls were learning a new language in that courtyard, protected on three sides by the gray walls of our building and various mothers and grandmothers who would peek their heads out the window to make sure we were there. But the courtyard was also open to the street, and I remember sometimes men would stop and watch us while we played, until they were hissed away by one of the grownup women coming in or out of the building. (50)

Protected is the key word here; the world lurking outside the courtyard is far more menacing for girls of color than the world bordered by the gray walls of their building. "Teenagers turning to prostitution to survive, toddlers molested by drunken uncles," and "girls who were raped and thrown off rooftops" (50) are among the dangers that have become routine in a post-civil-rights Harlem where buildings had been allowed by the city to fall into disrepair and tenants' rights were ignored. From a young age Ragusa learns to fear "the dark basement where no one ever went" (80) and the barely functional elevator in which a junkie once held a knife to her throat as her mother emptied her pockets.

Ragusa relates the violation of black female bodies to black male disenfranchisement. In telling the story of Samuel Stevens's "courtship" of Miriam—a story linked to the myth of Demeter and Persephone through the motif of abduction— Ragusa emphasizes her grandfather's precarious, nomadic existence and his unrealized ambitions:

> He arrived in Pittsburgh from a mountain town in North Carolina, where the people had been mixed, black and Cherokee, for generations. He came to find work in the steel mills, though he dreamed of being an actor. The mills were hot and loud, every night he came home with the echo of machines pounding inside his head. He had quit inside of a year and began working odd jobs while he studied acting with a white teacher downtown who didn't mind giving lessons to coloreds— all money was green, after all. But there aren't a lot of roles for a black man in the theaters of Pittsburgh, and he can't afford to move to one of the bigger like New York or Chicago, not just yet. As a last resort he applies for the job of drama coach at Miriam's high school and to his surprise, he gets it. (90)

In this brief biographical sketch of Samuel Stevens, Ragusa describes the collective plight of black men during the Great Migration. However, when she tells her grandmother's story, she presents it as singular, "a Pittsburgh tragedy" (92): sixteen-

year-old Miriam, an "honor student, pride of the family, beauty of the neighborhood "(88), tries out for a part in a school play against her parents' wishes. Her drama teacher, an older black man, invites her to his apartment for extra coaching on a Saturday afternoon. She accepts, not knowing that he will drug her drink and rape her while she is unconscious, and that, a year later, she will be married to her rapist, living in the suburbs of Los Angeles with him and her young daughter, Kym's mother. The enclosure of her intellect and talent in the well-worn black female plot of sexual victimhood, marriage, and motherhood is what renders her story tragic; Ragusa imagines the young Miriam "practicing her trigonometry on the bus home from school, catching up before church services, a copy of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* hidden in an open Bible" (88). Like Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, who was influenced by Woolf's invention of Shakespeare's sister in *A Room Of One's Own*, Ragusa laments the life that her grandmother could have lived, her unrecognized genius. At the same time, by telling her story, she seeks to "resurrect" "Miriam's girlhood body made of dreams and promises and hope," to "bring flesh back to the bones" (92). Here, as in other places in her narrative, Ragusa acknowledges how her reconstruction of her female ancestors' lives could never recuperate their losses.

Despite their lived experiences of sexual and racial oppression, the women on the African American side of Ragusa's family refuse to be trapped in narratives not of their own making. Kym's great-grandmother Mae, the darkest of five daughters at a time when admission to parties in Pennsylvania required that the skin color of guests be lighter than the color of a paper bag, is a flapper during the Harlem Renaissance who travels the country and takes five husbands, abandoning each when her appetite for sex and companionship is sated. Miriam channels her writing ambition into local journalism in L.A. and saves enough money for her and her daughter's bus ride to New York City, leaving Samuel Stevens behind. In Harlem, she resumes her writing career and becomes a public relations consultant for a famous nightspot frequented by the likes of Sammy Davis Jr. and Kim Novak. In her elder years, she throws herself into activism to restore the former grandeur of Harlem's buildings and protect tenants' rights, throwing fundraisers and victory parties for councilmen at her apartment. Kym's

mother, however, is unimpressed by the Harlem that awaits her and Miriam after their departure from California. She makes it her primary objective to leave, landing a modeling job that takes her to Milan. The different relationship Kym's mother and grandmother have with Harlem constitutes another point of identification with the myth of Persephone and Demeter: Kym's mother disappears and reappears in a cyclical fashion while Miriam remains behind, tending to the needs of the community.

Miriam's determination and resilience are not shared by Gilda, Kym's Italian American grandmother. Their stories unfold in separate chapters, reflecting in literary form the segregation of Italian Americans from African Americans. Unlike Miriam, Gilda does not dare to dream of becoming an artist; she surrenders herself to the script written for her by her parents and their parents long before she was born: "As a girl, Gilda learned from her mother how to keep a spotless home, how to care for her younger siblings, how to feed a growing family, all preparations for the time when she would have a husband and children of her own" (123). As the first one of Luisa's children born in America, she learns to read and write English, but her high school education is abruptly interrupted because of the entry of a man into her life. Unlike Miriam's parents, who entertain high hopes for their daughter, Gilda's parents believe education is wasted on girls and arrange a marriage between Gilda and a boy from Calabria, following village customs. Gilda does not resist this destiny, or Ragusa fails to imagine such a resistance:

> I don't know if Gilda ever imagined such a possibility for herself, if she ever truly believed her life held other options than that which was presented to her at sixteen. Her girlhood was over- she said goodbye to her textbooks and notebooks and prepared to become a wife. (125)

Her enclosure of Gilda in the realm of the domestic is a dramatic point of departure from her writing of other women in the narrative, whom she endows with self-determination.

Arguably, Ragusa's uneven treatment of her two grandmothers is related to her grandmother's rejection of her because of racial difference. Her sense of outsiderness is magnified when she lives with her father's family in the suburbs of New Jersey. Reflecting on her relationship with Gilda during this period, Ragusa writes: "There was

a certain distance between me and Gilda that never seemed to close, an almost imperceptible formality that I could sense but never quite name or understand. I felt often that I was more a guest in the house than a part of the family" (213). Excluded from the tight-knit circle formed by Gilda, her aunt Angela, and her cousin Marie, whose inside jokes are lost on her, the teenage Kym accuses her grandmother of favoritism and receives a beating from her father. Her suspicions about Gilda's ambivalence are confirmed when Gilda, who had fought against a racist board of directors so that Kym could gain admission into the local country club's swimming pool, articulates her hope that their new neighbors not be black.

Ragusa's desire to recuperate her *Italianità* is at odds with her recognition of the Italian American community's betrayal of the African American community. This tension is never resolved, even at the end of the Harlem chapters, when her father officially recognizes her as his biological child in a court ceremony—a symbolic gesture that brings a false sense of closure to the narrative, as he has never acknowledged his own motives in keeping his daughter's existence a secret from his mother for the first two years of her life or the painful effects of this secrecy on Kym. Yet her impossible desire for belonging motivates her writing of Harlem as translocal. For the most part, translocality manifests itself in lyrical digressions in which Ragusa identifies herself with women from diasporas south of the US: her Caribbean nanny, whose singing voice is associated with the voice she will later develop as a writer, or the Haitian women whose "canopy of hands" (146) stretch towards the image of the Madonna at the Mount Carmel in East Harlem. Through her consciousness of migrancy, Ragusa transmutes her experience of racism and ethnic non-belonging into a valorization of cross-cultural identifications and black female agency. The hundreds of people who march in the procession in East Harlem, most of whom are women, are there to pay homage to an image of the Madonna who is more like the Black Madonna honored in folk festivals throughout the Mediterranean world despite her porcelain face.[4] Ragusa emphasizes

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[4] As Elisabetta Marino has argued, the Black Madonna in Italian American culture, although Christianized, has "been persistently associated with the articulation of empowering strategies, with antagonism towards any kind of

that she is "not an image of selfless maternity, but one of absolute sovereignty and limitless power. She is the center here, not Christ, not the Father" (145). Watching Italian women carrying tiers of lighted candles on their heads, Ragusa is reminded of Africa: "It's such an African image to me, a woman carrying what is most precious on her head: water, grain, fire" (143). Her diasporic consciousness metaphorizes East Harlem: "Italian Americans, and Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Haitians" move together "like an exhalation of breath" across a neighborhood that is "almost a geologic formation, stratified by waves of migration, years of occupation and contestation, different communities who have all called it home" (144-145). Women sing in different languages, Spanish and Italian, French and Creole. Their songs grow more frenzied when the procession halts at the foot of the church and the male Italian American marching band breaks into the Italian national anthem, as though they struggle not to surrender their power to the violence of male nationalism.

Translocality is also embodied by Luisa, Ragusa's Italian great-grandmother, who brings to East Harlem the small mountainous village in Calabria from which she migrated as an adolescent in the second decade of the twentieth century. "If East Harlem was the village transplanted, Luisa was the village embodied," Ragusa writes, reflecting that "whatever sense of tradition and connection my father feels to his Italian heritage comes from his grandmother, from the words on her tongue, the labor of her hands, the epic struggle she enacted each day of re-creating life as she had known it in Calabria within the confines of her gray tenement building" (131). Luisa's efforts to recreate Calabria in East Harlem parallel Miriam's efforts to restore Harlem to its former grandeur. Both women are engaged in a mission of cultural preservation that they believe will give meaning to future generations. Each has been influenced by the other's culture: Luisa's work as a root woman evokes Africa, while Miriam's knowledge of the myth of Demeter and Persephone evokes Sicily, the home of Luisa's ancestors. Although they live a generation apart, each woman is married against her will to her abuser and

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patriarchal restraints, with the healing of deeply ingrained divisions (of gender, class, ethnicity), and with the celebration of diversity in unity" (39-40).

finds a way out of the marriage, becoming the head of her own household at a time when to be a single mother was to be a pariah by the standards of the dominant American culture.

In an interview with Livia Tenzer in 2002, Ragusa spoke about how Gilda's "revelation about her father's physical abuse of her mother illustrates the ways in which an impoverished man still had power over an immigrant woman through the force of his body" (214). Southern Italian women, like African American women, too often bore the brunt of their husbands' economic powerlessness. By drawing attention to a gender-based system of oppression that traverses Harlem's ethnic, racialized boundaries, *The Skin Between Us* hints at an alliance that could have developed between southern Italian female immigrants and working-class African American women despite linguistic and cultural boundaries.

SICILY AS A THIRD SPACE

Third Space theory, an interdisciplinary tool of analysis, originated in Postcolonial Studies, in the work of Homi K. Bhabha. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha made hybridity the starting point of his theory of cultural identity, emphasizing how cultures influence and transform each other. His theory was controversial in that it unsettled the binary between colonizer and colonized that postcolonial critics relied upon in their own writings, showing how the two are already imbricated in the field of cultural production.

Bhabha conceived of the Third Space as enabling the dynamic interplay between cultures through a deferral of meaning. He relates it to a lack of transparency inherent in language and communication:

> The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two spaces be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific condition of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation. (53)

The Third Space is linked to a Derridean idea of différance—impossible to pin down, yet responsible for the instability of meaning within linguistic systems and semiotic contexts. Its existence, for Bhabha, "challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People" (54). As hybridity's ontological ground, it shatters myths of national, cultural, and racial purity.

Third Space theory is useful for conceptualizing Ragusa's memoir, which concerns itself with relations between diasporas, with liminal, in-between spaces, as expressed through its central conceit of skin and its allusions to Persephone, a figural border crosser who divides her time above and below the earth, alternately celebrated and mourned by her mother. It is not altogether incompatible with Kandiyoti's idea of migrant sites; both Bhabha and Kandiyoti would agree that the old cannot simply be replaced or erased by the new, that the migrant subject inhabits multiple places simultaneously. Yet Kandiyoti has distinguished her understanding of migrant sites from a third-space typology in which "everything comes together" in "a zone of hybridity," emphasizing that in her analysis of US diaspora narratives, enclosure and openness "clash and collide" (43). Both models of diaspora inform *The Skin Between Us*. While the Harlem chapters engage and destabilize Harlem as a site, Ragusa's prologue and epilogue, set near and within Sicily, respectively, partake of a third-space chronotope. Sicily is a discursive space that permits Ragusa to contest the ethnoracialized boundaries of her remembered Harlem with images of openness; a liminal space that, in the words of Bhabha, give rise to "something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meeting and representation" (1994, 211). While the Harlem chapters are rich with ethnographic insights and journalistic detail, the descriptions of Sicily consist mainly of surface impressions, stylized poetic images that underscore Sicily's status as a textual construction and remind the reader that Ragusa's true home is language.

The prologue reflects on the textual creation of a diasporic self through the topos of the journey. While on a ferry crossing the Strait of Messina, Ragusa locates her origins in displacement, in the forced migration of her maternal ancestors and the "barely

voluntary" migration of her paternal ancestors to the US Although the status of Italians as a diasporic group was fiercely debated at the time that Ragusa was writing, Ragusa makes her own position clear by connecting the Italian American experience of separation with the African American experience: "Two homelands left far behind" (2). However, this shared history is not enough for Ragusa to experience belonging. Ragusa's identity splits in two when she becomes aware of the disapproving looks of the Italians on the ferry:

> What must I have looked like to them? A woman alone, already an oddity. Already suspect. My dark, corkscrew hair was pulled back, something I had learned to do whenever I went someplace where I didn't want to stand out, which for most of my life had been that time, I had that feeling, all too familiar, of wanting to climb out of my skin, to be invisible (18-19).

This reflection on her gendered, racialized difference gives way to a reflection on her own history of migrations within the US, where she had spent much of her childhood traveling between the homes of the now deceased Miriam and Gilda, "trying and not always succeeding to negotiate the distance—cultural, historic, linguistic—between them" (19). Towards the end of the prologue, she communicates her goal as a writer: by returning to Sicily, she would find her way back to Harlem.

Yet in Sicily, Ragusa is "unhomed," Bhabha's term for "the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world... that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" (1992, 142). Palermo is Harlem's double, engendering cross-racial, cross-cultural identifications that have been repressed in the US Palimpsestic, it bears the traces of multiple histories, "the site of thousands of years of invasion and violation, accommodation and amalgamation" alternately plundered by "Greeks, Romans, Phoenicians, Arabs, Normans, Spanish, and French" (Ragusa, 234). Wandering the ancient capital, Ragusa connects the words she hears in Sicilian dialect, "words of Arabic origin," with her grandparents' home in the Bronx and New Jersey, and marvels that her rich heritage could have been disparaged in the US For the first time in the narrative, she identifies her face with that of Gilda and her father, and sees it reflected in the faces of the people around her. In La Kalsa, "the Harlem of Palermo," where

working-class Sicilians and immigrants from Africa and Asia live, Ragusa sees a black female prostitute who has painted her face white, a reworking of the blackface trope popular in Western culture. When she asks her Sicilian friends why prostitutes choose to hide their faces, he responds, "To make themselves more beautiful to Sicilian men," (Ragusa, 236) naturalizing racist beauty standards that Ragusa's African-American mother and grandmother have never ascribed to; their focus on their physical beauty and flattering fashions, which might be read by white feminists as a sign of internalized oppression, is actually a form of defiance against the transnational erasure of black women's beauty. She also sees black African and local Sicilian boys playing joyously in a "large, open field," an image that serves as an ironic counterpart to the scenes of racial warfare described in the Harlem chapters. Harlem is continually evoked and de-familiarized in Ragusa's description of Palermo, but it is her aesthetic contemplation of the boys in the field that—in contradistinction to her aesthetic contemplation of the photograph of her two grandmothers—constitutes an unhomely moment in the narrative. The "shock of recognition of the world" in the home and "the home in the world" (Bhabha 1992, 142) disorients Ragusa: "For a moment I lost track of where I was- was this Palermo, or Cairo, or Lagos, or Harlem?" (237). Harlem, Ragusa's home, becomes the world in this moment.

Ragusa concludes her memoir by returning to the myth of Demeter and Persephone, a story which has held a central place in Italian American and African American women's writing.[5] Whereas in Chapter 5 she read Persephone as "the good daughter split in two," forced to shuttle between two incompatible worlds, by the epilogue Persephone has become a representation of the diasporic female writer (107). The distance between the two grandmothers' worlds collapse in her final retelling of the myth, which is introduced with a Sicilian proverb: *Cu bona reda voli fari, di figghia*

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[5] In "Persephone's Daughters," Edvidge Giunta emphasizes the centrality of the myth in Italian American women's writing, citing Susan Caperna Lloyd, Lucia Perilla, Diane di Prima, and Joanna Herman. According to Giunta, Italian American women have a privileged relationship with the myth because of its roots in a Greek-inspired Mediterranean culture (769). The myth has also resonated with African American writers such as Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Rita Dove, who have incorporated its central motif of mother-daughter separation and reunion in their own works (eg, *Beloved, Mother Love*, "The Annaid" and "In the Mecca").

fimmina avi a cumincinari. Ragusa gives an approximate translation, "A good descent starts with a girl," and reflects on the meaning of descent, creating a female genealogy that connects the Italian side with the African side: "Sybela and her unnamed mother, Luisa and Gilda, Miriam and my mother, my mother and me: a lineage of mothers and daughters losing each other and finding each other over and over again" (237). Their common heritage is "the loss, the search, the story," which Ragusa as memoirist has taken it upon herself to reconstruct, descending into an underworld that has become synonymous with memory.

CONCLUSION: PERSEPHONE'S DESCENT

In the preface of *The Skin Between Us*, Kym Ragusa uses patchwork as a metaphor for the writing of her narrative: "I have woven a narrative out of many bits and pieces: fragments of memory; family stories passed down through the generations and altered in the process with each telling; interviews with family members; snippets of adult conversation I overheard as a child" (7). Despite her reliance on this multiculturalist trope and the cover's image of white hands folded into and resting over black hands, *The Skin Between Us* does not encourage us to reach comforting conclusions about our diverse heritage. What Edvige Giunta has written about *fuori/outside*—that it "does not subscribe to what Louise DeSalvo has called 'the recovery narrative,' a narrative that exonerates the reader/viewer of any social or political responsibility" (2003, 229)—also holds true for Ragusa's written memoir. Kym's status as an outsider in Italian America is unchanged by the events in the narrative; her female ancestors come together only in the memoir's mythopoetic, metatextual ending, which plays on the literal and figural meanings of descent. Descent as blood lineage is transmuted, through the final allusion to the myth of Demeter and Persephone, into descent as re-memory, a meaning consistent with Stuart Hall's notion of cultural identity as "a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, and not outside, representation" (222). Displacement and the desire to recuperate losses incurred by migration through storytelling constitute the common heritage of African American and southern Italian American women.

Ragusa recuperates her *Italianità* through her rewriting of myth, and not through a reconciliation with her father, who remains a mysterious, aloof presence despite their time together in New Jersey. In Chapters 6 through 8, she alludes to his heroin addiction, his PTSD from his service in the Vietnam War, and his propensity for violence, but she does not flesh out his character. Instead, she claims as her literary father Ovid, an ancient Latin poet who spent the last few years of his life in exile, having been banished by Emperor Augustus to a remote province on the Black Sea. In Ovid's retelling of the myth, Persephone is more than the hostage of Hades; she steals the pomegranate from his kingdom, enabling her own return "to the realm of the ancestors, the realm of memory" (Ragusa, 238). Ragusa finds Ovid's Persephone compelling because of her transgressive desire for knowledge, which is eroticized in her imagination—"She breaks open the rough red skin of the fruit, and puts the seven seeds in her mouth" (238)— and, more importantly, because she chooses her own fate, as Ragusa announces in the last sentence of her memoir. Fiore has written that Persephone's underground journey is "not as convincing as the kind of spatial experiences and rethinking of space that Ragusa offers on other occasions," "partly because of its brief appearance in the novel" (133), but the Ovidian version of the Persephone theme is alluded to on multiple occasions throughout the Harlem chapters, albeit implicitly, through the defiant decisions of Kym's mother and Sybela to live elsewhere. Moreover, Ragusa's representation of Harlem as a migrant site, with its oscillation between thematics of enclosure and translocality, restages Ovid's depiction of Hades as a confining yet transformative, potentially liberating space.

Perhaps more copies of *The Skin Between Us* would have been sold in the US had it ended with a scene of racial harmony rather than with Persephone's subversive decision to eat the pomegranate seeds. Yet Ragusa's determination to tell an intergenerational story of loss and betrayal is more relevant than ever in a post-Trumpian age of Black Lives Matters, when racist sentiments in Italian American communities have been reignited by the destruction of Columbus monuments across

the US.[6] Her memoir confronts us with the inadequacy of multiculturalist discourses that attempt to smooth over divisions within and between African American and Italian American communities, even as it offers hope that through creative acts of storytelling—what Toni Morrison has referred to as "re-memory"—members of both communities can reclaim their histories and finally speak to each other.

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[6] Fred Gardaphé's recent article, "Beyond Columbus: An Italian American Wake Up Call" (2020), discusses how the removal of Columbus statues across the US has forced Italian Americans to re-evaluate their problematic identification with a man who had never been a part of Italian history.

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REVERSE EXODUSES: RETURNING TO VIETNAM AS A TROPE OF VIETNAMESE AMERICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

In 1995, the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam restored diplomatic relations. After twenty years of embargo, the two former enemies reestablished trade links and removed the restrictions imposed on travels. As a result, members of the Vietnamese diaspora had the chance to return freely to their ancestral land, in many cases after a painful and prolonged absence. Most notably, the détente enabled many second-generation Vietnamese American to visit their fatherland for the first time, with all the emotional consequences that such a visit implies. In the following years, several Vietnamese American authors portrayed this experience in their works, either as a narrative turning point or as an autobiographical moment. This article analyzes three remarkable instances of this trope in contemporary Vietnamese American literature. The aim is to prove how the nuances of the Vietnamese American perspective on postwar reconciliation are still fertile ground for narratives and stories.
Keywords: Vietnamese American Literature; Vietnamese Diaspora; Ocean Vuong; Aimee Phan; Lan Cao; Viet Thanh Nguyen.

Is it possible to *return* to a place where you have never been? Such a question may appear paradoxical to many, but not for a Northern American, an Australian, or a European of Vietnamese descent, when descending an airplane staircase at Tân Sơn Nhất airport, feeling for the very first time the warm breeze of Southern Vietnam's eternal summer. Perhaps, the same question could come back to him or her during a chat with a cab driver, while entering the bustling tree-lined avenues of Hồ Chí Minh City's District 1, because of the driver's oddly familiar Saigonese accent. Or maybe later on, while recognizing a small building wrapped in a tangle of wires and old loudspeakers—which now houses a family of total strangers—as the native house of his or her parents. This hypothetical second-generation Vietnamese person had never set foot on Vietnamese soil. Yet this first journey may somehow feel like a sort of homecoming.

Diasporic Vietnamese arts and literature often retell or reimagine similar 'home(land)comings.' Most notably, Vietnamese American narratives are frequently

"bound by the theme of return" (Pelaud 2001, 5), to the point that the reverse exodus could be classified as a recurring trope of sorts. Early Vietnamese American literature consisted mostly of an oral tradition of exile narratives, co-written with American authors, that targeted mainly an American audience (Wang 2013, 162). But in the past two decades, as 1.5 and second-generation Vietnamese Americans started to make headway in the literary world, the focus shifted. A new character emerged, the Vietnamese American *returnee*:

> a cosmopolitan traveler whose encounter with contemporary Vietnam not only raises questions about history and memory as lived discrepantly by Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans but also compels us to reconsider the relations between representation, subjectivity, and the geopolitical history that is crystallized in the body of 'Viet Kieu' (diasporic Vietnamese). (Wang 2013, 164)

In 2013, Chih-ming Wang identified this paradigm in two Vietnamese American memoirs, *Catfish and Mandala* by Andrew X. Pham and *Perfume Dreams* by Andrew Lam. Wang raised the question of whether "this urge to return, in reality and in one's memory" is in fact "the same as the Hollywood version of US comebacks for the purpose of putting the 'Vietnam War syndrome' to rest" (2013, 163). The aim of this article is to widen the frame even further, including also some works of fiction that have appeared in the meantime. The goal is to prove how the Vietnamese American perspective on postwar reconciliation is still fertile ground for narratives and points of critical discussion.

EXILE AND BACK: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Monarchs that survived the migration passed this message down to their children. The

memory of family members lost from the initial winter was woven into their genes.

(Ocean Vuong, On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous, 16)

And if you bypassed a war, a war/ wouldn't bypass you.

(Diana Khoi Nguyen, "The Exodus," 2018)

If the archetypical diasporic Vietnamese traveler described in the introduction happens to hold an American passport, we should not probably date his/her first return before the end of the 1980s. Indeed, it was at that time that the United States started to gradually normalize diplomatic relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. For almost twenty years, Washington had refused to officially recognize Hà Nội's government. After the demise of the American-backed Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) in 1975, the US had imposed an embargo against the new regime. The reunified Vietnam was then a poor and isolated country worn down by thirty and more years of war: before long, people started to flee. Most of the refugees who escaped Vietnam in the late 1970s/early 1980s resettled in the United States. The first wave consisted largely of the political and military élite of the South Vietnamese regime. The second and the third are usually referred to as the 'boat people' exodus. Among the many who managed to escape, there were persecuted ethnic Chinese and ARVN soldiers who underwent hardships and starvation in reeducation camps.[1] Afterward, legal exits were authorized and coordinated through the Orderly Departure Program. In the following years, many of these refugees were to form large communities across the US. They published newspapers written in Vietnamese, opened *phở* restaurants, and embellished Californian strip malls and Boston's shop signs with the diacritical marks of the *Quốc Ngữ* alphabet. Every Lunar New Year, their veterans paraded in the avenues of Orange County, proudly wearing the uniforms of a now-dissolved army. The yellow flag of South Vietnam was hoisted again, trembling in the sand-filled wind of Texas or in the breeze of the Pacific Ocean: it was the birth of Vietnamese America.[2] Communications between those who left and those who stayed behind were slowed by the embargo, and by Communist Vietnam's policy of self-isolation. Letters and diaspora remittances could still reach the homeland, but with difficulties. Even making a phone call was a tough task, as shown in Lan Cao's novel *Monkey Bridge*: Chapter 2 begins with the protagonist Mai resorting to cross the Canadian border to get in touch with her

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[1] For comprehensive statistical data on Vietnamese refugees, see Aguilar-San Juan 2009; Pelaud 2011.
[2] On the cultural and political texture of Vietnamese American communities, see also Bui 2017, Nguyen 2017.

long-lost grandfather. For many families, it was not unusual to wait years for news of their loved ones.

When the Cold War came to its end at the turn of the 1990s, things started to change. As the American journalist Neil Sheehan puts it, in the late 1980s Vietnam had learned the hard way that "the concrete of socialism crumbles" (1991, 17). Thus, after the Sixth National Congress of the Party, Communist Vietnam reversed course. In 1986, the Politburo and its new general secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh launched Đổi Mới, a market economy reform that ultimately managed to "Vietnamize capitalism" (Bui 2017, 180). "American neoliberals," from their part, "wanted to dominate the world economy even if doing so required recognizing the legitimacy of the Hanoi regime" (Nguyen 2017, 121). Establishing lucrative trade connections with a country that sacrificed millions of its men in the name of Marxism-Leninism enabled the United States to frame "reconciliation as a postwar victory" (Nguyen 2017, 121). From then on, it was not long before overseas Vietnamese were finally allowed to come back. Initially, the process did not start well. The wounds of the war were still fresh: "[b]ack then, the former refugees … weren't exactly welcomed" and "[m]any were harassed at the airport, unless they slipped a $10 bribe to the officers stamping their passports" (Ly 2003). In the streets of Hà Nội, foreigners were observed with curiosity. American journalists and war veterans might feel even well-liked and welcomed. But for the losing side, the "enemies of history" (Lam 2005, 30) long since removed from the national narrative, it was different. The phrase *Việt Kiều*, which translates as 'Vietnamese sojourner,' "became a common slur for people who were fat and spoiled" (Ly 2003). Moreover, officials feared exiled insurgents and tended to distrust returning refugees.

However, as soon as Vietnamese American wealth started to flow back in, the old grievances lost importance. Business opportunities arose, and the returnees slowly became an asset. The same government "that once would have imprisoned them" (Ly 2003) ended up passing laws that allowed *Việt Kiều* retirees to own real estate. Many of them even decided to return to their homeland and settle for good, forming "a small but growing reverse exodus" (Ly 2003). Yet, many never went back. They resolved to grow old and die on American soil, refusing to accept the very idea of a Communist

Vietnam. "In time, April 30"—the day Sài Gòn fell/was liberated, depending on who you ask— "became the birth date of an exile's culture, built on defeatism and on a sense of tragic ending" (Lam 2005, 68).

Their children, however, are a different matter. The distance between Vietnam and Vietnamese America is deep, but so is the distance between first and second-generation Vietnamese Americans. In a way, even the latter experienced war and displacement: but only vicariously, through the pain and the memories of their parents. Such forms of intergenerational trauma "do not often express themselves as holistic narratives of past suffering but rather *as deep silences* produced within families still trying to heal from their past" (Bui 2015, 78, emphasis added). Thus, for a second generation Vietnamese American, as poet Bao Phi puts it, to have kids is to wonder "[h]ow much blood and history can one last name hold" (2017, 16). For the above reasons, as anyone that grew up with second-hand memories of war and postwar atrocities, "mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 2012, 5), second-generation Vietnamese often return to Vietnam with a heavy heart.

Meanwhile, for better or worse Vietnam had shed its skin. A new flag waves over the Perfume River and on Sài Gòn's City Hall. There are giant billboards with hammers and sickles celebrating Five-Year Plans on every major roundabout. President Hồ Chí Minh's face smiles at them from *đồng* money bills. Now, the texture itself of the cities is different: after 1975, in Sài Gòn/HCM City many street names were changed. The new authorities replaced 26% of the topography "to both de-commemorate the previous regime and celebrate the new national identity" (Hương and Kang 2014, 69).[3] As a result, one might get lost between the layers of history, resorting to asking for directions to passers-by old enough to remember Sài Gòn as it once was. Upon departure, many

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[3] For that matter, South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm had done the same in the 1950s with the colonial French toponyms. See Hương and Kang 2014. As exiled intellectual Nguyen Long recalled in his memoir *After Saigon Fell: Daily Life under the Vietnamese Communists* (1981), the post-1975 name-changing could lead to unintentional ironies. "Công Lý (Justice) is now Nam Kỳ Khởi Nghĩa (Southern Uprising) and Tự Do (Liberty) is now Đồng Khởi (Simultaneous Uprising). As I walked I often remembered a popular jingle about the name changes: 'The Southern Uprising has destroyed Justice, /The Simultaneous Uprising has killed Liberty'" (61).

Vietnamese refugees had lost houses and properties to new occupants. For their sons and daughters, visiting those houses and meeting those occupants could prove to be an unforgettable event. Several YouTube travel vlogs made by second or third-generation diasporic Vietnamese depict the intensity of such moments: brief exchanges on camera between those who had remained and those who had left show how deep the scars of history can go. It is as if the Cold War made the whole Vietnamese people play a sick game of musical chairs. In the words of Andrew X. Pham, "[e]verything could shift, and nothing would change," because "[t]he shoes to be filled were the same" (1999, 107).

Figure 1. Page from a forthcoming volume of "The Gulf" series
(Nguyễn 2020)

In short, returning second-generation Vietnamese Americans carry the weight of the 'American possibility' no less than the burden of the Vietnamese past. They embody "a successful model minority who returns to Vietnam as a kind of Superman, flaunting the American wealth that the Vietnamese could not have had" (Nguyen 2016, 205).[4] They

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[4] As Andrew Lam writes: "[i]n Vietnam my face and body take on mythological proportions … Visions of double-tiered freeways and glassy high-rises are to be extracted out of the Viet Kieu's flesh. Squeeze a little harder, and who knows, you might just see Disneyland" (2005, 128).

stand at a crossroads between what has been, what will be, and what could have been. Hence, it is no accident that the emergence of many Vietnamese American literary works coincided with the coming of age of the 1.5 and the second generation. The reverse exodus, i.e. the possibility of going back to confront the trauma, is a central point in many Vietnamese American and diasporic Vietnamese narratives. "The movement from the homeland to the adopted land, as refugees and exiles, and finally the return and the reconciliation, marks much of the literature" (Nguyen 2016, 205). When 1.5 and second-generation Vietnamese Americans started to produce literature, they juxtaposed the reverse exodus narrative with the usual rhetoric of remembrance commonly associated with the Vietnam War. Sick of Hollywood revenge fantasies in which the Vietnamese were relegated to extras, they took center stage. Instead of the American Vietnam of *Apocalypse Now* or *Platoon*, they narrated Vietnamese America. They wrote family sagas and choral novels that explored its ambiguities and complexities, and created characters and narrators that strive in order "to reconcile the singular self with collective history" (Wang 2013, 167). As Isabelle Thuy Pelaud summarizes:

> More emotionally and politically detached from Viet Nam than those of the first generation, these narratives articulate *a new concept of home*. Identity is depicted to a different degree in terms of movement, one that goes back and forth between North America and Viet Nam, either by actual travel there or by acts of memory, imagined or recollected. (2011, 36; emphasis added)

These narratives were rife with home(land)comings and reverse exoduses: as Vietnamese American literature entered this new phase, the trope of the return to the fatherland gained prominence.

"WOVEN INTO THEIR GENES": THREE OCCURRENCES OF THE TROPE IN 2010S VIETNAMESE AMERICAN WORKS OF FICTION

I. To rebuild

The reverse exodus trope marks respectively the beginning and the end of the narrative in two Vietnamese American novels of the 2010s: Aimee Phan's *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* (2012) and Lan Cao's *The Lotus and the Storm* (2014). Phan's novel is a

saga that spans generations and continents. Drawing on her family history, the Orange County native crafted a multilayered cross-Atlantic perspective on the Vietnamese diaspora. *Reeducation* is at once a journey of self-discovery and a reflection on Vietnamese identity, as much as a story of betrayals and silences. Phan wrote Cherry as a detective bent on unfolding the hidden secrets of both the French and American branches of her extended family, learning "much more than she bargained for" (Bui 2015, 81) in the process. Notably, the novel also contains a cross-section of the diasporic Vietnamese reverse exodus process. The prologue opens with a reunion between second-generation Vietnamese American Cherry Truong and her brother Lum, who has recently resettled in Vietnam. A failure back in the States, Lum has remade himself as a successful entrepreneur in the homeland. He is in charge of a housing company that targets Vietnamese American buyers:

> "Wait until you see the finished product. You'll be happy." He gestures up to a sign.
> Cherry hadn't noticed it when they drove in. On a clean yellow billboard, in red block letters, her eyes take a minute to focus: THE FUTURE SITE OF NEW LITTLE SAIGON… THE COMFORTS OF AMERICA, IN YOUR TRUE HOME, VIETNAM. (Phan 2012, 5)

> Lum's desk is covered with miniature dioramas of the development's different housing options: the Magnolia, the Westminster, the Bolsa, and the Brookhurst. (Phan 2012, 19)

According to Long T. Bui, in creating Lum Phan highlighted a neo-neocolonial dynamic of sorts:

> Lum is a … quintessential loser who comes from a people viewed as the ultimate losers of history…[h]is incapacity to live up to the middle-class ideals and upwardly mobile values espoused by so many Vietnamese Americans today is transfigured in postsocialist Vietnam, where overseas Vietnamese like him return to colonize, modernize, and reeducate South Vietnamese people on capitalism. (2015, 83)

Lum's reverse exodus is a paradigm shift: raised in America as the son of unwanted refugees, he returns to Vietnam as a welcomed expat who capitalizes on refugees' nostalgia. His "New Little Saigon" is explicitly named after Orange County's topography.

Besides being the product of a wise business move, his housing complex is in a sense akin to other Vietnamese American "strategic memory projects" such as the Westminster's Vietnam War Memorial (Aguilar-San Juan 2009, 88). To reclaim "Bolsa" or "Brookhurst" as *Vietnamese* toponyms is to quietly reverse the post-1975 de-commemoration campaign of streets-renaming. Thus, Lum's project is a monument to Vietnamese American culture: built in the homeland, hidden in plain sight, and made possible by American dollars.

Lan Cao's *The Lotus and the Storm* describes the reverse exodus in a rather different light. Cao, the daughter of an ARVN four-star general, escaped Vietnam at the age of 14. Like other 1.5 generation authors, she has direct recollections of wartime Vietnam. Therefore, her depiction of the exile/reverse exodus dynamic is particularly poignant. The novel covers more than forty years of history, from 1963 to 2006. Cao uses the great national Vietnamese epic *Truyện Kiều* by eighteenth-century poet Nguyễn Du as an intertextual reference. In doing so, she establishes a parallel between the ancient Trịnh–Nguyễn partition of Vietnam and the divisions of the recent past.[5] Even in this case, incidentally, the plot is centered around a family that harbors secrets and divided loyalties. Moreover, one of the main character-narrators of *The Lotus and the Storm* is a person that suffers from multiple personality disorder. The split has been caused by war trauma: in a sense, Mai/Bao/Cecile herself could be seen as a sort of living allegory of the partitioning of Vietnam. Therefore, the division is undoubtedly one of *Lotus*' core themes. Hence, the *double* reverse exodus with which the novel ends. Cao encapsulates the dualities of the *Việt Kiều* experience through the different attitudes of Mai/Bao concerning the home(land)coming. Whereas Mai feels alienated in returning to Sài Gòn after a thirty-year absence, Bao seems to feel at home. Chapter 28, "Knowing," dwells on Mai's impressions:

> When the plane landed, I felt as if Saigon had been willed into unlikely existence by an extravagant act of faith—mine. ... It is still Saigon. But my infatuation with

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[5] This parallel was actually at the base of the commemoration strategies and nation-building of the Republic of Vietnam, as evident from several decisions of Diệm's government in matters of toponymy. See Hương and Kang 2014.

> it is mingled with suspicion. ... *It is exactly as it was*—this is what people like me want very much to tell themselves when they return home. But this is not the case. Thirty years after the war's end, the city is visited daily by the love-struck Viet Kieu, the overseas Vietnamese who, like me, are perpetually filled with unrequited longing. We have embarked on our trips in search of a time and place that no longer exists. ... If it were not for the hard currency—U.S. dollars—we bring with us, we wouldn't even be welcomed here. This is no longer my city. ... I realize that I am but a few steps away from a house that is no longer there. I cannot even locate the spot where it once stood. ... I look at the surrounding space with proprietary wonder and ascendant hope, searching for the afterimage of life as I once knew it. ... I am both restless and anchored, touched and alienated, present and invisible. (Cao 2014, 354, 355, 357)

Mai's reverse exodus is truly an "act of faith." Growing up, she kept scenes and places of her childhood frozen in memory. Now, as she wanders in those same streets, she clings to distant reminiscences as to an outdated map unable to point the way. Like *Reeducation*'s Lum, Mai is a rebuilder of sorts. Whereas Phan's character was literally building a piece of Vietnamese America in the homeland, Cao's character-narrator is metaphorically excavating the ruins of South Vietnam. She is not visiting the city; she is *reimagining* it as it was—desperately trying to reconcile her memory with her perception. However, hers is a failed effort: pre-1975 Sài Gòn is a "time and place that no longer exists," and its very existence is possible only through an "act of faith." For Mai, Hồ Chí Minh City's avenues are a landscape of the *Unheimlich*. She knows that under the surface the city has remained the same. Nonetheless, she cannot accept the new flag, the new names, and the new symbols. She behaves like an "ordinary stranger" (Cao 2014, 355), avoiding raw vegetables, distrusting street food vendors, and drinking only bottled water. In 1971, she was a Vietnamese girl. In 2006, she is an American tourist.

Conversely, Bao seems pleased to be back. She loves the smells and the vibrancy of Bến Thành Market. She feels at home in Vietnam, a place that she claims to "inhabit without ambivalence" (Cao 2014, 362). "After more than thirty years in America," Bao says, "I remain wholly and quintessentially Vietnamese, tethered to this place" (Cao 2014, 362). As often with Lan Cao, food descriptions are a key narrative factor. Whereas Mai distrusted an elder *bánh cuốn* seller and looks for "Westernized" (Cao 2014, 359) restaurants, Bao is intrigued by the food stalls and by the flavors that linger in the air.

As Mai observes, whereas she feels "alienated" and "invisible," Bao "makes peace with Vietnam as it is" (Cao 2014, 355). *The Lotus and the Storm*'s last two chapters are thus an interesting take on the trope of the reverse exodus. Stating that Bao embodies the Vietnamese in 'Vietnamese American' as Mai embodies the American is to oversimplify. More properly, it could be said that Mai and Bao embody two *possible* shades of the returnee experience; two seemingly conflicting kinds of reverse exodus, that, on some level, can even coexist—as the split personalities of Mai/Bao/Cecile ultimately manage to do. Placing back a woman with two names in a city with two names allows Cao to paint a nuanced picture of the *Việt Kiều* condition and of its complexities. As a 1.5 generation author, she sits somewhere in the middle between nostalgia and projection. Every refugee home(land)coming, Cao seems to suggest, is at once a painful and joyous experience. Mai/Bao's journey is a path of reconciliation and healing, as Cherry's reverse exodus in Phan's *Reeducation* was. But it is a reconciliation based on remembrance, not on oblivion. Both novels end with a peace agreement of sorts between the self and its memories (or, in Cherry's case, *post*memories). For this reason, the choice of putting the reverse exodus respectively at the beginning and the end of the narrative is significant, as the trope marks a crucial moment both in *Lotus* and *Reeducation*. Now let us see how the reverse exodus can play a minor, but equally crucial role in the framework of another novel, Ocean Vuong's acclaimed prose debut *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019).

II. Two funerals

Ocean Vuong's first novel has definitely caused a stir. Since its appearance in June 2019, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* has been a recipient of numerous awards, has been translated into several languages, and has topped countless year-end 'best book' lists. It was also recently announced that the prestigious indie studio A24 has optioned the movie rights to the book. Having already made a name for himself in the 2010s as a poet, Vuong is now indisputably one of the most renowned and promising Vietnamese American novelists of our time. Despite his young age, Vuong is a first-generation Vietnamese American. Born in Vietnam in 1988, he resettled in Connecticut with his

mother, grandmother, and aunt as "the only child in the three-generation exodus" (Armitstead 2017). At the time of his birth, thirteen years had already passed since the day that the North Vietnamese tanks crashed the gates of Independence Palace in Sài Gòn. Nonetheless, Ocean considers himself a "product of war" (Tippett 2020), like the speaker of his 2016 "Notebook Fragments" poem, who does the math and concludes: "[a]n American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists. Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me. / Yikes" (Vuong 2016, 70). The same 'war equation' comes back again in *On Earth*, as character-narrator Little Dog applies it equally to golf champion Tiger Woods and to his mother, Hong/Rose. Both a successful sportsman and a humble pedicurist, Little Dog argues, can be seen as a "direct product of the war in Vietnam" (Vuong 2019, 77) because of their family history. But in fact, Vuong observed in an interview, deep down "so much of American life is a product of war," as Americans celebrate themselves using a "lexicon of death" and "talk about pleasure as conquest," all while "standing on stolen ground" (Tippett 2020).[6] America, Vuong implies, is a warrior society and does not even know it.

For the above reasons, Vuong's historical perspective is rather different from the ones we have seen so far. His family did not escape the collapse of South Vietnam, but lived through it. His grandmother worked as a prostitute during the war and had a relationship with an American serviceman. His mother, for her part, grew up as a mixed child in postwar Vietnam, when Amerasian kids like her were seen as the living embodiment of the 'betrayal' of the South. Growing up, along with reading Homer and Roland Barthes, Vuong studied the war that 'produced' him. Unsatisfied with the hasty summaries he found in his textbooks, he went deeper. As he revealed in an interview:

> I realized right away that one's research with the Vietnam War—something I was
> not prepared for—was to see upwards of hundreds of dead bodies. Asian bodies.
> Bodies that look like me. So when you are most recognizable, in your research,

[6] In a passage of *On Earth*'s third section, Little Dog further elaborates on this idea. Wondering whether "destruction is necessary for art" (Vuong 2019, 256), he gathers several occurrences of said "lexicon of death" in the everyday language of the art world: "[y]ou killed that poem ... I am hammering this paragraph ... We smashed the competition. I'm wrestling with the muse. ... The audience a target audience" (Vuong 2019, 257).

as a corpse, it does something to you. Sometimes, the bodies were so mangled, you didn't know where one began and ended. And so I wanted, for my first book, to have Vietnamese bodies on the cover that were living. (Tippett 2020)

Vuong's acclaimed poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016) dealt extensively with the memory of the war, turning historical events like the Fall of Sài Gòn into impressionistic images and unreal visions. Likewise, inherited trauma is scattered everywhere on the pages of *On Earth*. In addition to being a coming-of-age and a meditation on grief, race, class, and queerness, the novel is also a testimony of what it means to be Vietnamese in America, and a testament to the power of words. It is structured around the idea of incommunicability, showing how language shapes people and relations—especially among migrant families. Little Dog writes a letter to his mother knowing that she, as an illiterate woman, will not be able to read it. He writes it not despite this, but *because* of this. As he affirms: "the very impossibility of your reading this is all that makes my telling it possible" (Vuong 2019, 165). Incommunicability dooms also the life of Little Dog's first love, Trevor, who, even before succumbing to drug addiction, had already fallen victim to his father's abuse and to "the rules ... already inside us" (Vuong 2019, 176), that is, to the burden of societal norms regarding masculinity, frailty, and homosexuality. In the background of Little Dog's tale, the tobacco fields of Connecticut, Bush's America, the opioid epidemics, and the lyrics of 50 Cent's rap classic *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'*.

On Earth's reverse exodus is presented as a diptych: a juxtaposition of two episodes, rather than a single narrative unit. Significantly, both episodes are centered around a memorial service. In part III, Little Dog and Hong/Rose return to Vietnam. They travel down to the rural Gò Công District, in the heart of the Mê Kông Delta, to bury the ashes of Lan, Little Dog's grandmother, near the paddy fields of her native village. The first episode of the diptych takes place on the day of the funeral. After the ceremony, Little Dog Skype-calls Paul, Lan's estranged ex-husband. Paul asks him to place the laptop between the graves to 'see' Lan for the last time. Little Dog holds Paul's face in front of Lan's tombstone, hiding unseen behind the computer. Paul is an American veteran: he had abandoned Lan back when he had to leave Vietnam during Nixon's Vietnamization. Now, he asks for Lan's forgiveness. It is another occurrence of

On Earth's structural theme of incommunicability: the only moment in which we see the former lovers facing each other, all that we see is a one-sided conversation. Paul's a confession that does not allow for answers: it is American pain versus Vietnamese silence. As in the case of Little Dog's confession to his mother, the very impossibility of Lan hearing Paul's confession is all that makes the confession *possible*. In this light, considering that this scene is itself a part of Little Dog's narration, that is, of his macro-confession, we could interpret Paul's confession as a sort of *mise en abîme* of the textual whole.

But there is more. Little Dog cannot help but notice that "[a] few children from the village had gathered at the edge of the graves, their curious and perplexed stares hover on the periphery" (Vuong 2019, 303). He sees himself through their eyes: "I must look strange to them, holding the pixelated head of a white man in front of a row of tombs" (Vuong 2019, 303). Paul's Vietnamese is not good, he is stuttering, and the Wi-Fi connection does not work. His face is a mess of pixels. Little Dog senses that to village boys not used to American technology the scene must appear grotesque. Suddenly, he realizes that he is holding a simulacrum in front of another: Lan's smile on the grave picture does not match Paul's sobbing, because neither Paul nor Lan are really there. Paul is thousands of miles away, and Lan is ashes. Besides, the picture was taken when Lan was 28, "roughly the age when they first met" (Vuong 2019, 301). It is as if Paul was somehow hoping to travel back to 1971 and ask for Lan's forgiveness right after she realized he had abandoned her. He is an old man apologizing to the young version of an old woman: as he is crying, she smiles in response. When it comes to Paul's perspective, all of this makes perfect sense. In the eyes of the kids, however, in holding the laptop Little Dog is performing an incomprehensible ritual.

"As I look at Paul's face on the screen … I realize how little I know of us, of my country, any country" (Vuong 2019, 303), he muses. Little Dog is understandably stunned after having learned the hidden secrets of his family history. On the one hand, he considers the long cause-effect chain of trauma and pain he is a 'product' of. In carrying the laptop, Little Dog is quite literally holding the weight of Paul's choices on his shoulders. Symbolically, he is bearing the burden of America's military intervention

in Vietnam. Ironically, as a 'product of war' which owes his very existence to those choices and to that intervention, this is a task that suits him fine. On the other hand, Little Dog cannot help but consider how relative everything is when seen from the outside. From his perspective, he had just witnessed the end of a sad love story. In fact, he was the one who made it possible: it was Little Dog who had actively enabled Paul to say his "last words to his first love" (Vuong 2019, 303). They performed a one-time ritual that nonetheless was somewhat already encoded in their set of cultural practices. But, for a group of poor kids born in rural Vietnam, witnessing such a strange funeral is to question their own interpretative codes. And in understanding this, Little Dog is slowly starting to question his own. Let us see how the second part of the diptych broadens and completes this hermeneutical process.

The second episode takes place two days later. Little Dog and Hong/Rose are back in Sài Gòn, and it is two in the morning on a hot summer night. The boy is awakened by music and voices and decides to step outside the hotel to see what the commotion is about. Walking past the alley, he is suddenly blinded by "colors, garments, limbs, the glint of jewelry and sequins" (Vuong 2019, 317). There are vendors, food, people. To the sleepy Little Dog, this impromptu street party looks like a sort of fever dream. Someone set up a "makeshift stage" (Vuong 2019, 318); women are dancing and singing karaoke. Upon hearing Vietnamese lyrics, four words suddenly flash into Little Dog's mind: "[y]**ou're already Vietnamese**" (Vuong 2019, 318, in bold type in the text). It is a reminiscence of something that Hong/Rose used to tell him back in Hartford: "'Remember,' you said each morning before we stepped out in cold Connecticut air, 'don't draw attention to yourself. You're already Vietnamese'" (Vuong 2019, 312).[7] In this case, however, the phrase takes on a different meaning. In hearing Vietnamese pop music from the 1980s, Little Dog is reminded of his '*Việt Kiều*' condition. Even though he did not grow up in this country, he still thinks he can

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[7] Vuong repeated this line verbatim, further elaborating on the concept during a 2019 interview with PBS' *Amanpour*. As a person of color, "your goal is to be invisible," he said to Michel Martin. "That's very strange for a mother to tell a child: 'disappear.' ... What I realized is that they were trying to protect me" (Amanpour 2019).

understand its codes. Approaching the party, he recognizes the language, the food, and the music. Yet, he still senses that something is wrong. The party is limited to a single city block: just outside of its edges, Sài Gòn's roads are empty and silent as they usually are at such an hour.

"In the ground, Lan is **already Vietnamese**" (Vuong 2019, 318, in bold type in the text), Little Dog says to himself. In the Saigonese episode, Hong/Rose's old advice is doubly reframed, as the adverb "already" assumes two different meanings. Here, "already Vietnamese" signifies the completion of Lan's reverse exodus, as her ashes now are *physically* one with her native land. Little Dog's reverse exodus, however, is another issue. He approaches the stage and takes a look at the dancers. Suddenly, he realizes that, until that very moment, he had not really understood what he was seeing:

> It was only when I came close enough to see their features, the jutted and heavy jawlines, the low forward brows, did I realize the singers were in drag. Their sequined outfits of varying cuts and primary colors sparkled so intensely it seemed they were donning the very reduction of stars. … To the right of the stage were four people with their backs to everyone else. … They stared at something on a long plastic table in front of them, their head so low they looked decapitated. … I stepped closer, and that's when I saw on the table, impossibly still, the distinct form of a body covered in a white sheet. By now all four mourners were openly weeping while, on stage, the singer's falsetto cut through their racked sobs …. (Vuong 2019, 318-20)

Little Dog's shock mirrors the perplexities of the Gò Công's kids from the first episode of the diptych. He believed he was crashing a party, when in fact he was stumbling into a funeral. Albeit being "already Vietnamese," until that night Little Dog had not yet possessed the cultural and social codes of the event he was witnessing. At the time of the narration, he is finally able to understand them:

> Later, I would learn that this was a common scene on a Saigon night. City coroners, underfunded, don't always work around the clock. When someone dies in the middle of the night, they get trapped in a municipal limbo where the corpse remains inside its death. As a response, a grassroots movement was formed as a communal salve. Neighbors, having learned of a sudden death, would, in under an hour, pool money and hire a troupe of drag performers for what was called "delaying sadness."

In Saigon, the sound of music and children playing this late in the night is a sign of death—or rather, a sign of a community attempting to heal.

It's through the drag performers' explosive outfits and gestures, their overdrawn faces and voices, their tabooed trespass of gender, that this relief, through extravagant spectacle, is manifest. … [T]he drag queens are, for as long as the dead lie in the open, *an othered performance*. Their presumed, reliable fraudulence is what makes their presence, to the mourners, necessary. Because grief, at its worst, is unreal. And it calls for a surreal response. The queens—in this way—are unicorns.

Unicorns stamping in a graveyard. (Vuong 2019, 320-22; author's emphasis)

In these passages, Little Dog's writing style is almost journalistic. Having detached himself from the phenomenon, he is now able to see it from the outside and draw conclusions. Until he got close to the stage, he believed he was seeing just some girls singing at a party. Then, he realized he was seeing a crew of drag queens paid to mourn an untimely death. In a single instant, his whole perception had completely shifted. This epiphany allows him to encapsulate the phenomenon into his interpretive codes: namely, his Western and queer perspectives. Now, he can draw parallels. He considers how different cultural codes are equally effective when it comes to coping with grief. The reaction differs, but the underlying causes are the same. Little Dog understands that in both cases the grief has to be *performed*. Whereas he was holding a laptop in front of a piece of stone, the queens are filling the night's silence with falsettos. Whereas Paul needed to confess his sins to an old picture via a Skype call, to "delay sadness" the four mourners need the "surreal response" of having sequined dancers and laughing children in the vicinity of a corpse. Both Little Dog's laptop-placing and the queens' karaoke are *performative acts*, practices that make sense only if the 'public' and the performer share the same set of cultural codes. In both episodes of the diptych, this is not the case. In the first, the Gò Công kids did not understand what Little Dog was doing. In the second, Little Dog, in order to fully grasp the meaning of what he had witnessed, had to do research afterward. Little Dog's dual role of performer/public allows him to overcome his own fore-structures. As a cross-cultural subject, the *Việt Kiều* is perpetually in the midst of opposing interpretative frameworks: with *On Earth*'s

funerals diptych, Vuong shows how such awareness can come at them at any moment, even during a Skype call or a nighttime walk.[8]

Therefore, Ocean Vuong's take on the reverse exodus trope differs significantly from Lan Cao's and Aimee Phan's. As for the form, the double episode is presented in a way that is consistent with *On Earth*'s scattered narrative structure: the episodes are intermingled with suggestions and calls to other passages of the novel. *On Earth*'s reverse exodus is framed as a pair of complementary scenes loosely connected to the textual whole, rather than as a narrative turning point—as in Cao and Phan's novels. But the political connotation of *On Earth*'s reverse exodus is where the novel really differs. In fact, Vuong manages to represent the *Việt Kiều* condition without having to dissect it. He wrote what to an extent, for his admission, is an autobiographical story. However, as for the matter of the reverse exodus, he offered no context. On the surface, *On Earth*'s reverse exodus is not connoted as an exodus at all. As far as we know, this could be a sought-after home(land)coming or a routine trip, indifferently. There are no political undertones in his depiction: Vuong describes the alienation of returning overseas Vietnamese without necessarily dwelling on their *alien nationalism*. His description of Sài Gòn is notably devoid of red flags and Communist billboards: for him, there is no paradise lost, no idealized happy past to retrieve. War and refugee politics are embedded in the fabric of *On Earth*, but there is no *before* nor *after* them: in all simplicity, they are what Little Dog is made of. As he writes to Hong/Rose: "Ma, to speak

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[8] Interestingly, the final part of *On Earth*'s reverse exodus is marked by an illusory overlap between the two funerals, that ideally reconnects the two halves of the diptych:

> In that street, beside the lifeless person who was somehow more animated in stillness than the living, the perpetual stench of sewage and runoff that lined the gutters, my vision blurred, the colors pooled under my lids. Passersby offered sympathetic nods, thinking I was part of the family. As I rubbed my face, a middle-aged man gripped my neck, the way Vietnamese fathers or uncles often do when trying to pour their strength into you. "You'll see her again. Hey, hey," his voice croaked and stung with alcohol, "you gonna see her." He slapped the back of my neck. "Don't cry. Don't cry." (Vuong 2019, 324)

It is revealed that the dead person mourned in the second funeral is in fact a woman. Little Dog's bewilderment is mistaken for grief, as passersby, assuming he is a relative, show him sympathy. A man even tries to console him. However, unbeknownst to him, he *is* in fact comforting Little Dog. Since the middle-aged Saigonese keeps using a female pronoun, he is unintentionally providing solace to the bereaved boy, who had just buried his grandmother. Symbolically, the two funerals of the diptych are now merged into one.

in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war" (Vuong 2019, 46). There is no way to overcome the war equation, at least in this world. The trauma is "woven into the genes," passed on from generation to generation. It marks the body like a birthmark. But this does not prevent Little Dog from fantasizing about reincarnation, that is, about the possibility of overcoming it in the soul:

> Maybe you'll be a girl and maybe your name will be Rose again, and you'll have a room full of books with parents who will read you bedtime stories in a country not touched by war. Maybe then, in that life and in this future, you'll find this book and you'll know what happened to us. And you'll remember me. Maybe. (Vuong 2019, 341)

Nor this does prevent him to ultimately overcome it by inverting its premises. If the passing is inevitable, it may well be even a positive thing:

> Yes, there was a war. Yes, we came from its epicenter. In that war, a woman gifted herself a new name—Lan—in that naming, claimed herself beautiful, then made that beauty into something worth keeping. From that, a daughter was born, and from that daughter, a son.
> All this time I told myself we were born from war—but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty.
> Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence—but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it. (Vuong 2019, 329)

This is Little Dog's "im/possible reconciliation" (Wang 2013, 181). He recognizes that, because of his lineage, he is indeed made of war: but along with the pain, he inherited the strength to cope with it. Along with Lan's trauma, he inherited her stories and her songs. Along with the war, he inherited Vietnam.

CONCLUSION

> *i know the promised land is a paradise but i still long for egypt/ i have found my oasis and still long for the desert/ sometimes after i eat, i am so full/ yet i ache for the*
>
> *hunger//*
>
> *(Kimberly Nguyen, "reverse exodus," 2019)*

The trope of the reverse exodus is still a constant presence in diasporic Vietnamese literature.[9] In addition to the three occurrences that we have examined in this article, there are still several other instances that could be listed. In Vietnamese American literature alone, the trope has recently made its appearance in seminal works such as Viet Thanh Nguyen's short story collection *The Refugees* (2017), or Thi Bui's graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do* (2017).[10] This constant series of occurrences goes to show how the theme of the return is still at the center of Vietnamese American collective imagination. Even now, thirty-five years into Đổi Mới and after decades of legal border crossing.

We have seen how, for diasporic Vietnamese, to return often means to reconcile: reconcile the perception with memories; reconcile the memories with places; reconcile the places with tales you grew up with. But the situation is further complicated when it comes to political reconciliation. Whereas returning American war veterans often feel welcomed and embraced by their former enemies, and the United States has long exorcized the ghost of defeat, the same cannot be said of the exiled South Vietnamese. "Mainstream narratives about postwar reconciliation read like morality tales, with the Vietnamese refugees depicted as petty, vindictive simpletons who should learn to forgive their enemies, as America and Vietnam had evidently done" (Nguyen 2017, 121). In the last episode of Ken Burns and Lynn Novick' 2017 documentary *The Vietnam War*, returning American veteran Mike Heaney asserts that such a reconciliation is possible: "you don't get closure, but you get some peace." For former refugees, however, both closure and peace can still seem impossibly elusive. As the real losers of the war, they do not possess "the luxury of historical amnesia" (Nguyen 2010, 145). Many of them

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[9] The trope is also present in cinema. A recent occurrence of it can be found in H. Khaou's *Monsoon* (2019).

[10] Nguyen's short story "Fatherland" is a prominent example of how the trope can be used skillfully by someone who has studied and mastered its mechanism. As we have seen, in his *Nothing Ever Dies* Viet Thanh Nguyen had already analyzed the theme of return in Vietnamese American literature. Moreover, Nguyen has recently announced that he is working on a memoir. For these reasons, I intend to return to the subject in the near future in order to give this matter the proper attention it deserves.

never wanted to go back. Some returned "only in their mind" (Lam 2005, 115). Others went back but returned with a markedly changed perspective, like Viet Thanh Nguyen's father, who after his last visit simply told him: "[w]e are Americans now" (Nguyen 2017b). The reverse exodus trope embraces all of these perspectives and more. It can retell a real-life return or an imaginary one. It can shed critical light on the diaspora, on America, or on the homeland. It can argue for reconciliation, or dismiss the very possibility of mending fences. It can show how time changes everything, or show you the things that not even time can change. Finally, the reverse exodus trope demonstrates how, sometimes, the only closure one might get is the certainty that no real closure is ultimately possible. This apparently hopeless paradox is in fact fertile ground for narratives and points of discussion. We have seen how many of these narratives have already been written. There is no reason to doubt that many others will make their appearance in the near future.

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I GOTTA WEAR SHADES: MULTICULTURALISM'S CONTENTS AND DISCONTENTS

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The issues raised by the essays in this volume represent the type of work that has been at the center of my career since the early 1980s. As a veteran of the infamous and antagonistically named 'Culture Wars' period, and as an academic nearing the end of his career, I am happy to see that the spirit of critical contention lives on through new work. Over those years, I have had my share of encounters, some might call them skirmishes, over what should be read, what should be studied, and what should be written about in US American literature courses. Whether it was my advocacy for the inclusion of writings by Italian Americans, or my struggles to include other writers of color, class, and lifestyles into my teaching and to the general teaching of various departments in which I've worked, my position has been strengthened by new developments that have occurred over those years. This volume speaks loudly to me about the changing nature of academia in Italy and how it is coming to terms with the variety of cultures that have always made-up US American culture, but until recently have not been acknowledged by traditional scholars of US American Studies. To invoke a popular song from the band Timbuk 3, "The future's so bright I gotta wear shades." Indeed, shades are especially important for us older folks to ward off the onset of cataract development. And the future of this field is indeed brightened by the contributions here.

As I read through the essays gathered here, I couldn't help but recall the efforts put forth by many of us at my stage of career and life to challenge the interpretative strategies, ethics, and the aesthetic standards that we were taught as universal during our education. Many were the workshops that I took and eventually presented on incorporating more diversity in our classes. When the word multicultural was introduced back then, it seemed not only something new but also something that was

politically radical. Quite often our efforts were dismissed as simplified identity politics, which, according to the foundational New Criticism by which most of us were nursed, was no way to seriously examine literary production in the classroom and in articles and books. Most of my generation of scholars had encountered a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon canon of literature that we were told was the greatest work that had been produced, and that if we hoped to advance in our fields, we would have to focus our studies on it. We were cautioned that the very notion of an 'American' culture depended on students studying the materials that had been deemed important and necessary in the creation of 'American' values that would unite citizens in formation and ensure common ground for the successful interaction of those living in a democratic society.

It's hard to believe that in those days, US American literature was considered secondary to British literature, especially as one advanced from high school through college and graduate studies, and that if you expected to get a job upon graduation, you needed to master that literature with the hopes that you might be able to teach a course or two someday in American Literature. I don't know how I made it through it all and retained a passionate love for literature, but I do know what happened when I finally got the guts to switch my dissertation proposal from one on Walt Whitman to Italian American writers.[1]

The result of that small revolution was nothing less than the career I have enjoyed through the support of such organizations as the Italian American Studies Association (formerly the American Italian Historical Association), the Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature in the United States (MELUS), and the Society for Multi-Ethnic Studies of Europe and the Americas (MESEA), which have all helped to develop multicultural approaches to the study of US American literature of the type found here.

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[1] A more detailed account of this can be found in my contribution to the forthcoming volume *Beyond Boundaries: The Interplay of Ancient and Modern Literatures, Visual Arts, Cinema and Music in American Culture* edited by Valerio Massimo De Angelis, Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh, and Giuseppe Nori (University of Macerata 2021). The volume contains essays developed from presentations at the "Oltre i Confini" conference held at the University of Macerata November 30 to December 2, 2015, in honor of Professor Marina Camboni.

Fred L. Gardaphé |

Much of what I would like to say here has been expressed already in yet another forthcoming article of mine, "Art of the State: The Politics of Multiculturalism in American Literary Studies, or Who Hung the Rembrandt on the Multicultural Mural?"[2] in which I treat this subject in greater depth. Rather than quote from that essay, I thought I'd draw your attention to it and then go on to add my two cents to the discussion framed by Francesco Chianese and Cristina Di Maio in their introductory essay, "Is Multiculturalism Who America is? Investigating the United States 'Patchwork Heritage,'" which takes as its title a sentence pronounced by Mike Pompeo, the former Secretary of State in the Trump administration. Pompeo, ironically a descendent of Italian immigrants, was certainly voicing "retrotopian rhetoric" characteristic of old White Anglo Saxon Protestant attempts to control the development and advancement of what once was considered to be 'American' culture. Similar thinking is what gave us the mistaken notion of "The Melting Pot" metaphor as a means of describing the making US citizens out of immigrants. So how does a son of immigrants reach a position of power and come to say such things? The rush to assimilation, done quite well by Americans of Italian descent, primarily because of skin color, the lack of an understanding of Italian culture because it was not well reflected in his educational experiences as he moved from student, to CIA Director, to Secretary of State, in the process adopting WASP values and the need to police them, led him to believe that Culture was one thing, and multiculturalism a diversion from what was important. These are the words of a way of thinking that is not going gentle into that good night, as reflected by the recent backlash of white power and privilege fostered by the Trump administration. This old way disguised politics as aesthetics, the privileged creating a hegemony of critical standards that went unchallenged for many years, arguing for universal standards by which literature would be judged worthy of canonization. At its

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[2] This article will appear in *Migrant Fictions*, edited by Dorothy Figueira and contains essays that came from presentations made at the "Multicultural Migrant Fictions" Conference, held in April of 2017 at the University of Georgia. This conference was a direct result of that conference held at the University of Macerata noted earlier.

heart, WASP culture was anti-dialectic, paying lip-service to dissenting voices, but as we know, the times were a-changing.

The political struggles that led to racial studies gave birth to ethnic studies, creating the initial wave of multicultural thinking. Yes, it was those political acts based on identity issues that preceded changes in critical approaches, leading to the 'Culture Wars' of the 1980s, and have now opened the door for such ideas as Cancel Culture that seems to be the rage in the US The irony of those proposing the erasure of minority cultures is that their acts are nothing more than 'civilized' ways of doing what was done to the indigenous cultures that once stood in the way of such imperialist notions as "Manifest Destiny," that led to the celebration of victories though naming streets, towns and even states after the very peoples and cultures they were trying to erase as they paved a great white way throughout the country. Held in place by personal and institutionally supported racism, minority cultures were mined and mimed by minstrel shows, rock and roll, and myriad of cultural thefts that came to be known as American culture. In the end, those signs of their sins would be read by the survivors of their attempts to whitewash the various cultures that make up the US A. and recast as signals for necessary retribution and reparations. Such is the way of life in a democratic society and those who have lived long enough in one could see it coming and welcome its arrival. Multiculturalism, as we see it now, means nothing more than many cultures, and that's the reality of where we are today. What we do with each of those cultures depends on a combination of cultural acts, political, social and moral, that are deemed acceptable by the changing body of what makes up the majority. With those acts will come new ways of thinking, that will create new responsibilities for artists, critics, consumers and institutions. The essays in this volume give us an indication of possible directions those acts and responsibilities might take.

Framed neatly by the editors, the essays here, begin the work of moving the discourse along by considering such ideas as the triangulation of race, ethnicity and disability in the essay by Elisa Bordin, a solid contribution that shines multiculturalistic light on the important role that the abnormalities play in cultural discourse and how that discourse changes when the focus shifts onto the likes of adjoined twins in history,

or any of the other "freaks," that have occupied America's attention over the years. Bordin's insight into the way deviancy reinforces normative ideas requires us to consider the policing function that freaks have played in the hands of the powerful as we advance our ways and means of dealing with the many cultures that make up the United States of America. Anna Marta Marini's thoughtful examination of the television series *Gentefied* helps us to see urban development as another form of colonization that changes urban neighborhoods and the people who move there, inviting the use of the powerful tools created by postcolonial criticism to make sense of these cultural experiences. Marco Moschetti's encyclopedic survey of Chicago's urban planning and execution of racists policies created a sense of racial geography that helps us understand just how the unhealthy segregation of Chicago's neighborhood came to be and how early groups such as the Italian Americans slipped out of its grasp under the cover of whiteness. Victoria Tomasulo's study of Kym Ragusa's memoir shows us that just gaining a sense of multiculturalism does little to resolve the dilemmas it reveals. It takes more than recognition of racism to eradicate it, but it's a start, and multiculturalism is more complex than a simple cultural quilt woven with separate but equal patches of different cultures. As the many cultures that make up the United States interact, they create even newer hybrid cultures that will bring with them their own cultural products requiring new ways of consumption and critical response. Giacomo Traina's essay on reverse exoduses of Vietnamese Americans brings us the new problem of what to do with the cultural products of those who return to their ancestral homes and utilize those experiences in their art. In the process, their writings reveal intergenerational traumas that quite often go unprocessed as generations move from immigrant to acceptance as US Americans, certainly the case of Secretary Pompeo. In sum, these essays, advanced by the editors' introduction, continue to challenge notions of multiculturalism and why it matters now more than ever.

We need to rethink the meanings of multiculturalism in US American Studies so that the result is the creation of an inter-ethnic/racial and class solidarity rather than fragmentation, so that we recognize the continued centrality of racism in American culture, and to understand how perceived differences are formed, acted and reacted to

in today's world. This issue of *JAm It!* bodes well for the future of cultural scholarship that connects the academy to the streets, for if there is one thing I've learned over my career, it's that cultural change requires the conviction of critics not only to understand the creation of institutional injustices, but to use their minds and words to right those wrongs.

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THE SUBTLE RESIDUAL:

BAROQUE ECHOES IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

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ABSTRACT

The following essay analyzes a significant Baroque substrata underlying *The Scarlet Letter*, taken up, among other things, in relation to the momentous Puritan legacy that is an essential element of Nathaniel Hawthorne's literary work. In particular, the paper focuses on analyzing crucial and minor Baroque *topoi* represented in the novel, such as metamorphosis, relativism and ambivalence of reality, anxiety and the obsession with death. Furthermore, the article investigates the role of sharp chromatism within *The Scarlet Letter*, the use of typical Baroque symbols, such as the ellipse and the maze, and the fundamental role of distinctive Baroque tropes, that is, metaphor and antithesis.

In order to examine the aforementioned Baroque elements, the present essay refers to the theoretical framework drawn up by Raymond Williams in his classic work *Marxism and Literature* (1977). That theoretical model, elaborated by Williams on the basis of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, aims at describing social and cultural practices and phenomena as dynamical interaction between "residual," "dominant" and "emergent" components. While the "dominant" represent the core of the cultural triad, the "residual" and the "emergent" situated on its periphery are likewise essential for a persuasive dynamic description of literary phenomena at any given moment.

The following article interprets the echoes of the Baroque literary tradition in the novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne as belonging to the domain of "residual" and hence effectively formed in the past, but still active in the cultural process as an effective element of the present.

Keywords: Nathaniel Hawthorne; The Scarlet Letter; Baroque; Raymond Williams.

No one, these days, would reasonably rehash the critiques made at the end of the nineteenth century, which regarded Nathaniel Hawthorne—as Francis Otto Matthiessen observes—as "a dweller in the shadows of history, weaving his art out of the haunted memories of Puritanism, but scarcely conscious of [contemporary] real life" (1941, 192). Undoubtedly, being a re-creator of "a dim past," Hawthorne succeeds in fulfilling the major obligation of the artist, that is to say to confront actual life and to make his art "an act of possession," as stated by André Malraux (1949), and not one of mere oblique evasion.

The following article aims at examining extensive Baroque substrata underlying *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, exploited by the author with regard to the

reality of contemporary America. In particular, the essay will focus on analyzing the representation of crucial and minor Baroque topoi, such as metamorphosis, relativism and ambivalence of reality, anxiety and the obsession with death. Furthermore, the paper will examine the role of sharp chromatism within the novel, use of typical Baroque symbols, such as the ellipse and the maze, and the fundamental role of distinctive Baroque tropes, that is to say metaphor and antithesis. This essential element, which both links Nathaniel Hawthorne's literary work to European tradition and at the same time distinguishes him from it, shall be analyzed using the theoretical framework drawn up by Raymond Williams in his classic work *Marxism and Literature* (1977).

Williams develops the notions "residual," "dominant" and "emergent" in order to revise the traditional Marxist notion of "totality" that, regarding social and cultural life, suggests the existence of an unchanging and unchangeable monolith. Williams hence adopts Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemony" (1970) in place of "totality" to suggest the variable relations of social practices. Therefore, expounding the structure of his theoretical model, Williams states: "We have certainly still to speak of the 'dominant' and the 'effective,' and in these senses of the hegemonic. But we find that we have also to speak, and indeed with further differentiation of each, of the 'residual' and the 'emergent,' which in any real process, and in any moment in the process, are significant both in themselves and in what they reveal of the characteristics of the 'dominant'" (1977, 121-122). The concepts forged by Williams are extremely useful in literary analysis, since the set might provide a persuasive dynamic description of literary phenomena at any given moment. Thus, Williams calls the element that is displaced by the dominant the "residual" and the one that in turn shall displace the dominant, the "emergent," and emphasizes active interrelations within the triad. Since the following essay interprets the echoes of the Baroque literary tradition in the novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne as belonging to the domain of "residual," it is fundamental to clarify the meaning of the term. "The residual," Williams states "by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present" (122).

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In the introduction to *Emergent U. S Literatures. From Multiculturalism to Cosmopolitanism in the Late Twentieth Century* (2014), Cyrus Patell, theorizing about the concept of "residual," stresses that the definition given by Williams does not imply that "'residual cultures' should be considered 'minor' or 'insignificant.'" "On the contrary," Patell insists, "they represent the major part of any cultural formation"[1] (2014, 4).

In "Hawthorne and His Mosses," musing on "a touch of Puritanic gloom" that lurks in Hawthorne, Herman Melville compares Hawthorne's "mystical blackness" to the one "against which Shakespeare plays his grandest conceits" (1853, 1417). "Shakespeare has been approached. There are minds that have gone as far as Shakespeare into the universe," Melville affirms implying Nathaniel Hawthorne's "literary genius" (1419). Afterwards Melville points out respectfully: "I do not say that Nathaniel of Salem is greater than William of Avon, or as great. But the difference between the two men is by no means immeasurable. Not a very great deal more, and Nathaniel were verily William. This, too, I mean, that if Shakespeare has not been yet equalled, he is sure to be surpassed" (1421). Subsequently, albeit condemning "literary flunkeyism towards England" (1421) and hence trying to emancipate Hawthorne from the heritage of William Shakespeare, Melville's meditations bridge the Atlantic nonetheless and, by a sort of paralipsis, reinforce Shakespearean echoes which resound in Nathaniel Hawthorne's literary work offering thus the first cue for the following analysis.[2] Melville likewise asserts that "it is better to fail in originality, than to succeed

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[1] In order to support his argument, Patell cites the excerpt from Ralph Waldo Emerson's journal of 1840: "In all my lectures, I have taught one doctrine, namely, the infinitude of private man. This, the people accept readily enough & even with loud commendation, as long as I call the lecture, Art; or Politics; or Literature; or the Household; but the moment I call it Religion - they are shocked, though it be only the application of the same truth which they receive everywhere else, to a new class of facts" (2014, 4). Patell emphasizes that, in spite of "living in post-Enlightenment, post-Jacksonian market society when the influence of the old republican biblical culture presumably has fallen away," Emerson, promulgating his doctrine of the "infinitude of the private man," finds resistance "only when he begins to talk about religion" (4).

[2] For instance, in his classic work *The Concept of Baroque in Literary Scholarship*, René Wellek mentions the thesis of Oskar Walzel , who states that "the number of minor characters, the unsymmetrical grouping, the varying emphasis on different acts of a play, are all traits supposed to show that Shakespeare's technique is the same as that of baroque, i. e is 'asymmetrical, atectonic'" (Wellek 1946, 88–89). Wellek as well mentions the article "Barockstil in Shakespeare und Calderòn" by Wilhelm Michels (1929) and the work of Roy Daniels "Baroque Form in English Literature" (1945),

in imitation" (1420) and this statement both epitomizes the phenomenon christened by Harold Bloom "the anxiety of influence" (Bloom 1973)—which analyses how the yearning for originality might be triggered by the frustration over a standard considered unattainable—and alludes to one of the key features of The Baroque Age, that is, renunciation of mimesis typical of classicist ideology (Battistini 2020).

The title of the full-length piece of fiction Hawthorne published in 1851 — *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance* — suggests that the author identifies this work as "a romance" rather than "a novel." In the well-known passage from the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) Hawthorne sets up the following distinction:

> When a writer calls his work a romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former — while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart — has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. (Hawthorne 1851, 569)

As Michael Davitt Bell emphasizes, the "latitude" of the romance is hence a latitude of imagination which in order to preserve "the truth if the human heart" consents the author to "manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights, and deepen and enrich the shadows, of the picture" (1988, 425).

Subsequently, this image imbued with intense *chiaroscuro* overtones introduces the concept of "the Marvellous," the crucial notion for the following analysis: "He [the author] will be wise … to make a very moderate use of privileges here stated and … to mingle the Marvellous … as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor" (Hawthorne 1851,

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who emphasize William Shakespeare's affiliation to the Baroque (Wellek 1946, 80, 84). For more on Baroque elements in Shakespeare's plays see, also, Barasch 1983 and Russell 1964.

569). The idea of the "marvellous real,"[3] essential for the Baroque's poetics, therefore emerges in this passage as the key concept of Hawthorne's literary project termed "a Romance." It is hence possible to trace the *fil rouge* which links *The Scarlet Letter* to the massive Baroque substrata which represents the residual of Hawthorne's poetics.

According to the thesis expressed by Guido Morpurgo-Tagliabue in *Anatomia del Barocco* (Morpurgo-Tagliabue 1987, 31–32), the "concept" of Baroque consists in the surplus of metaphor — a classical trope defined by Aristotle as "putting things before eyes" (*pro ommaton poiein*), since it links the production of meaning to a sensible, pictorial or iconic quality (Aristotle 1926). Metaphor, the cornerstone of Baroque poetics of wonder (Morpurgo-Tagliabue 1987, 79), is likewise fundamental for the structure of the romance by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Save the central metaphor embodied by the scarlet letter itself, the fiction is rich in other striking examples of this trope. Thus, Pearl, "the living hieroglyphic" (Hawthorne 1850, 538), "herself a symbol" (510), is recurrently depicted as a wayward extension of the scarlet letter Hester Prynne is bearing on her chest. This statement is fitly illustrated by the following passage of Chapter VII, "The Governor's Hall:"

> There was fire in her and throughout her: she seemed the unpremeditated offshoot of a passionate moment. Her mother, in contriving the child's garb, had allowed the gorgeous tendencies of her imagination their full play, arraying her in a crimson velvet tunic of a peculiar cut, abundantly embroidered in fantasies and flourishes of gold thread … But it was a remarkable attribute of this garb, and indeed, of the child's whole appearance, that it irresistibly and inevitably reminded the beholder of the token which Hester Prynne was doomed to wear upon her bosom. It was the scarlet letter in another form: the scarlet letter endowed with life! (481)

The description of Pearl's sumptuous attire, which alludes explicitly to the Baroque taste for artificiality typical of "conceptism" (Morpurgo-Tagliabue 1987, 45–48), is indeed reminiscent of the portrayal of the scarlet letter when it first appears in the novel.

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[3] The concept of the "marvelous real" mentioned in the following essay as the basis of Baroque poetics should not be mistaken for the conception of *lo real maravilloso* as perceived by Alejo Carpentier, who subsequently appropriates and elaborates aesthetic principles of the Baroque.

Interestingly enough, the child and the token make the scene together in the first "threshold" chapter of the novel since they were born from the same sin:

> Lastly, in lieu of these shifting scenes, came back the rude market-place of the Puritan settlement, with all the townspeople assembled, and levelling their stern regards at Hester Prynne — yes, at herself — who stood on the scaffold of the pillory, an infant on her arm, and the letter A, in scarlet, fantastically embroidered with gold thread, upon her bosom. (Hawthorne 1850, 458)

Furthermore, in the course of the novel, the embroidered scarlet *A* is not the unique symbol by which the idea of sin is expressed. The other metaphor brought into play by Hawthorne is melded with an obscure image of the black flower. The former is endowed with a broader spectrum of meaning since it alludes to the universal Puritan concept of the total depravity of humankind (Bercovitch 1988). In fact, in Chapter I, "The Prison Door," the prison is described as "the black flower of civilised society" (452). Subsequently, Roger Chillingworth uses this symbol in like manner while evoking his eagerness for revenge: "'By thy first step awry, thou didst plant the germ of evil; but since that moment it has all been a dark necessity. Ye that have wronged me are not sinful, save in a kind of typical illusion; neither am I fiend-like, who have snatched a fiend's office from his hands. It is our fate. Let the black flower blossom as it may!'" (521)

Nonetheless, the chasm between two symbols, which represent two different facets of sin, is never bridged in the novel, as if Hawthorne rejected the monolithic Puritan vision of reality that insulates the chosen ones from the backslidden and binds the sinners into a single horde. Indeed, the image of the black flower, which alludes to innate evilness of human nature, is never assigned to the figure of Hester Prynne. Furthermore, the scarlet *A* seared on Hester's bosom symbolizes the bright passion rather than the inner corruption of the young woman; it marginalizes Hester but at the same time distinguishes her from rather than binds her to the rest of the miscreants.

Another significant instance of metaphor that elicits awe and bewilderment is illustrated in the second chapter of the novel, "The Market Place," in the passage that parallels the image of Hester Prynne, the adulteress, to the image of the Virgin Mary:[4]

> Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with one another to represent; something which should remind him, indeed, but only by contrast, of that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world. Here, there was the taint of deepest sin in the most sacred quality of human life, working such effect, that the world was only the darker for this woman's beauty, and the more lost for the infant that she had borne. (456–457)

Rita K. Gollin and John L. Idol emphasize, indeed, that "the allusion to the pictorial tradition of the Madonna and Child is arresting, thought-provoking, functional" and induces the reader to cogitate on "the implicit comparison and the explicit contrast" (Gollin 1991, 50). Undoubtedly, the former metaphor, albeit constructed on the edge of paralipsis, links the images of the two women, the hallowed and the apocryphal, subverting thus the orthodox Puritan relation between the Type and Antitype (Davis 1970) and creating the sense of ambiguity, which represents one of the pillars of Baroque poetics.

In *Anatomia del Barocco*, Guido Morpurgo-Tagliabue affirms that the rise of the Baroque coincides with the crisis of *endoxa* and myths, both religious and chivalrous, which formerly bound together the society and shaped its imagery (Morpurgo-Tagliabue 1987, 89). Thus metaphor—which, due to its epistemological nature, represents an essential tool used in order to analyze and to interpret the mercurial and metamorphic aspect of reality—reflects the acute sense of indeterminateness caused by

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[4] As stated in *Prophetic Pictures: Nathaniel Hawthorne's Knowledge and Uses of the Visual Arts*, Nathaniel Hawthorne frequently relates work of art to character in his fiction by referring to types of figures in paintings or statues, and the former association of Hester with the Madonna represents an instance of this tendency (Gollin 1991, 49).
Additionally, in her article "Hawthorne and Visual Arts", Susan S. Williams accentuates how, by associating Hester Prynne with the multidimensionality of the statue, Hawthorne juxtaposes the character to the Puritan legacy, encoded by the four portraits of patriarchs (2018, 171).

the decay of common places that unsettles the epoch. Likewise, the metaphors used by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* frequently allude to the concept of relativism, crucial for the Baroque Age. Being linked to multiple images that cause a kind of a kaleidoscopic effect, the scarlet *A* reveals a myriad of meanings, which disclose the multi-faceted essence of reality. In particular, leaving behind its original role to stigmatize an "Adulteress," in like manner it may signify an "Antitype," embodying the principles of typological hermeneutics put to use by Puritans to attain a plain and monolithic interpretation of the world. *A* as well might represent "Artist,"[5] referring both to Hester Prynne and to Nathaniel Hawthorne. The latter statement can be seen in Chapter V, "Hester at Her Needle," where Hester Prynne is depicted as artist able to discern and to recreate beauty:

> She possessed an art that sufficed, even in a land that afforded comparatively little scope for its exercise, to supply food for her thriving infant and herself. It was the art, then, as now, almost the only one within a woman's grasp—of needle-work. She bore on her breast, in the curiously embroidered letter, a specimen of her delicate and imaginative skill, of which the dames of a court might gladly have availed themselves, to add the richer and more spiritual adornment of human ingenuity to their fabrics of silk and gold. (Hawthorne 1850, 470)

Similarly, the strong and direct connection between the token and the narrator is illustrated in the preface to the novel, "The Custom–House," just as the "rag of scarlet cloth" strongly appeals to the writer at the moment he places it on his chest:

> While thus perplexed—and cogitating, among other hypotheses, whether the letter might not have been one of those decorations which the white men used to contrive in order to take the eyes of Indians—I happened to place it on my breast. It seemed to me—the reader may smile, but must not doubt my word— it seemed to me, then, that I experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet

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[5] Significantly, as affirmed by Rita K. Gollin and John L. Idol, Hawthorne regularly used artists as central or minor characters in his fiction in order to examine "their minds, hearts, talents, and temperaments" (1991, 54).

almost so, as of burning heat, and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron. I shuddered, and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor. (443)

This quotation relates to another passage of the preface, in which the narrator meditates on the fact that his vocation of being a writer would have probably been considered a mere transgression by the Puritan ancestors. In fact, according to stark Puritan logic, fiction, being opposed to the Divine Truth expressed in The Holy Bible, is rather an act of disobedience than an act of imagination:

> No success of mine ... would they deem otherwise than worthless, if not positively disgraceful. "What is he?" murmurs one grey shadow of my forefathers to the other. "A writer of story books! What kind of business in life—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!" Such are the compliments bandied between my great grandsires and myself, across the gulf of time! (430)

The figure of the artist therefore, whether interpreted as referring to the author or to the character he created, represents an outcast in this traditional religious community. Being unintelligible to the rest of the flock, the *sui generis* person eventually ends up being considered dangerous.

In fact, Hester Prynne is akin to Nathaniel Hawthorne not only in the artistic streak she is graced with but also in the intellectual freedom they share. The scarlet letter, born from the carnal sin Hester commits, eventually generates another sin, the sin of intellect, connecting thus the protagonist to the narrator, enriching and complicating the network of meanings concealed in the scarlet *A*. Chapter XIII, "Another view of Hester," sheds light on how the marginalization of the protagonist gives rise to her new heterodox world outlook:

> Standing alone in the world—alone, as to any dependence on society... alone, and hopeless of retrieving her position ... she cast away the fragment of a broken chain. The world's law was no law for her mind ... She assumed a freedom of speculation... which our forefathers, had they known it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatised by the scarlet letter. In her lonesome cottage ... thoughts visited her such as dared to enter no other dwelling in New England; shadowy guests, that would have been as perilous as demons to their entertainer, could they have been seen so much as knocking at her door. (515–516)

This thesis is eventually evoked and reinforced by the passage from Chapter XVIII, "A Flood of Sunshine," which describes how Hester Prynne, "not merely estranged, but outlawed from society" (534), has habituated herself to a latitude of speculation absolutely unachievable for her interlocutor and her co-prisoner, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. Shrouded by her stigma from the Puritan community who stigmatised her, Hester explores primeval forests of "moral wilderness" (525), unfolds her soul and her mind and approaches the natural state of innocence not yet corrupted by shame:

> She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness, as vast, as intricate, and shadowy as the untamed forest, amid the gloom of which they were now holding a colloquy that was to decide their fate. Her intellect and heart had their home … in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods. For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions … The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. (534)

The images and metaphors, however, do not cease to multiply as if reflected in a hall of mirrors, and the scarlet letter Hester is wearing on her breast is in its turn echoed by the stigma Arthur Dimmesdale is bearing. Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale persists in "gripping hard at his breast, as if afflicted with an importunate throb of pain" (498), but the true meaning of this gesture is perceived only by Hester Prynne, Pearl, and Roger Chillingworth, the living beings bound by the same damnation. This mark is never entirely revealed to the reader although the reader is constantly aware of the "scarlet token" on the clergyman's breast, "right over his heart" (507). In fact, Hawthorne never declares its presence explicitly since he affirms it would be "irreverent to describe that revelation" (564). Additionally, when Roger Chillingworth thrusts aside the clergyman's vestment in order to bare his bosom, only by capturing the physician's "look of wonder, joy, and horror" (501) the reader can deduce the nature of his discovery. Likewise, "the gaze of the horror-stricken multitude … concentrated on the ghastly miracle" (564) confirms this deduction in the penultimate chapter called "The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter." Hawthorne allows the reader to behold this "token" only through the prism of other characters' views and by so doing enhances the atmosphere of ambiguity which

shrouds the clergyman. This uncertainty endures even Dimmesdale's confession and the catharsis it might represent: "It is singular, nevertheless, that certain persons, who were spectators of the whole scene, and professed never once to have removed their eyes from the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast, more than on a new-born infant's" (565). Reality thus evades a unique interpretation and its fluid, phantom essence is accentuated.

Metamorphosis, an essential Baroque *topos*, is likewise fundamental for the structure of *The Scarlet Letter* since multifarious transmogrifications occur to the characters of the novel. At the outset, the first chapter, "The Prison Door," plainly lays the foundation for the potential transformation of Hester Prynne as the author evokes the story of Anne Hutchinson, baptized as one of the "sainted."[6] Anne Hutchinson, at the core of the Antinomian controversy which struck the very heart of the Puritan community of New England (Hall 1990, 263) professed the concept of sanctification which (being in some way opposed to justification based on the principal of unconditional election) emphasised the possibility to gain grace through faith and good works. According to the official doctrine, the promises of justification and sanctification are joined at the hip:[7] they are often mentioned in Scripture side by side, but sanctification, which aims at revealing "grace infused into us, by which we made conformable unto the image of Christ" (Obadiah, 489), can only derive from justification pre-determined by God's providence. Mere sanctification therefore is not sufficient and "there is something of sin remaining in the sanctified person, which is contrary to that grace which is wrought in us by the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:17)" (489).

By consecrating Anne Hutchinson's heterodox teachings, Nathaniel Hawthorne overturns the Puritan concept of pre-determination. Moreover, the author emphasises and praises the possibility of transformation that may come from within. The rosebush, which had believably "sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Anne Hutchinson"

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[6] For penetrating analysis of Anne Hutchinson's trial see, particularly, McGunigal 2016.
[7] The relationship between Sanctification and Justification is set forth in the second part of Chapter 7 entitled "Sanctification Promised as well as Justification" of the work on covenant theology by Obadiah Sedgwick, a noted Puritan preacher and a member of the Westminster Assembly from 1643 to 1649.

is indeed a perfect antithesis to "burdock, pig-weed, apple-pern, and such unsightly vegetation" (Hawthorne 1850, 452) grown in the very core of the Puritan community. Furthermore, the "sweet moral blossom" of the flower plucked from this bush, which the reader is supposed to "carry" (452) through the novel, represents the foretaste of this transfiguration and makes the reader await it eagerly.

"Is there no reality in the penitence thus sealed and witnessed by good works? And wherefore should it not bring you peace?" (530), Hester demands of Arthur Dimmesdale during their intimate conversation.[8] In truth, the transformation of Hester Prynne's image in the eyes of the community illustrated in the Chapter XIII, "Another View of Hester," alludes to the Antinomian creed professed by Anne Hutchinson since it was precisely a good deed to turn "Adulteress" into "Able." The following chapter, representing the exact midpoint of the novel, symbolises a kind of caesura which divides the story in "before" and "after" and accentuates the fundamental role of the metamorphosis the protagonist and the symbol are going through. The scarlet letter thus changes its original meaning and, ceasing being "token of sin," becomes the "symbol of ... calling:"

> Hester Prynne did not now occupy precisely the same position in which we beheld her during the earlier periods of her ignominy. Years had come and gone ... It was perceived, too, that while Hester never put forward even the humblest title to share in the world's privileges ... she was quick to acknowledge her sisterhood with the race of man whenever benefits were to be conferred ... None so self-devoted as Hester when pestilence stalked through the town ... She came, not as a guest, but as a rightful inmate, into the household that was darkened by trouble, as if its gloomy twilight were a medium in which she was entitled to hold intercourse with her fellow-creature. There glimmered the embroidered letter, with comfort in its unearthly ray. Elsewhere the token of sin, it was the taper of the sick chamber. It had even thrown its gleam, in the sufferer's hard extremity, across the verge of time. It had shown him where to set his foot, while the light of earth was fast becoming dim, and ere the light of futurity could reach him. In such emergencies Hester's nature showed itself warm and rich—a well-spring of human tenderness, unfailing to every real demand, and inexhaustible by the largest. Her breast, with its badge of shame, was but the softer pillow for the head

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[8] For the Hester Prynne–Ann Hutchinson analogy see Colacurcio 1972.

> that needed one. She was self-ordained a Sister of Mercy … The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her … that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able, so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength. (Hawthorne 1850, 513–514)

The love for fellow beings that Hester Prynne is endowed with, and the self-sacrifice that she is committing, might suggest to the reader that she should be rather called an "Angel" if only severe Puritan lips could pronounce this word while referring to an adulteress.

Furthermore, in the course of the chapter not only the scarlet *A* is described as subject to a metamorphosis. It took seven years for the symbol to generate the shift of meaning, and in the meanwhile the scarlet letter generated an oppressive strain that induced vital changes in the inner world of a young woman who was constantly wearing it:

> The effect of the symbol—or rather, of the position in respect to society that was indicated by it—on the mind of Hester Prynne herself was powerful and peculiar. All the light and graceful foliage of her character had been withered up by this red-hot brand, and had long ago fallen away, leaving a bare and harsh outline, which might have been repulsive had she possessed friends or companions to be repelled by it. (515)

The drought caused by the stigma seared on her breast has likewise wilted Hester's regal beauty. While in the Chapter II the protagonist is described as "a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale" graced with "dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam" and a face "which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes" (455), afterwards this portrayal is replaced by a bitter account of Hester's transformation. Even though she did not lose her "state and dignity" the narrator states that:

> Even the attractiveness of her person had undergone a similar [tragic] change. It might be partly owing to the studied austerity of her dress, and partly to the lack of demonstration in her manners. It was a sad transformation, too, that her rich and luxuriant hair had either been cut off, or was so completely hidden by a cap,

that not a shining lock of it ever once gushed into the sunshine. It was due in part to all these causes, but still more to something else, that there seemed to be no longer anything in Hester's face for Love to dwell upon; nothing in Hester's form, though majestic and statue like, that Passion would ever dream of clasping in its embrace; nothing in Hester's bosom to make it ever again the pillow of Affection. Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman. (515)

In spite of the grimness this description conveys, Hester's gorgeous hair, albeit concealed, is evoked in the passage and cannot go unnoticed. Being a striking symbol of her sensuality, it comes to light hand in glove with images of "love" and "passion" and remains in the reader's imagination even if for now eclipsed by the image of a blazing *A*.

However, the sombre transfiguration Hester Prynne undergoes is not irreversible since in the aftermath the narrator sets forth that "she who has once been a woman, and ceased to be so, might at any moment become a woman again, if there were only the magic touch to effect the transfiguration" (515). Perpetual metamorphosis of images and essences—the exact spirit of the Baroque Age[9]—is therefore evoked and empathised in the central chapter of the novel as the fundamental axis of the story.

The crucial scene of Chapter XVII, "The Pastor and His Parishioner," which describes the encounter between Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne in the gloomy forest, accentuates the fallout the scarlet letter has caused. In fact, when the clergyman notices Hester he believes her to be "a spectre:" "Throwing his eyes anxiously in the direction of the voice, he indistinctly beheld a form under the trees, clad in garments so sombre, and so little relieved from the gray twilight into which the clouded sky and the heavy foliage had darkened the noontide, that he knew not whether it were a woman or

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[9] Guido Morpurgo-Tagliabue underlines that the Baroque's fondness for incessant metamorphosis, as well as for variations on the theme of volatility of essences and of precariousness of appearance, derives from the consciousness of futility of former *endoxa*. Considered against this background, the taste of macabre and the death obsession typical for the epoch—enclosed in phrases like *memento mori* and *vanitas vanitatum*—represent the counterpart of the former phenomenon (Morpurgo-Tagliabue 1987, 61). In his article *Dal Cerchio all'Ellisse: dal Rinascimento al Barocco*, Battistini considers metaphor and metamorphosis the cardinal points of the Baroque literary system, since the tropes embody the loss of constant touchpoints and mirror the new fragmentary world outlook characteristic of the epoch (Battistini 2020).

a shadow" (Hawthorne 1850, 529). Nevertheless, a "magic touch" essential for the transformation comes along and a cardinal metamorphosis occurs as Hester takes the scarlet token from her bosom. "The stigma gone, Hester heaved a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit" (536). The inner change consequently triggers the miraculous transformation of the image of the body and Hester's beauty unfurls vigorously. Her gorgeous hair, a symbol of suppressed feminine sensuality, is first to reveal itself as the burden is cast off:

> By another impulse, she took off the formal cap that confined her hair, and down it fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich, with at once a shadow and a light in its abundance, and imparting the charm of softness to her features. There played around her mouth, and beamed out of her eyes, a radiant and tender smile, that seemed gushing from the very heart of womanhood. A crimson flush was glowing on her cheek, that had been long so pale. Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past, and clustered themselves with her maiden hope, and a happiness before unknown, within the magic circle of this hour. (536)

The life energy previously condensed in her bosom and drained out by the blazing scarlet letter could now break the deadlock and start running through Hester's veins, making her cheeks glow with a "crimson blossom." Undoubtedly, the impact of the wondrous metamorphosis is intensified by its very nature, unstable and fleeting since confined "in the magic circle of this hour." In consequence, the illustrated transfiguration of the main character, crafted on the edge of the marvellous and evanescent, is clearly a striking instance of Baroque poetics of wonder.

Furthermore, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale is likewise subjected to a very peculiar transformation, which follows the "earth-shaking" encounter in the wilderness. First of all, vexed with "indistinctness and duplicity of impression" (Hawthorne 1850, 542), the character is described as wandering in a "maze,"[10] alluding thus to a fundamental Baroque topos. The image of a labyrinth, which embodies the vertiginous anxiety the character is doomed to endure in order to preserve and reaffirm his identity,

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[10] Chapter XX, which describes Arthur Dimmesdale's transformation, is titled, indeed, "The Minister in a Maze."

is, indeed, one of the crucial symbols within the novel. "There is no path to guide us out of this dismal maze," asserts Hester during her conversation with Roger Chillingworth, "there could be no good event for him [Arthur Dimmesdale], or thee, or me, who are here wandering together in this gloomy maze of evil" (520). By this bitter statement made in a fit of temper, Hester succeeds in capturing the essence of the blight they struggle with. Marginalized, either explicitly by a blazing stigma or implicitly by a devouring passion, on the fringe of a society which determines cardinal rules of conduct and world outlook, the main characters stray into an emotional and intellectual wilderness and strive to find the way out. In the end, Hester and Arthur manage to extricate themselves, albeit separately, and thus arduously obtain redemption and peace.

The metamorphosis of Rev. Dimmesdale "indicated no external change, but so sudden and important a change in the spectator of the familiar scene, that the intervening space of a single day had operated on his consciousness like the lapse of years" (543). Thrilled with excitement, the clergyman is affected by "unaccustomed physical energy" as he follows the pathway among the woods and as he draws "near the town, he took an impression of change from the series of familiar objects that presented themselves" (543). This "sense of change" the character is experiencing is "importunately obtrusive" and touches even the very core of his macrocosm, that is to say, the church.[11] The clergyman undergoes the sensation of splitting and his mind vibrates "between two ideas; either that he had seen it only in a dream hitherto, or that he was merely dreaming about it now" (543). This image of daydreaming consequently highlights the illusory essence of the outside world and points up the shift from typological hermeneutics, which aims to establish a direct relationship between material and divine, towards the Baroque's representation of reality perceived as chaotic and elusive.[12]

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[11] "A similar impression struck him most remarkably as he passed under the walls of his own church. The edifice had so very strange, and yet so familiar an aspect" (Hawthorne 1850, 543).

[12] In fact, Wellek points out that, according to Leo Spitzer, the perception of life as a dream, an illusion or a mere spectacle is a fundamental trait of the Baroque world outlook (Wellek 1946, 93).

Furthermore, a new "inner man," the doppelgänger prone to incite "revolution in the sphere of thought and feeling" (Hawthorne 1850, 544), comes to light after the encounter in the woods. "It was the same town as heretofore, but the same minister returned not from the forest. He might have said to the friends who greeted him—"I am not the man for whom you take me! I left him yonder in the forest" (543). Significantly, an allusion to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* might be illustrated by the later apt quotation. In fact, in the comedy by William Shakespeare the forest represents the locus where fantastic metamorphoses occur to the characters.

On the whole, transformation represents a red thread running through the novel, which links its first lines to its conclusion. In particular, while standing on the threshold of the prison Hester Prynne conveys the image that discloses the essence of her first striking transfiguration. She is portrayed as a kind of pagan Madonna shrouded by the scarlet letter and thereafter her child is depicted as a wild heathen, which belongs to the wilderness. Nevertheless, once "the portent ... has done its office" (565), "Pearl—the elf child—the demon offspring" might be reintegrated into New England social fabric. By becoming "the richest heiress of her day in the New World ... little Pearl at a marriageable period of life might have mingled her wild blood with the lineage of the devoutest Puritan among them all" (567).

Moreover, another typical feature of the Baroque, namely sharp chromatism, manifests itself on a large scale within the novel. As scholars researching the role of visual arts in Nathaniel Hawthorne's fiction emphasize, the usage of such artistic technique as chiaroscuro is intrinsic to Hawthorne's oeuvre and the writer frequently resorts to it in order to establish atmosphere and to add potent evocative registers to his symbols (Gollin 1991, 53).[13] Consequently, at the outset of the novel, when Hester Prynne first comes to light, she is described as emerging from deep shadows of the jail into sunshine, thus accentuating the further clash of shadows and light, which both

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[13] Additionally, Gollin and Idol accentuate that chiaroscuro is crucial to the very theory of the romance elaborated by Hawthorne, since the writer believed that the right mix of the "sunlight of realism" and the "moonlight of fantasy" would enable him to write a romance "acceptable to readers with growing appetites for realistic novels" (Gollin 1991, 53).

literally and metaphorically unfurl along with her story. Dressed in a humble dark garment, which sets off the embroidered scarlet letter on her bosom, with her white face marked by "impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes" and framed by "dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam" (455), Hester herself represents the personification of converging contrasts emphasised by the chromatic colors she is depicted with. This impression is henceforth intensified in Chapter V, "Hester at Her Needle," as the author brings up "a terrific legend" created by "the vulgar:" "They averred that the symbol was not mere scarlet cloth, tinged in an earthly dye-pot, but was red-hot with infernal fire, and could be seen glowing all alight whenever Hester Prynne walked abroad in the night-time" (474). In addition, the haunting image of Hester's thought-burdened face partially illumined by the glow of the scarlet letter in like manner alludes to the bold contrasts of Caravaggio's intense paintings.[14]

The crucial scenes of the novel are likewise characterized by sharp chiaroscuro that accentuates their dramatic tension. Significantly, F. O. Matthiessen affirms: "the light does not simply remain the dramatic property, but becomes itself a central actor" (Matthiessen 1941, 281).[15] In the key episodes of the novel Nathaniel Hawthorne indeed draws on every possible contrast between light and dark, invariably using colors as a projection of deepest passions of the characters. In fact, the second crucial scene on the scaffold of the pillory, described in the Chapter XII, "The Minister's Vigil," represents fanciful interlacement of vivid passions and illusive imagination reinforced by the very interplay of antithetical colors used to paint the picture. First of all, the platform itself is depicted as a spot where antitheses collide, since it is "black … with … sunshine of seven long years;" this quite unusual description, doubtlessly, appeals to imagination

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[14] For a detailed examination of Nathaniel Hawthorne's cultural milieu, writer's aesthetic education and, consequently, knowledge and uses of the visual arts see Gollin and Idol 1991 and Williams 2018. Significantly, Gollin and Idol cite numerous exponents of European Baroque (including Caravaggio) while analyzing the collection of paintings and drawings Hawthorne could view at his leisure at Bowdoin college (Gollin and Idol 1991, 13) and the exhibit of 1836 held at the Boston Athenaeum he frequented (23).

[15] For more extensive analysis of Hawthorne's manipulation of light and shade see also the following dissertations: Cook 1971, Kaufman Budz 1973, and Dunlavy Valenti 1977.

and foreshadows the further advancement of the plotline. "Walking in the shadow of a dream, as it were, and perhaps actually under the influence of a species of somnambulism, Mr. Dimmesdale" driven almost insane by his guilt ascends the scaffold for self-torture and in the "dark grey of the midnight" he is no more than an "the outline of a human shape" (Hawthorne 1850, 506). "And thus, while standing on the scaffold, in this vain show of expiation, the minister was overcome with a great horror of mind, as if the universe were gazing at a scarlet token on his naked breast, right over his heart" (507). A distorted echo of "good Governor Winthrop's" (512) words—while the character that represents him is mentioned being on the deathbed—might be heard in this phrase. "For we must consider that we shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us," *A Model of Christian Charity* states (Winthrop 1630, 1881). Hawthorne's puzzling tribute to the past is hidden in this midnight darkness, which likewise shrouds the figure of Arthur Dimmesdale when his outcry goes "pealing through the night" (Hawthorne 1850, 507). And once again, the expiation sinks in still waters of ambiguity as his cry is mistaken "either for something frightful in a dream, or for the noise of witches" (507). Only three uncertain lights illuminate the darkness without illuminating the clergyman—a blur of Governor Bellingham's and his sister lamps and an "illuminated circle" (507) of the Reverend Mr. Wilson's lantern—whereas Hester approaches through a silent darkness.

Furthermore, as Hester ascends the scaffold, she ceases being a mere spectator of Arthur Dimmesdale's self-flagellation and turns into a character involved in the play. The transformation of the scaffold into the scene and characters of the novel into actors doubtlessly echoes the famous scene of Hamlet—Act III, Scene II—in which the story of the members of the royal house is performed in front of their eyes. "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women, merely players;" another Shakespearean character states and, significantly, the scene constructed by Hawthorne both alludes to the theatrical representation of reality typical of the Baroque and reflects the Baroque

literary tendency to play on the edge across genres.[16] Significantly, according to Gollin and Idol, the former scene represents an instance of Hawthorne's use of such artistic technique as *tableau vivant* (1991, 54), while already in 1902 George Woodberry observed that *The Scarlet Letter* evolves "in that succession of high-wrought scenes, tableaux, in fact, which was his characteristic method of narrative, picturesque, pictorial, almost to be described as theatrical in spectacle" (Woodberry 1902, 191).

While standing on the scaffold, the minister, Hester and the child are floodlit by a meteor "burning out to waste, in the vacant regions of the atmosphere" (Hawthorne 1850, 510). As "the great vault brightened, like the dome of an immense lamp," it revealed "the familiar scene ... with the awfulness that is always imparted to familiar objects by an unaccustomed light" (504). This passage that describes the effect of the physical phenomenon foreshadows the spiritual revelation of the clergyman, who having undergone the encounter in the woods struggles to recognize familiar objects which surround him: "And there stood the minister, with his hand over his heart; and Hester Prynne, with the embroidered letter glimmering on her bosom; and little Pearl, herself a symbol, and the connecting link between those two. They stood in the noon of that strange and solemn splendor" (504).

A dense network of interconnections thus emphasizes a complex structure of the novel, which being symmetrically designed around the three key scenes on the scaffold of the pillory, progress in a spiral while the author, due as well to skillful use of chromatic elements, adds a little with each thematic repetition.

At last, the author states that, looking upward to the zenith and guided by guilty imagination, Arthur Dimmesdale discerns "an immense letter—the letter A—marked out in lines of dull red light" even though eyes burdened with "another's guilt might have seen another symbol" (511). The sense of uncertainty is subsequently reinforced when in the end of the chapter another spectator of this atmospheric phenomenon

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[16] This scene is cited as an instance of what suggested by Erich Auerbach: the division of literary genres is typical for the Renaissance and dissolves with it, while the Baroque Age is rather known for its fondness of the "border" genres (Auerbach 2003).

interprets it as "a great red letter in the sky—the letter A, which ... stands for Angel" since "good Governor Winthrop was made an angel this past night" (512). Once again Hawthorne exploits the twofold essence of the symbol and ties together the two extremes of its meaning.

Another crucial scene described in the Chapter XIX, "The Child at the Brookside," is in like manner crafted by skilled disposition of lights and shadows and the insertion of the image of the "double." The passage describes Pearl standing still "in a streak of sunshine" on the margin of the brook she lingers to cross and "gazing silently at Hester and the clergyman, who still sat together on the mossy tree-trunk" (538). Quiet water reflects "a perfect image of her little figure, with all the brilliant picturesqueness of her beauty, in its adornment of flowers and wreathed foliage, but more refined and spiritualized than the reality" (538). On the whole, Hawthorne replicates the pattern he uses to settle key scenes while filling in the framework with different contents.

Furthermore, bipolar structure of the scene invokes another fundamental symbol of the Baroque Age, that is to say the ellipse (537).[17] One of its focal points is represented by Pearl adorned by "the mother-forest"[18] and hence the sphere of intellectual and moral wilderness sealed by the scarlet letter "in which she and her mother dwelt together" (539), while the other one corresponds to the possibility to "undo it all, and make it as if it had never been" (536). Ironically, neither of the two alternatives is truly achievable since the reality is mutable and shifts under characters' feet.[19]

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[17] In *Dal Cerchio all'Ellisse: dal Rinascimento al Barocco*, Battistini, relying, *inter alia*, on theses of Calcaterra analyzes how the seventeenth-century ideological fluctuations between carnal and spiritual, senses and intellect, natural and supernatural led to "the breaking of the circle," which represents the idea of perfection and of a cosmic order, and made the ellipse the real emblem of the Baroque Age (Battistini 2000).

[18] In the article *The Concept of Baroque in Literary Scholarship*, Wellek, analyzing Baroque "in more general terms of a philosophy or a world view or a merely emotional attitude toward the world," states that according to Eugenio d'Ors "pantheism a belief in the naturalness of the supernatural, the identification of nature and spirit" represent the fundamental trait of the epoch (Wellek 1946, 93).

[19] Michael Bell underlines that Hawthorne does not share "the Romantics' valuation of ... movement from civilization to nature, or at least their confidence that such a return is possible," which reveals his "paradoxical" relation to romanticism (1988, 426). On the other hand, Morpurgo-Tagliabue affirms that, although restless and bewildered, Baroque characters often "abandon themselves" to a rather "tempered" catharsis, thus avoiding drastic outcomes (1987, 87).

Be that as it may, the image of the ellipse is likewise one of the essential elements from which the structure of the novel arises. It reemerges in one of the final scenes, in which Hester Prynne tries to attend Arthur Dimmesdale's last sermon. "An irresistible feeling kept Hester near the spot" and "she took up her position close beside the scaffold of the pillory" (557), which indeed represents the center of her being. In fact, "if the minister's voice had not kept her there, there would, nevertheless, have been an inevitable magnetism in that spot" and therefore "during all this time, Hester stood, statue-like, at the foot of the scaffold" (558). "It was in sufficient proximity to bring the whole sermon to her ears, in the shape of an indistinct but varied murmur and flow of the minister's very peculiar voice" (557–558). This voice "breathed passion and pathos, and emotions high or tender, in a tongue native to the human heart, wherever educated" (558). But its sound was "muffled … by its passage through the church walls" (558). Another focal point of the scene is thus embodied by the figure of the church, which both literally and metaphorically shrouds the minister from Hester's eyes. Split double essence of the episode is therefore revealed and, in a sense, the figure of the ellipse represents a double mirror Nathaniel Hawthorne uses in many instances in order to create ambivalence and strengthen a network of hidden meanings within the novel.

Additionally, diverse minor topoi typical for Baroque literature tradition are likewise present in the novel. First of all, a sort of death obsession as a recurring element in the story is built on three crucial encounters between Hester Prynne and the pastor, all contaminated by nearness of malady and death. In fact, the image of the "good Governor" (512) Winthrop's deathbed weights upon the couple during the first meeting on the scaffold; this image becomes almost tangible when the scarlet *A* caused by the meteor is later interpreted as *Angel*. In a like manner, the encounter in the wilderness is planned by Hester "while attending a sick chamber, whither the Rev. Mr. Dimmesdale had been summoned to make a prayer" (525). Finally, Arthur Dimmesdale himself dies in Hester's arms near the pillory. On the whole, the obsession with death is continually revealed by numerous minor cues that appear in the course of the novel. For instance, the window of Arthur Dimmesdale's chamber opens onto the "the adjacent burial-ground" (499) as if alluding to his fate, and while narrating about Pearl "in the flush and

bloom of early womanhood" the author surprisingly muses on "whether the elf-child had gone thus untimely to a maiden grave" (567). Finally, the novel ends with the image of Hester's tomb on the burial-ground beside King's Chapel.

The descriptions of physical deformity[20] and decay are likewise recurrent in *The Scarlet Letter*. For example, Roger Chillingworth, eloquently called a "leech," fitted with a "glare of red light out of his eyes, as if the old man's soul were on fire and kept on smouldering duskily within his breast" is not only "a striking evidence of man's faculty of transforming himself into a devil" but also an emblem of disfigurement and decay caused "by devoting himself … to the constant analysis of a heart full of torture" (518). Another disturbing presence, embodied by the "ugly tempered lady, old Mistress Hibbins … the same who, a few years later, was executed as a witch" (489). Her lamp lights up when the minister utters the cry on the scaffold, and her "ill-omened" face "cast a shadow" (489) over the joy Hester experiences when she is allowed to keep Pearl with her. Furthermore, "Mistress Hibbins" encounters the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale in the moment of spiritual crisis when he returns from the forest: "… old Mistress Hibbins, the reputed witch-lady, is said to have been passing by. She made a very grand appearance, having on a high head-dress, a rich gown of velvet, and a ruff done up with the famous yellow starch" (546). This portrait of lavishly embellished old woman, so typical of the Baroque, reappears in the final part of the novel as a presage of collapse of the hopes Hester is cherishing: "Mistress Hibbins, who, arrayed in great magnificence, with a triple ruff, a broidered stomacher, a gown of rich velvet, and a gold-headed cane, had come forth to see the procession" (556).

In conclusion, it might be stated that numerous echoes of European Baroque, filtered through the peculiar prism of the sixth-generation New Englander's worldview, constantly reverberate in *The Scarlet Letter*. Furthermore, retracing that "touch of Puritanic gloom" (Melville 1853, 1427) flourishing in the novel and its vivid Baroque

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[20] Andrea Battistini stresses that during the course of the seventeenth century the canons of Petrarch's poetry regarding the ideal of female beauty are distorted and even subverted, thus giving rise to the *Kitsch* and intentional disfigurement (2000).

equipoise, we can affirm that the bedrock of "Hawthorne's Baroque" is forged in a manner analogous to its European counterpart, that is, in response to the crisis of patterns and myths, which formerly bound together the society and shaped its imagery (Morpurgo-Tagliabue 1987, 79). Indeed, Hawthorne's fondness for Baroque topoi might be explained by the author's consciousness of irreversible disruption of former endoxa and, at the same time, by awareness of clout it still exercises. In fact, in the present essay the Baroque substrata of Hawthorne's literary work is taken up, among other things, in relation to the momentous Puritan legacy the author is struggling with. Additionally, the aforementioned phenomenon is analyzed according to the theoretical framework drawn up by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* and is considered the "residual" element of Hawthorne's poetics. Being a rather unique revision of European literary tradition, this "residual" component allows the author to examine his contemporaneous milieu by threading its relation to the past and thus plays a fundamental role in the construction of *The Scarlet Letter* and represents one of the axes the novel is built on.

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AS WE HAVE ALWAYS DONE: INDIGENOUS FREEDOM THROUGH RADICAL RESISTANCE

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Author)
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 251, ISBN 978-1517903862

Reviewed by Elena Lamberti

Writer, scholar, multifaceted artist and activist, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson is one of the most interesting Indigenous voices from contemporary Canada, not only for her work with the Idle No More movement, but also for her innovative approach to more traditional literary, cultural, and historical discourses. A member of the Mississauga Nishnaabeg community, well trained in the Western canon (she holds a PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies from the University of Manitoba), Simpson completed her Indigenous education under the guidance of Doug Williams, an Anishinaabe elder who helped her to deepen her knowledge of what she defines as *Nishnaabewin*, the "Nishnaabeg intelligence:" a form of awareness based on the "Land as Pedagogy" approach, a concept underpinning her book *As We Have Always Done*. As she explains, in this pedagogical model "embodied practice" stands as a key concept opposing more coercive Western models of (literary and life) education: sentences like "theory isn't just for academics, it's for everyone" (151), or "there is no standard curriculum," encapsulate her approach to *Nishnaabewin*. In her vision, knowledge implies a more direct involvement of the individual in a learning-by-doing process that does not start from given and accepted taxonomies, but from the idea that all theories can be continuously regenerated through practice. "If you want to learn about something, you need to take your body onto the land and do it. Get a practice, [...] get involved, and get invested" (165).

What might sound like a new version of the traditional Emersonian idea of what an American scholar should be, is in fact a real challenge to American pragmatism and

self-reliance. If the American pursuit of happiness sounds more like a call to an individual economic success that rewards those who work hard and invest their talents to improve their social status (and welfare), what Simpson proposes is instead a call to pursue a new ethical-political horizon based on a different understanding of the relationship between the individual and the community. Simpson often recalls that indigenous communities did not bank money; instead, they banked relationships. Therefore, *As We Have Always Done* is a personal journey into a resilient indigenous tradition based on various principles that resonate as counter-narratives to the American ones, if we use the term "American" as a synonym for the leading cultural model reflecting the capitalistic, normative spirit of globalization.

"Internationalism," "Anticapitalism," and "Queerness" are the axioms of Simpson's discourse translating Land as Pedagogy in a volume that challenges also traditional academic narratives; therefore, her first-person narrative is an interesting act of storytelling that also reflects the political will to empower the teller, based not on Western literary approaches but on new semantics revitalizing an ancient oral heuristic. Genre-hybridity and trans-mediality are constant practices in all Simpson's works, both as an academic, a writer, an activist, and an artist: she constantly shifts from different expressive codes, therefore creating a different form, at once original and traditional. For this reason, *As We Have Always Done* is a crossroads of communicative possibilities that creates a mobile semantic and questions mainstream ideas, starting from everyday stories: the academic footnotes are there, but they often refer to "Nishnaabeg stories" the author has heard from elders, to "series of conversations with" different people (academics, elders, friends), or to quotes from panel discussions that inhabit Simpson's memory. The goal is to give power back to the community to collaboratively imagine different ways to inhabit our world, more inclusive and sustainable, investing on relationships through storytelling.

This book perfectly epitomizes the indigenous critics' resilience to dominant models of literature and literacy, including those elaborated by post-colonial theories and writing. It exemplifies a new indigenous discourse that elaborates a new form that transcends the mere denunciation of the colonial past and retrieves a dialogue with

diverse cultural traditions to imagine a different future at a time of crisis. Simpson's book is based on *alterNative* semantics that turns literature and criticism from subject to function, generates a collective catharsis as academic discourse gets rid of dominant classifications and defines new shapes for a poetic intuition that turn creativity into agency. Simple storytelling becomes key to political activism and civic awareness.

Simpson's original method introduces a different social vision where "internationalism" challenges globalization and the logic of nation-states, in order to retrieve a different idea of 'community.' In fact, Indigenous internationalism opposes all traditions based on colonial violence and exploitation, what Simpson calls "extractivism," a term coined to re-translate the process of colonization and redefine Eurocentric "appropriation," and "naming." "Extracting is stealing. It is taking without consent, without thought, care or even knowledge of the impacts on the other living things in that environment" (75). Inevitably, in this book Indigenous freedom starts from a counter-appropriation of the terminology used to frame history and culture, a sort of radical resistance to what is still perceived as a linguistic subliminal brainwashing. Similarly, "anticapitalism" opposes a globalization perceived as the output of money-based individualism, and encourages a global economy based, instead, on mutual understanding as a strategy to reconsider priorities and sustainability. Simpson's "society of makers" opposes the "society of consumers" as the foundation of freedom and of a more ecological self-reliance "My Ancestors didn't accumulate capital, they accumulated networks of meaningful, deep, fluid, intimate, collective and individual relationships of trust. In times of hardship we did not rely to any great degree on accumulated capital or individualism but on the strength of our relationships with others" (77). Storytelling is an ethical strategy to *accumulate* relationships, as stories can become an empathic territory where to develop shared collective memories and identities. Words are a different technology than the one required by capitalism. "We certainly had the technology and the wisdom to develop this kind of economy, or rather we had the ethics and knowledge within grounded normativity to *not develop* this system, because to do so would have violated our fundamental values and ethics regarding how we relate to each other and the natural world" (78, original emphasis).

As said: people over banks. It might sound as a naïve idea, but it is refreshing, as it challenges globalized politics that do not necessarily consider culture (and even less literature) as an engine for social innovation. Naïve is not necessarily bad, it can open different paths to pursue happiness, as other scholars have started to prove, also from within the Western humanistic tradition (Floridi 2020).

"Queerness" is another important concept discussed by Simpson as part of a different idea of "normalcy;" she recalls how heteronormativity is a concept imposed over the Indigenous reality by settlers and Western religions. "My sense is that my Ancestors lived in a society where what I know as 'queer' [...] was so normal it didn't have a name" (129). Nishnaabeg concept of "two-spirit people" was, in fact, used to define a person that was at once male and female, an accepted reality that was twisted by the new moral codes imposed by the colonizers; the paradox is that in recent times, the LGBTD+ Indigenous movements had to fight for the civic rights of a community that once was not perceived as diverse precisely because diversity was a status quo.

What makes Simpson's idea of "Indigenous freedom through radical resistance" particularly interesting is that it is not based on a nostalgic call for a lost world; nor is it an attack on colonization *tout court*. The trauma is there, wounds are shown, but Simpson's radical resistance relies on different semantics that evolve into the will to suggest that a different way to do things is possible. In Simpson's work, *Nishnaabewin* goes beyond sentimentality and becomes a narrative that blurs past and present into a different perceptual dimension that the cultural anthropologist Joseph Weiss defines as "The future perfect:" "The future perfect is a grammatical tense in which a future is framed as already determined—'this is what will have happened'" (73). It is a dimension that translates the Indigenous radical resistance into a different approach to resilience, something that ethnophilology (Benozzo 2010) explains through the uncanny relationship between prey and predator: each time a (literary, artistic, linguistic) tradition is conquered by a dominant culture, at first it is forced to adapt to mainstream models but, little by little, it resurges and reshapes those models from within. The prey becomes the predator, and radical resistance empowers Indigenous freedom. "As we have always done," little by little, this is what will have happened.

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POCAHONTAS AND THE ENGLISH BOYS: CAUGHT BETWEEN CULTURES IN EARLY VIRGINIA

Karen Ordahl Kupperman (Author)
New York: New York University Press, 2019, pp. 240, ISBN 978-1479825820

Reviewed by Elena Furlanetto

"Doughiness," the quality of being "unbaked," is the capacity to adjust to new contexts and learn new ways with ease (13). This is a term Karen Ordahl Kupperman writes in quotation marks and uses with a measure of irony, but it does visualize quite effectively one of the most salient conceptual nodes in *Pocahontas and the English Boys*: "doughiness" is a marker of adolescence as well as of the early Atlantic world, a trait one finds in youth and in colonists. In her book, Kuppermann reflects on youth and transatlantic citizenship as two conditions marked by fluidity and traces the histories of certain teenagers caught between cultures in 17th century England and Virginia. Although English youths did not go through a ritualized initiation like their American Indian peers, it was customary for them to leave their parents to serve another family; these teens were embarked on a ship, sent to the colonies, and left with Native communities until they had reached their twenties. Adolescence, Kupperman explains, was a "dark and dangerous" stage, a "nonage" (13), that English parents preferred to delegate. Forced to live in Native societies, these adolescents became well acquainted with Indigenous cultures and overseas geographies, forging futures as interpreters, and developing skills that were essential to transatlantic relationships.

The ambition of creating "amphibious" beings that would manage diplomatic relations with Native societies was not without collateral damage. Their double loyalties soon became a source of anxiety for them and for their employers: because they had access to the invisible workings of multiple cultures, they were under constant suspicion of mistranslating, erasing, and strategically manipulating diplomacy. In the case of Guillaume Rouffin, a boy who was first French, then Guale, and Spanish, Kupperman

wonders, "if someone had woken him up in the middle of the night and asked him who he was, how would he have replied? Would it depend on who was asking?" (18). Often asked to deliver false messages, to assist in the execution of treacherous schemes, or to conduct double-dealings which put their lives in danger, these intermediaries were no strangers to betrayal. Not only did they exist in a world that required reinvention and adaptation for survival, most of them had no choice but taking on the self-defeating task of mediating between cultures that plotted reciprocal destruction. "If they were to function well," writes Kupperman, "their identities had to be ambiguous" (151).

Kupperman follows the American trajectories of three 'doughy' boys, Thomas Savage, Henry Spelman, and Robert Poole, who were sent to Virginia/Tsenacomoca in the early years of the 17th century and left with the families of local chiefs to learn their language and culture. Conversely, the author lingers on Pocahontas as the Native equivalent to Thomas, Henry, and Robert. Married to John Rolfe and celebrated in London as first convert and English gentlewoman, Kupperman invites the reader to imagine the "great inner conflict" (120) she must have faced at the thought of returning to Virginia to be the instrument of mass conversion. Although pneumonia and tuberculosis were probably the ultimate cause of her death, the author does not exclude that the immense stress she had suffered may have fatally weakened her body. Kupperman also tells the story of a Paspahegh boy named Paquiquineo, taken by the Spaniards in 1561 and brought back to Virginia ten years later to support a group of Jesuits in their work of conversion. It must have been excruciatingly painful for Paquiquineo, who returned to his tribe and ultimately led a war party that wiped out the Jesuit mission.

Kupperman's *Pocahontas and the English Boys* is an immensely enjoyable book, blessed by approachable language and multiple anecdotes that make it flow like casual reading. One of the book's strengths is its attention to words, manifested in the author's dedication to calling things by their Indigenous names without erasing the colonial legacy of English, and to show how words shifted, evolved, and functioned on multiple levels simultaneously. Kupperman shows how a Native leader changing his name was bad news for the settlers–with consequences they often failed to foresee; that translating

the word "Lord" into Chesapeake Algonquian could have one charged with heresy (20), and that the renegades' habit of running away from their home culture had one governor misspell them as "runnagates" (156). These semantic excursions show that words sometimes have a deceiving nature, and for these adolescents, who had no choice but doing the dangerous work of translation, managing ambiguity meant survival.

Elena Furlanetto earned her doctorate in American Literary and Cultural Studies from the Technical University of Dortmund in July 2015 and currently works as researcher at the University of Duisburg-Essen. She is the author of *Towards Turkish American Literature: Narratives of Multiculturalism in Post-Imperial Turkey* (2017) and a co-editor of *A Poetics of Neurosis: Narratives of Normalcy and Disorder in Cultural and Literary Texts* (2018) and *Media Agoras: Islamophobia and Inter/Multimedial Dissensus* (2020). She has published on the influences of Islamic mystic poetry on American romanticism, on Islamophobia and Orientalism in film and media, and on the captivity narrative. Her research and teaching interests also include Orientalism, postcolonial literatures, Comparative Empire Studies, and poetry. Elena Furlanetto is writing her postdoctoral thesis in the framework of the DFG Research Unit "Ambiguität und Unterscheidung: Historisch-kulturelle Dynamiken" (Ambiguity and Difference: Historical and Cultural Dynamics). Her focus is the dynamics of 'ambiguation' in the early and nineteenth-century Americas. E-mail: elena.furlanetto@uni-due.de

POEMS

Rachel Galperin

O HEART, LOSE NOT THY NATURE

My tongue speaks only truisms now

In the way it wants to wail at me

I have lost my soil and it cannot be retained

Or found again, no matter how much I search

How much I scatter the pieces of my heart

About I will not find these flakes

They were meant to be lost I have realized

Some things are not meant to be returned

It is the returning that does its best to hold us still

To scream at us and tell us which way it wants to be had

When the truth spoils and the mirror cracks I can still see myself

It's just that my image is fractured, like a wound

I cannot see the whole any longer, only the

Missing parts that are slowly returning

At their own will

And my will?

What of my will? Has it returned to me?

Has my dog stopped sniffing each long

Blade of grass we pass while in the park?

Her heart joys at the new ground we cross

New to her, familiar to me and somewhere

In between her unknowing and my knowing

Our nighttime images turn to day

And our daytime images turn to night

It is only in those unknown, secret hours

In which we spy upon ourselves that the joys of

Life can be restored.

Yet, if you ask I cannot recall the steps to this place

This pyre that sits beauteously along nature's river

Along the soul's glance

Pick it back up where it needs to be picked up

Not where you *want* to pick it up

These complexities are difficult to explain, yet my puppy dog

Knows them better perhaps than I do and when she

Presses up against my skin I become all knowing

I cease to judge or be judge to want or to be wanted

I cease all flavor. I melt into the imbalance of nature

Which constantly without warning or foresight

Knows how to unwind itself, uncurl, like

A snake uncoiling at the bottom of an empty well.

I AM TRUSTING

of the trust exercise

When I fall the pavement cracks

I am not always trusting of the

trust exercise

I fall and the pavement cracks

anyway, I give it a tight hold

a squeeze, a relinquishing of data

and the numbers line up but

I've never been that good at

arithmetic. I may have the answers

but my comrades help me solve

the puzzle. I give in to the hard

Blow. Acorns. Trees falling. Twigs snapping.

Deer running across a neighbor's yard making me fear it

might get hit

I command you to wait for me

I command you to stand tall and still

I command you to bake me cookies

Did you kill that deer just for me?

Is that it's hide? Will you make me

a blanket with it or a stew? Or both?

Kristen Arnett writes about dead animals

like it's nothing and it makes me

feel that my dead relationship will be ok.

I like the taste of so many things

Of fallen things

Of open spaces

Of wide open legs

Of everything that flows like water and absorbs heat

Of things that are wet

Of soft cookies with chocolate chip centers

Of hard mouths with soft tongues

Of radical enjoyment

Of occasional employment

Of broad shoulders and strong holds

I'm in love with the subjective

lives that continue on in spite

of things that go wrong, in spite

of self-inflicted abuse unintentional

as it may be.

I claim a steak, I eat my heart -

again and again

Then repeat it

The juices give me voyage and nourish

a tenderness that grows

In spite of my recklessness

I live and so do you

Rachel Galperin |

COOKED FLESH

The beautiful illusion of my departure sits above me. How could I depart from here or count the ways of how to counter balance the judgement of a suitcase. I'll be like a centipede. A cricket. Did you know there's something called Cricket Powder. There is and you're supposed to bake with it or put it in your soup or other creations. Can you imagine eating a cricket?? I can't. But what I once thought I'd never do, I did.

I did refuse the salt of my family. The turmoil I once craved, the need for comfort, approval seems to be gone. A beautiful illusion? It was not the need of anyone's approval but everyone's approval also plagued me. I've heard people say once you reach (fill in benign age here) you stop caring what others think and I believed this for a long while too until I reached a point where the illusion broke. I stopped caring that my mother pretends I am invisible when I walk into a room - the hurt is still there but it's changed. I care about me, my hum drum artist life does not just go by. I do not merely spin as my parents oyster caught by hand in the sea. Nor do I believe in apathy or caring less about your own presence in the world in comparison to others or suddenly at age 50 becoming "your own person". My grandmother who is 85 still cares deeply so does my mother and so does my brother. Not I.

Being untied from the string I should feel proud but I don't. I feel free for now I am a woman who can walk with her shoes on backwards who can embrace snowfall in July who can wear fur in August.

If you want the recipe for detachment it's easy. Put yourself on a skillet. I like avocado oil but you are welcome to use whatever you fancy. Then sauté. My best friend seems to

think that friendships like we have are rare but it's not that they are rare it's that they are only experienced when ready and willing and wanting.

A crust of sky appeared over my bed in front of my ceiling. Spatial recognition. I looked up above it and realized the slice was mine. I check on it frequently like one would an ex

she's still pining over; winter and all its white fall & all its brown sets in a moment of frost sort of like buttering toast

would I could I get someone to butter me I've got some delusions to settle around this year's production I'll give you lots of kisses this year said to me - a lie, it's been a reclusive year for us all. I've heard everything up until now

Owl's cry, dog's sweet whisper, turtle's absence. We're all on the scenic route. Perhaps we should have been here all along. The space in between my collar bones has not gotten stuck and in the park the sun on me my hands are no longer cold.

WILD AND WICKED

During these seemingly

wasted eons I become

more and more myself

taking a bowel

& for what purpose

seems lost

yet I am reminded that

my grief is not the only grief of this time

my wanting touch is not the only ask for survival

the arrival of more and more

hope gives me a little sedition to fight against solicitude

what a jolt I felt in

the dawning hours of

my wickedness

of what I reported as wicked

my mother demonized all together

beneath the streams

lie buried the young

I used to be one of them

but completion does not end

with old age

creation is not for the young

I have heat & I have rain

My dog wanted to see

her girlfriend

today, she dragged

me to her door

sniffed all around the entrance

trying to see if she was home

hoping for an adherence

it was the second time

we stopped by today and

I consoled my dog like

I would a human who longed to touch

and couldn't, like I have myself

Rachel Galperin is poet, writer and casting producer living near New York City. She has worked on a variety of series including National Geographic's Brain Games, The Real Housewives of the Potomac, HGTV's Dear Genevieve, The Cooking Channel's My Grandmother's Ravioli and many more. In 2018 she worked as an Editorial Account Manager for Flower Publishing. She has written essays and features for The Ground Magazine, The Bolde, Folks and others. Her poetry and fiction can be found in Cliterature Journal, Elderly Magazine and is probably forthcoming elsewhere. Email: rach.galperin@gmail.com

CURRENTLY LISTENING TO THE SOUNDSCAPE OF CONTROL

Onur

Four nights ago I heard thumping

Liquid blue blood torrenting through

a body. My body. To sustain life the body circulates

blood through the veins. Blood distributes oxygen

to every cell within. More thumping.

The heart a constant stream. Four nights ago since I have heard

constant thumping.

Three days ago a phrase slipped my mind:

the locus of control. The locus a place where

something occurs.

Where cold spring showers rain on us

like benign meteors.

Where control of a person's life is

perceived to be.

Do you feel in control of life and the events

influencing it or

do you believe life is governed by factors outside your control?

The question slipped my mind

as the thumping drowned out all.

Over as soon as it begun.

Closer and closer I hear that thumping thresh.

Not the good kind, mind you. Deadlines due

at dawn when writing way past dusk.

Straining eyes in the dark lit by

an incandescent bright light. Persistent

blue lights making their way into my pupils.

Like the blue lights blasting them in morning

class and morning mail. Sirens wail

in the distance as I'm lulled to the thumping.

Flip the switch and

light up the occipital lobe. The thumping grows

hungrier. Devouring insides and out

till all that I'm left with is blue blood thumping

like a brain. After a snack the body replenishes itself with

glucose. Blood sugar rises and

all the thumping subsides.

The body a locus of control. Whether you choose to eat or not

you're in control—classed as an internal locus of control.

But what about the times, the rare cases, where no matter what you do the outcome is

fixed and

you're left with choices that you cannot change?

There's the rub.

Three hours have passed since pain

struck. The pain dulling

insides. Food the perpetual panacea for this

condition! As the thumping approaches so too

does the nourishment that alleviates

pain. Choice dictated by the lack

of choice. External control influencing internal

control. When the doctor tells you that there's no real cure then

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what can you do? Become a doctor

yourself? Choices, and choices, and

choices. Will we cure ourselves with poetry like Keats

wished?

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