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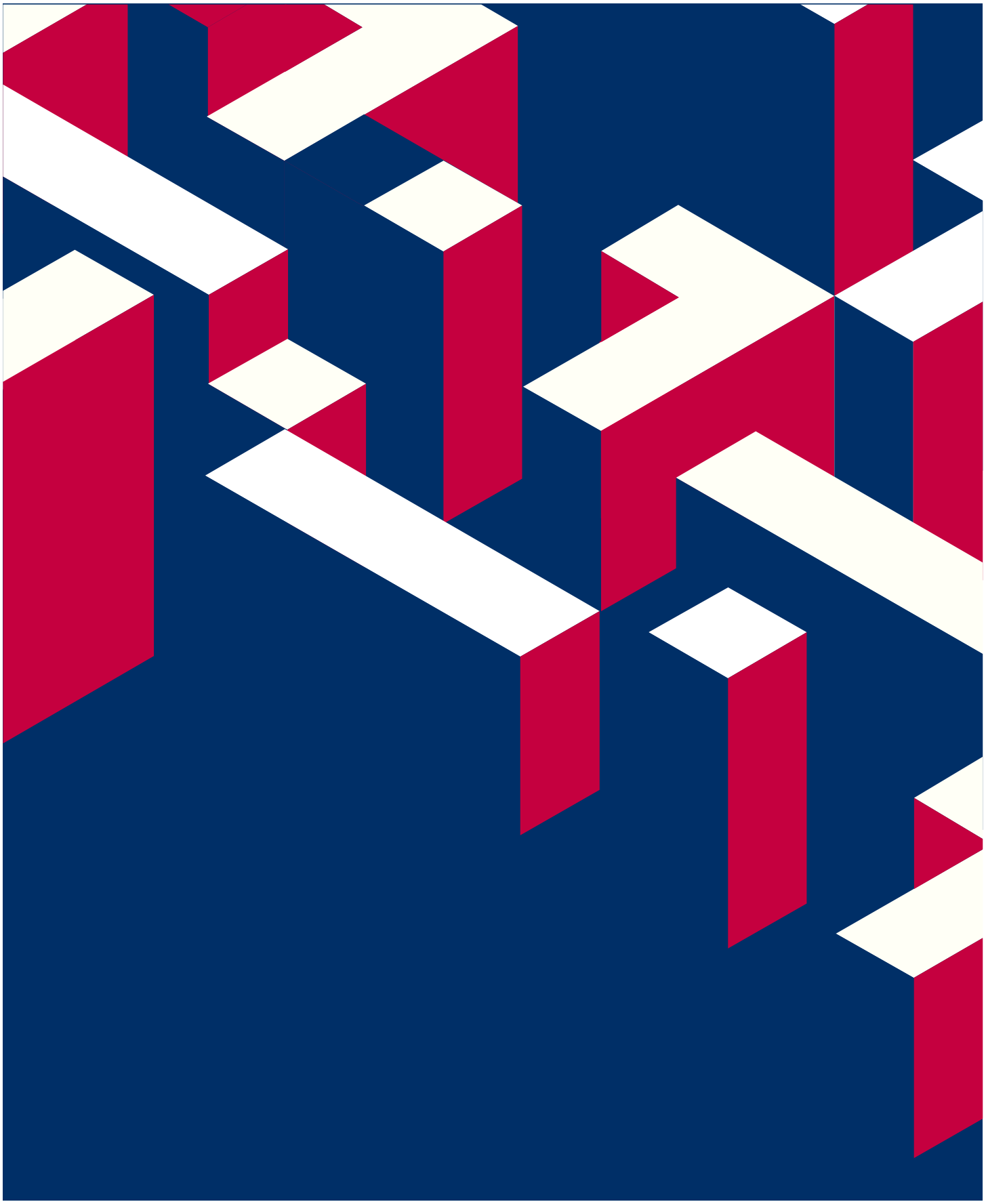

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Via Verdi, 8 – 10124 Torino

CONTACTS

http://aisna-graduates.online/jam-it/
journal@aisna-graduates.online

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A HISTORY OF URANIUM MINING IN CANADA

Peder Anker
New York University

ABSTRACT

The history of uranium mining on indigenous land in Canada is a story of settler colonialism, conflicts, and a clash of systems of belief. Pending whose knowledge you seek and which rationality you chose, it's a history that entails both pessimistic and optimistic perspectives. The miners believed in a rationality of prosperity at the expense of the existing First Nation cultures. It's a history of settler colonialism in which the process of conquest generated counterclaims of defeat. The ongoing clash between claims and counter-claims, prophecies and counter-prophecies, traditional and scientific knowledge, mark the history of Canadian mining along with the larger history of nuclear industries and weaponry. The Canadian uranium mines of the 1930s recuperated the first reactions to nuclear industries and disasters, but were also an early warning about what uranium-bearing minerals could do. That came in the form of what sounded like a mystical prophecy to Western ears, though to indigenous culture it was understood as medical advice. By untangling different rationalities for mining as well as a few early voices of resistance to it, the aim of this article is to uncover the origin and social dynamics of benefitting and suffering that came to mark a global crisis.
Keywords: uranium mining; nuclear history; Canada; indigenous studies; environmental history.

SOMBE KE, "THE MONEY PLACE"

About a hundred and fifty years ago, in the 1880s, a medicine man of the Dene First Nation made a chilling prophecy. Ehtseo (grandfather) Louis Ayah (1857-1940) was still young, but would soon become their recognized spiritual leader. He was hunting with some friends for caribou along the eastern shore of the Sahtú (the Great Bear Lake). They had ignored traditional beliefs and camped for the night by some large rocky cliffs known as Sombe Ke ("the money place"). A forbidden place, those cliffs were said to be bad for health if anyone stayed in their proximity. In the middle of the night, Ayah awoke suddenly and began singing until the very morning. When he was done, his fellow hunters asked him what was going on. "I foresaw many things and I was disturbed," he told them. He continued:

> I saw people going into a big hole in the ground – strange people, not Dene. Their skin was white. They were going into a hole with all kinds of metal tools and machines and making a lot of noise, so I followed them. They were going back and forth into that hole. They were digging a great tunnel. … On the surface where they lived, there were strange houses with smoke coming out of them. Another thing I saw were [sic] big boats with smoke coming out of them, going back and forth on the river. And I saw a flying bird – a big one. They were loading it with things. It didn't seem to harm anybody, but it made a lot of noise. … I watched them and finally saw what they were making with whatever they were digging out of the hole – it was something long, like a stick. I wanted to know what it was for – I saw what harm it would do when the big bird dropped this thing on people – they all died from this long stick, which burned everyone. … The people they dropped this long thing on looked like us, like Dene. I wondered if this would happen on our land or if it would harm our people. But I saw no one harmed here, only the material that was taken out of our land by people who were just living among us. That bothered me. But it isn't for now; it's a long time in the future. It will come after we are all dead. (Ayah quoted in Blondin 1990, 78-79)

The prophecy has been haunting the Sahtu Got'ine (Dene-speaking people who live around Great Bear Lake) ever since, passed down from generation to generation, deciphered and emulated. At first, they did not know what to make of it. Looking back at it today, most of them think that it came true. The rocky cliffs where the prophecy was given became the site for the mine which delivered the majority of the uranium for the Manhattan Project. Perhaps the "stick" resembled the elongated shape of nuclear bombs, and the people who were burned were the citizens of Hiroshima? Why did the hunters choose to rest by the forbidden cliffs? And could it all have been avoided, had they listened more carefully to the prophecy? These are questions the Sahtu Got'ine have been struggling with since then. The dark prophecy represents the first murmurings of a history that begins far away from where histories of nuclear bombs usually launch. Instead of starting with the work of famous scientists, the history of nuclear weaponry may as well begin at the material origin of bomb making and with the labor that made it possible at Sombe Ke, the "money place."

The mine at Sombe Ke is located at Cameron Bay, an inlet along the eastern shoreline of the Great Bear Lake, near the Arctic Circle in the Dene First Nation. As long as anyone can recall, the Sahtu Got'ine have been living peacefully as nomadic people in coexistence with the Sahtú. "The Dene were at one with the land, knowing how to

live in every season, in every place. … They knew their land so well that, as they journeyed through their vast territory, they were never lost," a knower of their culture, Sara Stewart (2021), notes (206). When not traveling to hunt and fish, they lived in the Délįne village, which means "where the waters flow," referring to the path of water from the lake into the Sahtúdé (Great Bear River). Selling or trading animal skins was a chief source of income, which left a paper trail with the North West Company beginning in 1799. This paper trail allows them to enter Western versions of history in the form of parcels of fur and written documents (Asch 1977, 47-61).

By 1930, when the mine at Sombe Ke opened, the historical significance of the Sahtu Got'ine would still be measured in terms of goods, except that the type of commodity had changed. Still nameless, they now emerge in mining records in terms of how many sacks of mineral ore they could carry.[1] They carried bags of it from the underground mine to a waiting boat which would ship it out for further processing. It was tedious work that lasted all day, and sometimes extended into the night. To make matters worse, the bags were heavy, 110 lbs. (50 kg), and they had no way to carry them except on their shoulders. It could take five to six days to fill the boat, after which they were allowed a rest. At times, the bags, made of cotton or jute, would spill, so they would have to gather the spilled mineral with their bare hands as best as they could, and place it in a new bag. In the course of this work, it was hard, almost impossible, to not inhale the dusty powder.

The workers' families lived at the other side of Sahtú in the Délįne village. This was also the home of Ayah, who made a series of dark predictions in the 1930s. He spoke of the changing lifestyle of Dene culture, which was under pressure from Canadian colonialism and modernization attempts, such as mining. Among his many gloomy forewarnings, Ayah predicted that the Sahtu Got'ine would suffer from a "new kind of sickness you have never heard of" and that there will also be "horrible things you have

[1] The archives of the Eldorado Mine are not accessible to the public due to nuclear secrecy, with the exception of Robert Bothwell's helpful and detailed history (University of Toronto Press, 1984), with labor culture discussed on pages 38-77.

never seen before" (Ayah 2016). These prophecies were barely audible or discussed, even among indigenous people. Today the Sahtu Got'ine believe these predictions came true, as within the next decades Délįne villagers were hit by rare cancers of the neck and shoulders, the same areas where they had carried the bags of ore.

THE ELDORADO GOLD MINE

The colonial history of uranium mining starts with the prospector Gilbert LaBine (1890-1977) who, in 1926, was a recent graduate of the Haileybury Provincial School of Mines, in the town of Cobalt (Ontario). The unearthing of silver in Cobalt in 1903 resulted in a silver rush to the town and the opening of the largest silver mining camp in the world, with the new riches making the School of Mines the best and most prominent mining school in Canada. LaBine was in the midst of this silver craze, observing firsthand how wealth could fall quickly into the hands of prospectors. He did some of it himself in the Cobalt region, and founded The Eldorado Gold Mines Ltd., in 1926, to pursue the cause. There were numerous prospectors around Cobalt, and some of them were indeed successful. The name of his company was designed to lure investors into financing his search for treasures. Enthused by the possibility of finding silver and gold, he studied the Geological Survey of Canada and various explorer accounts of possible mineral ores along the eastern shore of the Great Bear Lake.

In 1930, Le Bine went to explore the area himself, and met a Sahtu Got'ine known as Old Beyonnie, who showed him a rock with interesting minerals he had found at Sombe Ke. Noticing that it was pitchblende (or *uraninite*, in today's terminology), he gave Beyonnie $20 for the mining rights along with a verbal promise of a percentage of the profit (which never materialized), and subsequently registered the mining rights for Sombe Ke region under his company's name (Blondin 2021, 204; Bothwell 1984, 20-23). To LaBine, the place was simply unexplored land that could—and should—be developed to generate wealth for the nation, and himself. This type of settler colonialism involves, as Traci Brynne Voyles (2015) has pointed out, a "complex construction of that land as either always belonging to the settler—his manifest destiny—or as undesirable, unproductive, or unappealing, in short as wasteland" (7). The eastern shore of the Great

Bear Lake was indeed perceived as unproductive land to be exploited to LeBine, and the irony here is that the land later actually became an unproductive polluted wasteland, or what Marco Armiero calls a "wasteocene" (1), because of the mining of radioactive materials LeBine initiated.

Pitchblende is the uranium rich radioactive material from which Marie and Pierre Curie extracted the radium chloride compound back in 1898. By 1911, they had further isolated the radium chloride to its metallic state. Radium was used for experimental and medical purposes, most prominently as a promising component in a cure for cancer. Its ability to glow in the dark made the metal alluring to the general public as well, where it was used in state-of-the-art watches and high-end toys for children. Its many uses made radium into a true societal gem. The newly discovered metal became, in the words of the historian of science Luis Campos (2015), "the secret of life" (1). A 1913 article from *The New York Times*, for example, reported that with the discovery of radium, "Science [was] on Road to Revolutionize all Existence." The "march of science" would, thanks to radium, liberate a new powerful energy for human use and the "Results Would Be Vast" as "an ounce of radium would produce as much effect as much as many tons of the most powerful detonator known" (Soddy SM6).

Radium was new and novel. It represented the cutting edge of scientific research, and the virtues of the metal were to lead to human prosperity and progress. No wonder then that in the mid-1920s it became the most luxurious and expensive metal in the world, with a price tag over $100,000 a gram. That would not last long, with the discovery of a rich ore in the Belgian Congo. The Belgians (or the poor African Congolese miners working for the Belgians) would drive out their competitors with inexpensive radium, in effect creating a world monopoly on its production by 1930. Yet it was still a lucrative business, fetching $75,000 a gram (or about $1 million a gram in today's money) (Bothwell 1984, 7-8).

It was the possibility of earning money on radium that lay behind LaBine's decision to open a mine at Sombe Ke in 1930 under his company name the Eldorado Gold Mine. Owning shares in the mine represented an investment in the future, and LaBine used the novelty of radium and its high monetary value to promote his company.

In the late 1920s, there were speculations in the press and among scientists on the possible transmutation of radioactive metals into gold. This ultimate alchemical dream would even cause worries within the official US federal government about a monetary collapse, if scientists succeeded in making gold (Matínez 2011, 91). Yet, by 1932, the Eldorado Mine would take "gold" out of its name as it became clear that pitchblende for the purpose of extracting highly valued radium would be the mine's sole purpose. The ore at Cameron Bay was considered to be rich in comparison to its chief competitor in the Belgian Congo. In Eldorado, it took 15 tons of ore to recover one gram of radium, though the process was cumbersome and, in the end, barely profitable. The mine would extract about one ton of ore a day and ship it out for processing. Soon, Sombe Ke was renamed "Port Radium," complete with a settlement in the proximity of the mines where the workers could rest, and the initial processing of the ore would begin.

The workers within the mine were mostly immigrants of European descent, as the tooling required special skills and social trust, while indigenous people carried the bags of uranium ore from the mine to the dock from where M/S Radio Gilbert (named after Gilbert LaBine) would transport it away for further processing. The Eldorado Mine was built with a colonialist ethic of conquering foreign land and its people for the benefit of white settlers. It was a racist mindset and sense of superiority that allowed its culture of exploitation. And it was all driven by visions of radium as a bringer of prosperity and progress.

This had consequences for how Eldorado would run its mine. The initial expenses in opening a mine were massive, but they were an acceptable risk considering radium represented the very future of humankind. While waiting for the profit to materialize, the miners were given salaries well below comparable occupational wages in the region. As it turned out, the prospect of progress would keep their compensations below living wage for decades, as the mine would not earn enough to pay the shareholders any dividend or raise the miners' compensations until the 1950s. The hope in prosperity was what kept both investors and blue-collar workers going.

The belief in progress also had consequences for the handling of pitchblende. Because radium was regarded as an intrinsically good thing, only true skeptics would

question its many virtues. The exception to this trend was an engineer within the Canadian Government's Department of Mines who spoke out; his name was W. R. McClelland. In a report from 1931, he wrote that

> [r]ecent investigations in the field of radium poisoning have led to the conclusion that precautions are necessary even in the handling of substances of low radioactivity. The ingestion of small amounts of radioactive dust over a long period of time will cause a building up of radioactive material in the body, which eventually may have serious consequences. Lung cancer, bone necrosis, and rapid anemia are possible diseases due to the deposition of radioactive substances in the cell tissue or bone structure of the body. (McClelland 1931, 23; Fletcher 2015)

Yet, there is no evidence of his warnings being known to anyone near Eldorado, or anywhere else for that matter. Indeed, his finding seems to have been intentionally or accidentally buried, as it did not surface until recently when historians and activists began researching how much the government and the mining company knew about the dangers of radioactive material in the 1930s (Edwards 2010; Edwards 2016; Fletcher, 2015).

None of the workers were told that being in contact with radioactive material could be dangerous. As a consequence, they did not use protective clothing and handled bags of pitchblende with their bare hands until as late as 1937. The exception to the rule was the expert in radium processing, Marcel Pochon, who negotiated a clause in his contract of continuing pay in case of radium poisoning (Bothwell 1984, 57; Moss 1981). He was aware of the dangers, though there is no evidence of him passing on the knowledge. There was not any evident ill intent from him or anyone else here. Instead both experts and lay miners seemed to be blinded by the dream of having found a financial Eldorado.

Yet, for all their optimism, the mine did not do well financially, as it was soon caught in the downward spiral of the economic depression of the 1930s. The Belgians would ratchet up their production in Congo and saturate the market with cheap radium, causing the price to drop to $25,000 a gram by the late 1930s. Cuts in government medical spending would lead to less demand for radium, and by the summer of 1940,

Eldorado was sealed, leaving only a couple of caretakers to keep an eye on the mine and its equipment. This would not hinder the mine's President LaBine from promoting the company's shares to raise money. As its largest shareholder, he could not let go of the social and scientific optimism with respect to what radium could do.

MINING URANIUM FOR THE MANHATTAN PROJECT

One of the waste products from the Eldorado Mine was lots of uranium oxide, along with some noxious arsenate, cobalt, and silver. The problem with the uranium, however, was that it had limited use. In the late 1930s, Eldorado had tried to develop a market for particularly tough uranium-grade ceramics, but it failed. They also tried to develop a market for uranium-enhanced red and orange colors for artists, with little success. They had a small market among laboratory researchers, as in the case of the National Research Council in Ottawa and Columbia University in New York, each of which purchased tiny amounts. But that was about the extent of the available market. As a result, a large amount of uranium oxide was stored at the mine, at the factory site in Port Hope, or simply dumped in nearby environments, including the Great Bear Lake.

However, the limited market and use would expand with the onslaught of the Second World War, which Canada entered in September 1939 along with the British. How could the nation contribute to the war besides sending soldiers to fight the Germans? As a country with large amounts of natural resources, the government aligned its minerals and metals for the production of weapons. Perhaps radium with all its virtues could also be of military interest for bomb-making? "If radium can be made a decisive factor in war," a journalist from the *Toronto Daily Star* noted, then "Germany will be out of luck for Canada has in the Eldorado mine in Great Bear Lake the largest deposit of radium in the world" (Plewman 1940, 7). The board at the Eldorado Mine had worked under the assumption that they were producing a medical product, and their know-how was based on the science of geology, chemistry, and metallurgy. Now they began pondering if radium could be of any help in the war effort.

To the extent they had contact with scientific communities, it was through small shipments for laboratory work in radiochemistry. They had very little knowledge of or

interest in physics. The headlines in the summer of 1939 proclaimed that one "might blow world sky-high by splitting uranium atom" (Anonymous 1939, 1, 5). If the scientists were able to control the energy of uranium-235, LaBine told the press in the spring of 1940, Eldorado had accumulated large stocks of the uranium oxide to meet a "terrific overnight demand" for it (Anonymous 1940, 2). On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the Americans joined the war. Only months later, in March 1942, the head of the Manhattan Project, Vannevar Bush, sent Eldorado a surprise order for sixty tons of uranium dioxide. Moreover, he indicated that new and larger orders were on its way. This was truly exciting for LaBine, who quickly organized shipment of the uranium they had stored at their sites and sent orders for his workers to begin gathering the uranium oxide they had dumped in nearby environments. These actions represent the very origin of nuclear bombs, a weapon only thinkable without plenty of uranium oxide.

Figure 1. The Eldorado Mine at Port Radium in 1947. Credit: NWT Archives/Robert van't Hoff fonds/N-1995-007: 0022. Photo by Signalman Robert van't Hoff.

The order was large enough to reopen the Eldorado Mine. The Brits were also advancing plans to build nuclear bombs under the code name Tube Alloys, and consequently ordered twenty tons of uranium dioxide from LaBine in July, 1942. Given the previous large US order, the Eldorado Mine could not begin working on the British order until

October with eventual delivery in the summer of 1943. In the meantime, the Americans put in orders for uranium dioxide of a magnitude so large that the Brits would not get any more of it during the war. In other words, the Americans would, in effect, be the ones with enough oxide to build nuclear weapons.

The people at the Eldorado Mine had no clue what all the uranium was good for. There were few workers at the mine with long-term experience, as those with the know-how had moved on to other jobs when the mine closed back in the summer of 1940. As a result, the mine had to scramble to hire whoever they could convince to work for them, including high-school students, newly released jail inmates, army rejects, and women. It is the work of these unknown hands that begins the material trail––"the highway of the atom"—that led to nuclear destruction (Wyck 2010). And yet there is little evidence of people being concerned about working with radioactive materials or being aware that it was for serious bomb-making. The pay was low, lower than local sanitary workers, and physically hard and monotonous. And the turnover was high. As a result, there would be accidents, inefficiencies, and miners leaving for better jobs elsewhere. Things got better when the mine got unionized in 1943, with work hours dropping from 54 to 48 hours a week. Still Eldorado was not an attractive place to be.

Between 1942 and 1946 the Eldorado Mine would process about two thousand tons of uranium dioxide for the Manhattan project. It was not the only source of uranium for the Americans. Some of their uranium oxide came from the above-mentioned mine in the Belgian Congo, which had stored some of it in a warehouse in New Jersey where it was confiscated by US authorities to the benefit of the war effort (Jones 1985, 64-65). Another portion, about 15% of the uranium used for the Manhattan Project, came from piles of vanadium tailings in mines on or near the Navajo Nation in the United States (Voyles 2015, 2). Thus, the American bomb-makers relied almost exclusively on Canadian uranium oxide. The Canadian government realized that the Eldorado mine was important for the war effort, but also of national diplomatic interest. To gain full control of the ore, the Canadian government purchased the Eldorado Mine, which provided key shareholders, including LaBine, with a healthy profit. Those, however, who had invested in the mine during the radium craze of the early 1930s, lost

money. The takeover allowed the Canadian government to make sure the oxide would only be delivered to military projects, which in effect made the Manhattan Project the mine's only customer. The reason for the government takeover was a well-guarded military secret. The story leaked to the press stated that the Government had taken over the mine because radium was of military interest, while the press did not mention uranium at all (Anonymous 1944, 2). At the same time, Canadians initiated their own wartime uranium research which helped establish a legacy of nuclear power in the nation (Andrews, et al. 2021).

A COLD WAR ELDORADO

On August 6, 1945, the bomb made with uranium from oxide excavated in Eldorado exploded over Hiroshima: "We have won the battle of the laboratories" against the Germans, reported *The Toronto Star*, with Canada "providing indispensable raw material" for the bomb (Anonymous 1945, 4). Yet, at the end of the war the Eldorado Mines' financial prospects were somewhat bleak. While they had a near monopoly over uranium during the war, the price of uranium was set artificially low by the Canadians as part of the country's war effort. And with the end of the war, new mines producing uranium at a lower cost soon emerged. The Belgian mine in the Congo produced oxide at about $5,000 per ton, compared to $25,000 per ton for Canadian ore. Choosing a provider was a political as well as a financial question for the Americans, who diversified their sources and financially favored uranium from the Congo (Hecht 2012).

With the production of nuclear bombs escalating during the Cold War, pitchblende became a much sought-after and diplomatically-sensitive mineral oxide. At the time, the Americans were uneasy about the position of the Canadians. There were security issues with a Canadian spy-ring delivering secrets to the Soviets, the issue of a political bias towards the British with Canada being part of the Commonwealth, and a general feeling of not being in direct control of a material of vital importance for American interests (Knight 2005). In trying to negotiate their position, the Canadians sought to hammer out a policy for uranium oxide distribution through the United Nations, a position that made perfect sense to the Americans as long as no uranium

oxide was delivered to the Soviets. To keep control of the uranium the Americans continued to order pitchblende from Eldorado. With numerous tests of nuclear bombs and the radical build-up of the nuclear arsenal, Eldorado saw a steady increase in orders. By 1950, "uranium mining and selling ha[d] become a big and profitable business," a financial journalist noted, providing Ottawa with a healthy profit (Greer 1951, 13). New mines, including one in Saskatchewan, would provide a steady supply for the high demand. Indeed, by 1959, there were twenty-three uranium ore mines in Canada, valued at $330 million a year, more than any other mineral shipped out of the nation (Harding 2007; Haalboom 2016; Keeling 2010).

However, the profit did not trickle down to the Sahtu Got'ine, who would continue to work twelve hours a day, six days a week for four months a year. They would sleep in Port Radium on used oxide bags and eat fish caught from contaminated water. The pattern of bodily protection had improved somewhat, with them now using gloves, though they would still breathe in the dusty powder from the bags. Unlike the white workers in the mine, the Sahtu Got'ine workers were not offered a shower so that they could wash the dust off. Back in Délı̨ne, their traditional tents were sewed together from used uranium sacks donated in a gesture of good will from Eldorado. A reasonable connection between cancer and radioactive material was still questioned in local news as late as 1975 (Dalby 1975).

The mining would continue at Eldorado until the quality of the uranium declined and the ore was exhausted. The company also brought in machinery to dig up whatever uranium was left in the lake where it had been dumped in the 1930s. In 1960 the mine was closed, except for a short period in the 1970s when a different company extracted silver and copper at the Eldorado site. In 1982 the mine was closed for good, and Port Radium burned.

PROPHECIES COMING TRUE

In 1998, the Canadian filmmaker Peter Blow released *The Village of Widows*, a moving documentary about what happened to the Délı̨ne community due to its exposure to radioactive materials (Blow 1998; Déline Dene Band Council 1998; Salverson 2011;

Barbour 1998). It was an eye-opening film for many Canadians, made largely based on materials gathered by and interviews done with members of the Déljne Uranium Committee. Among the interviewed was a committee of Sahtu Got'ine ready to address what they saw as deep environmental injustices that had been inflicted upon their people, especially on the Déljne village. "In my mind it's a war crime that has been well hidden," its chairwoman Cindy Gilday said. "The Dene were the first civilian victims of the war and the last to be addressed" (quoted in Nikiforuk 1998, A1, A4). Their chief Raymond Tutcho was equally upset: "We the Dene have been subjected to over 60 years of horrible injustice because of apparent national interests. Our people have paid for this with our lives and the health of our community, lands and waters" (Tutcho, quoted in Dene Uranium Committee 1998). They used the documentary to call for an environmental clean-up of the Eldorado site and monetary compensation for lives lost.

The Village of Widows tells the story of Eldorado by focusing on how a village that had never registered cancer before sees many members of its population dead from the disease. The vast majority of the miners were men, which left the women as widows, but also endangered the aspects of Dene culture that had traditionally been passed from men to their male descendants. As a result: "The Dene of Deline are now [in 1998] living in fear of their land, water, animals and worried for their own health and survival" (Kenny-Gilday n.d.). The documentary showed to all what Sahtu Got'ine had known for long, namely that Ayah's old medical prophecies about sicknesses and the destructive weapon had come true. As a result, they pleaded for environmental justice and traveled to Japan to express remorse for unknowingly having been involved in producing such a terrible weapon (Goodspeed 1998; Knight 1999). In 1999, the Canadian government agreed to begin cleaning up Cameron Bay, and 1.7 million tons of radioactive material was removed in subsequent years.

Meanwhile people in the Déljne village began the process of documenting their history and the environmental injustices done. They found that out of 35 men who worked in the mine, "at least 10 have died of rare bone cancers, as well as lung, kidney, stomach, and bowel cancers — all cancers that can be caused by ionizing radiation." These were only the deaths that could be medically documented, as additional known

cases of mining-related illnesses leading to death could only be confirmed by oral history. Moreover, families of those who had carried uranium oxide or people living along its transport route were subject to a high level of cancer mortality. "Women's descriptions of life and work in this economy reveal that miscarriages were common, and provide accounts of still-births and strange deaths and illnesses (like deformities and leg cancer) suffered by young children" (Deline Uranium Team 2005, 56, 92, 95, 105). As Anna Stanley and others have shown, the emotional and physical impact of the mining on the Sahtu Got'ine has been significant (Stanley 2015; Stanley 2013; Parlee et al. 2007).

The response from the Canadian government health officials to these reports has been in line with the legacy associated with the uranium mining of the 1930s. In 2005, the Canadian government scientists investigated the claims of environmental harm, and concluded in its official report that the miners had not been overexposed to radiation, and that the Eldorado site was "below risk levels for background exposure." They "concluded that exposure to metals on the Port Radium site will not result in adverse effects to anyone." According to the scientists, living and working in proximity to the Eldorado mine would not result in greater risk than in other places (Canada Deline Uranium Table 2005, 73, 74, 78). Mathematical risk modeling was behind the argument, which suggested that the unusual cancer pattern among the Sahtu Got'ine villagers and oxide uranium carriers was the result of the probabilistic nature of cancer. The government report received national attention with newspapers concluding that the former workers at the Eldorado Mine had not much to complain about, as the exposure levels to radiation was not high enough to cause cancer (Anonymous 2005). Soon alternative explanations began surfacing suggesting that the cancer rates had other causes. Could it be the Dene's notorious smoking habits? The government report upheld a familiar line of argumentation to indigenous people reaching back to the 1930s. It also led the way for the more recent prospect of reopening the mine, with mining companies strategizing in 2014 on how to deal with First Nation interests (Graetz 2014). Interestingly, a recent study from 2022 concluded that the "radiation risks of lung cancer among men increased significantly" for workers at the Eldorado mine who were exposed

to radiation, thus reverting the scientific conclusion of previous studies (Zablotska et al. 2022).

The story of the Sahtu Got'ine is not unique. As Winona LaDuke has pointed out, First Nations people hold a significant amount of the world's uranium resources on their land and can as a consequence be linked not only to Hiroshima but "to more than a thousand nuclear tests" in Nevada and the Pacific (LaDuke and Cruz 2012, 37; Johansen 2016). In many, if not most, of these cases, optimistic as well as pessimistic prophecies have been rationalized. These are cases of typical settler colonialism, where one part moves in with a vision of prosperity at the expense of an existing lifestyle or culture. As scholar of Indigenous history Patrick Wolfe (2006) has pointed out, "the process of replacement maintains the refractory imprint of the native counter-claim" (389). The ongoing clash between claims and counter-claims, traditional and scientific knowledge, mark these stories which are rarely resolved. Is it all in the eye of the beholder? Or is it in the power of the best argument?

The question still remains: why were the environment of the Sahtu Got'ine destroyed in order to create destruction? Today the Sahtu Got'ine still turn to Ayah's thinking for elucidation and reflection (Clements 2003; Gilbert 2013). His predictions remain eerily relevant, as in the case of his prophecy of how the world will end. It will resemble that of a swift nuclear blast: "This is how fast it will end. Clap your hands together in front of you as fast as you can, it will be faster than that" (Ayah 2016, prophecy 7).

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Peder Anker is Professor of History of Science at New York University. He is the author of Imperial Ecology: Environmental Order in the British Empire, 1895-1945 (2001), From Bauhaus to Eco-House: A History of Ecological Design (2010), and The Power of the Periphery: How Norway Became an Environmental Pioneer for the World (2020). His latest book Livet er best ute (2022) explores the importance of outdoor life in Norwegian culture. Twitter: @pederanker. Page: pederanker.com. Email address: peder.anker@nyu.edu.

'THE AMERICAN NON-DREAM': ADDICTION AND THE GROTESQUE BODY IN WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS' WORKS

Elisa Sabbadin
University College Cork

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the tropes of addiction and the grotesque body as William S. Burroughs' paradigms for social control and subversion, further illustrating how they refer to the social, political, and economic context of the United States in the post-war decades. To do this, it highlights dynamics and images in Burroughs' works which concern invasion, predation, and control. The author's conceptions of the 'junk pyramid,' the 'naked lunch,' and the 'soft machine' illuminate his theories on oppression and parasitism. The author bases his discussions on models of production and consumption which characterize post-war capitalism and all power systems and hierarchies. Opioids, or 'junk,' emerge as both mechanisms of social control and positive metaphors of free exchanges between the (grotesque) body, or the national body, and the Other, or the 'non-American' as they open the body to external infiltration. As a mechanism of disruption, junk represents the threat of subversion and transformation. Burroughs' narrative of resistance comes to include a struggle against the control of the human consciousness as well, as his 'American non-dream' theorizes a conspiracy of the media and language as control mechanisms. The concrete counter-cultural solutions proposed by Burroughs include spontaneity and experimentation in consciousness with such techniques as cut-ups, fold-ins, and collaborations. His proposition is to liberate consciousness and to eschew the predatory nature of social structures and hierarchies.
Keywords: William Burroughs; Cold War literature; grotesque body; addiction; *Naked Lunch*.

Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs are commonly considered to be the founding trio of the Beat Generation, as the movement developed from their group of friends and collaborations. However, Burroughs has often sought to eschew categorization as a Beat, especially as the movement began to shift, often spurred by Ginsberg, beyond the literary and to the social, political, and cultural arenas in the 1960s and 70s. However, he undeniably plays an essential role throughout the movement, both as early mentor to Ginsberg and Kerouac and as writer, if sometimes more on the 'beaten down' rather than the 'beatific' side of 'Beat.' Like the other more characteristically Beat authors, he was, as Ginsberg (2017) relates, "dedicated totally and sacramentally in a sense to exploring his consciousness" (140). Consciousness is a central theme for Burroughs as well as the Beats: the writer engages in matters of perception and awareness on different levels, both in his life experience and in the formal crafting

of his works. Primarily, this preoccupation comes from the identification of contemporary society with an attack and a conspiracy against human consciousness.

As this article illustrates, Burroughs employs tropes of abjection and the grotesque body in his exploration of the individual self, the United States' sense of national identity, and the relations between the two. These tropes help shape his social, political, and economic critique of the United States during the Cold War. Significantly, Burroughs' attitude towards many of his themes is conflicted, reflecting his conflicted attitude towards American national identity: libertarian and individualistic, but fiercely critical of consumer culture and capitalism. Where Burroughs' explorations of consciousness place him at the heart of Beat sensibility, thanks to his often conflicting political and personal views, the writer defies strict categorization as part of the "general liberation" that, for instance, Ginsberg associates with the Beat movement, which includes "Sexual 'Revolution' or 'Liberation,' Gay Liberation, Black Liberation, Women's liberation too" (4).

In many of Burroughs' works, addiction emerges as his paradigm for social control and the grotesque body as his paradigm for subversion. Opioids, or 'junk,' serve as both mechanisms of control and as positive metaphors of free exchanges between the grotesque body, or, by extension, the national body, and the Other, or the 'non-American.' As a mechanism of disruption, they represent the threat of subversion and transformation. In light of Burroughs' use of these tropes, the writer's notorious countercultural position may be conceived in an innovative manner: Burroughs' revolt against social control and his propositions of openness and fluidity may come to be viewed to be part of a larger struggle against the control of human consciousness.

Burroughs' life experience may be taken into account for the purpose of an analysis of his tropes of addiction. In fact, Burroughs' engagement with the themes of subversion and social control reveals an ambivalence in his consideration of substances as, alternatively, negatively charged mechanisms of control and positively charged metaphors which induce openness and an exchange between inside and outside realities which opposes abjection. This ambivalence, and the multiple layers which his discourse surrounding drugs presents, underlies the author's sustained involvement in both

experimentation with psychedelics such as ayahuasca, mescaline, psilocybin, and LSD, and long periods of addiction to opium derivatives such as heroin, morphine, and methadone, which he refers to as 'junk.'

The grotesque body presents fewer ambivalences in Burroughs' consideration. According to Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque body as theorized in *Rabelais and His World* ([1968] 2009), the grotesque body is one which is open and fluid, leaking, in a continuous exchange between outside and inside (of the body) through openings and cavities, and through acts which are performed on the borders of the body such as eating and defecating (317). The grotesque body is also characterized around an emphasis on materiality, through the principle of degradation. In Burroughs' works, the trope of the grotesque body comes to signify, by extension, its abstract counterpart of the national body. For the post-war United States, defined by the conformity and paranoia of the Cold War, what lies outside of the national body is the 'non-American' and non-conforming. Burroughs' proposition to disrupt the confines of the body, therefore rendering it grotesque, is one of openness. This openness extends, concretely, to several groups of people and ideas which the Cold War United States rejects.

In the Prologue to *Junky*, Burroughs ([1952] 2010) describes the Louisiana 'junk law,' which criminalizes being an addict without specifying the term 'addict,' as one of the "symptoms of nationwide hysteria" and as "a police-state legislation penalizing a state of being," expressing that "the anti-junk feeling mounted to a paranoid obsession, like anti-Semitism under the Nazis" (142). Burroughs maintains, as expressed in his essays "A Treatment That Cancels Addiction" and "Jail May Be Best RX For Addicts MD Says," which figure at the end of the third edition of *The Soft Machine*, that the national disapproval of the addict was instituted by the American Narcotics Department's legislation on addiction, which criminalizes the phenomenon and punishes the addict, rather than treating them (Burroughs [1968] 1992, 132).

Burroughs further believes that this criminalization contributes to the spreading of addiction and that the suggested treatment contributes to its maintenance, implying that addiction is, for the NAD, both desirable and encouraged. In both essays, Burroughs discusses the efficacy of apomorphine treatment for heroin addiction in

opposition to methadone treatment. He explains why, in his opinion, the methadone treatment is preferred over the apomorphine one: methadone, unlike apomorphine, is an addictive substance, and therefore preserves a form of addiction in the patient. Moreover, apomorphine has been proved to effectively treat and contrast states of anxiety which arise with cravings. Burroughs claims that this is another explanation for its unpopularity as a treatment: "Since all monopolistic and hierarchical systems are basically rooted in anxiety it is not surprising that the use of the apo-morphine formulae have been consistently opposed" (143). The author therefore identifies both the criminalization of addiction and its treatment, methadone, as instruments of social control.

As David Ayers (1993) notes, Burroughs also considers junk as a paradigm for social control in *Naked Lunch*, developing this notion through the idea of the 'junk pyramid' (223-24). In "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness," Burroughs ([1959] 2015) describes the "pyramid of junk one level eating the level below right up to the top or tops since there are many junk pyramids feeding on peoples of the world and all built on basic principles of monopoly," remarking that "Junk is the mold of monopoly and possession" (200). Burroughs therefore refers to addiction by implying a relation with the forces at work in the world which aim to maintain established orders and social pyramids.

The apomorphine solution symbolizes for Burroughs the escape, or liberation, from both addiction and the established systems of control. This appears to occur in concurrence with a liberation from physical stimuli, such as language and images. As stated in *Nova Express*, "A powerful variation of this drug could deactivate all verbal units and blanket the earth in silence," and "Apomorphine is no word and no image – It is of course misleading to speak of a silence virus or an apomorphine virus since apomorphine is anti-virus … Word begets image and image *is* virus" (Burroughs [1964] 2010, 46; emphasis in the original). The control which Burroughs examines is therefore both physical, concerning people's lives and social positions, and metaphysical, concerning consciousness. Notably, his assessment of the virus as word and image suggests a relation to advertising and communications media.

Once free from the control of everyday stimuli and social mechanisms of addiction and predation, exemplified by the pyramid of junk, a gnosis of truth and detachment from the material world would take place. The 'word' particularly is described as violently aggressive in the "Atrophied Preface" at the end of *Naked Lunch*: "Gentle Reader, The Word will leap on you with leopard man iron claws, it will cut off fingers and toes like an opportunist land crab, it will hang you and catch your jissom like a scrutable dog, it will coil round your thighs like a bush-master and inject a shot glass of rancid ectoplasm" (192). The anecdote of "the man who taught his asshole to talk" (110) proposes another violent understanding of the word, or language. In fact, in this *Naked Lunch* routine (comedy sketch), a man's mouth becomes obstructed with "un-D.T., Undifferentiated Tissue" (111), and his anus begins to act like a mouth: "the asshole would eat its way through his pants and start talking on the street, shouting out it wanted equal rights. It would get drunk, too, and have crying jags nobody loved it and it wanted to be kissed as any other mouth" (110-11). As Robin Lydenberg (1987) points out in her study *Word Cultures*, "The anecdote of the talking anus challenges the comforting myth that it is language which distinguishes man from beast, man from his own bestiality" (27). Language is therefore exposed as dangerous, as something which may easily turn against people: Burroughs suggests, through the 'talking asshole routine,' also known as the 'carny man's routine,' for instance, that "the word has a strong, perhaps even a stronger affinity with body than with mind" (27). When defining the novel, the author states that "*Naked Lunch* is a blueprint, a How-To Book … How-To extend levels of experience by opening the door at the end of a long hall … Doors that only open in *Silence* … *Naked Lunch* demands Silence from The Reader. Otherwise he is taking his own pulse" (Burroughs 1959, 187; emphasis in the original). The image of the pulse suggests an escape from the world of the flesh, as well as from that of the senses and consciousness: language is implied as residing in both.

As Robert Batey (1996) notes, the junk pyramid exemplifies all power systems and hierarchies: "Burroughs sees the drug trade as the model for predatory practice in vast categories of human enterprise: business, politics, government, religion, philosophy, and the professions" (103). The 'naked lunch,' which in "Deposition"

Burroughs defines as the "frozen moment when everyone sees what is at the end of every fork" (199) corresponds to, in Eric Mottram's words, "the moment a man realizes his cannibalism, his predatory condition, and his necessary parasitism and addictive nature" (Mottram 1971, 15). The junk pyramid exemplifies these processes. One of the ways in which Burroughs represents them in his works is extending addiction to several substances beyond the known psychoactive ones; in *Naked Lunch*, for instance, Black Meat and Mugwump fluid, substances derived from the bodies of imagined creatures, are also addictive. Religion too becomes drug-like in a parody of different faiths:

> '*Christ?* … The one and only legit *Son of Man* will cure a young boy's clap with one hand – by contact alone, folks – create marijuana with the other, whilst walking on water and squirting wine out his ass … '*Buddha?* A notorious metabolic junky … Makes his own you dig. In India, where they got no sense of time, The Man is often a month late … '*Mohammed?* Are you kidding? He was dreamed up by the Mecca Chamber of Commerce. (94-96, emphasis in the original)

Religion is exposed as, indeed, 'the opium of the people.' The drug trade sets the paradigm of social control in different fields which, like religion, are brought back to a concrete and business-like model of production and consumption. All professions, especially medicine and law, are attacked (Batey 1996, 103). In *Naked Lunch*, Doctor Benway is the exemplification of the corrupt, predatory professional; his involvement in drug consumption strengthens the parallel between the dynamics of the social order and those of junk (Burroughs 1959, 174, 177). Moreover, Benway's sadism allows him to get 'kicks' from his own practice which, from the physical to the psychological, is based on the infliction of pain: for instance, he performs appendectomies with a rusty sardine can, and his 'T. D. – Total Demoralization' plan is nothing less than an attack on the human psyche. Similarly to drug consumption, the social pyramids of junk are shown by Burroughs to be based on the materiality, commodity fetishism, and consumerism which characterize post-war capitalism. The word and the image, which suggest the control of the masses through mass media and advertising, further relate his points to the economic, political, and social situation of the United States during the Cold War.

Significantly, the pyramids, the word, and the image are all used as tropes of invasion and possession. These dynamics shape Burroughs' discourse of the grotesque body and of abjection: they are based on movements of transformation, movements between openness and closure, fluidity and rigidity, and acceptance or interrelation and rejection. Both on a physical and on a symbolic level, virus and junk operate in a similar way which consists of a penetration from the outside to the inside, to the point of complete transformation of the initial subject. In *The Soft Machine* ([1961] 1992), Burroughs summarizes the mechanism as "*invade. damage. occupy*" (6; emphasis in original). Burroughs' focuses on material reality, on how virus and junk affect the cellular and molecular components of the 'soft machine,' which is "the human body under constant siege from a vast hungry host of parasites" (Burroughs [1961] 1992, 130). In his Prologue to *Junky* and in the book, he states that "Junk is a cellular equation" and that "the use of junk causes permanent cellular alteration. Once a junky, always a junky" (Burroughs [1952] 2010, xvi, 117): the transformation of the invaded subject is a totalizing one.

Burroughs frames a direct social, political, and economic critique of his time. The tropes of infiltration, invasion, penetration, and occupation unequivocally correlate with the United States during the Cold War and to the nation's paranoia, fear, suppression, and rejection of the Other. These were acted out in foreign policies of aggressive militarism and in internal policies of implementation of conformism with regards to political and economic ideologies and cultural norms and values. This enforced standardization would often label what was considered Other as pathological, as with different mental states or illnesses, or criminal, as with homosexuality. Addiction would also be considered as an illness of a psychological nature, with Burroughs' disapproval, as he always claimed junk addiction to be "a metabolic illness" for which "any form of so called psychotherapy is strongly contraindicated" (Burroughs [1968] 1992, 142).

This demonization of difference corresponds to what Jonathan Eburne (1997) names the "rhetoric of disease" (6): non-conforming behavior or lifestyle—homosexuality, addiction, criminal acts—would be rejected and labeled as 'deviant,'

psychopathological and criminal, to be cured through institutionalization in mental hospitals or to be punished through jail. This dynamic further corresponds to that of abjection, according to which something which is already part of the subject, or, in this case of the United States' sense of national identity, becomes expelled and externalized as something different, as Other. Therefore, there is a fear that the Other, when internalized, will be able to pervert the nation and "penetrate into the national fabric and disrupt its integrity" (6). The expulsion of the abject—theorized by Julia Kristeva (1982) as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4)—therefore maintains the illusion of a whole, secure, bounded presence of subject or national identity. Eburne (1997) effectively summarizes the national 'nervous breakdown' of fear and
rejection of the non-conforming as

> a mass of 'anxieties' drawn from foreign and domestic policy alike – the fear of communism, the Bomb, homosexuality, sexual chaos and moral decrepitude, aliens (foreigners and extraterrestrials) – became condensed with a nightmarish lucidity upon a unifying rhetorical figure: a festering and highly contagious disease which threatened the national 'body' (6).

Although Burroughs often refers to Western societies and Western systems of thought, it is clear throughout his works that he addresses the United States specifically. In the dystopian locations of the novels, freedom as an 'American' ideal is mentioned in sentences which refer to situations of addiction and control—for instance, "Shoot your way to freedom, kid" (Burroughs [1961] 1992, 6)—and the national anthem is interwoven with the narratives at different points in the novel, such as in the chapter of *Naked Lunch* which exposes Benway's sadism in the medical profession. This scene, a cut-up from "Twilight's Last Gleamings," a vignette from the late 1930s written with Kells Elvins, is accompanied in the novel by the figure of the diplomat, who still mumbles, as he dies of cerebral hemorrhage, "The Department denies… un-American… It's been destroyed… I mean it never was… Categor…" (Burroughs 1959, 54).

Political satire permeates Burroughs' body of work and is directed towards all official roles and levels of the hierarchies, from senators to private agents and

investigators who do not know who they work for and have no sense of personal identity, from "Clem Snide—I am a Private Ass Hole—I will take on any job any identity any body" (Burroughs [1961] 1992, 40) to the President of the United States. In "Roosevelt After Inauguration" (Burroughs [1953] 2010), the President appears "dressed in the purple robes of a Roman Emperor and, leading a blind toothless lion on a gold chain, hog-call[s] his constituents," orders the members of the Supreme Court to have sexual intercourse with a monkey until "the Supreme Court came to consist of nine purple-assed baboons," and abandons himself "to such vile and unrestrained conduct as is shameful to speak of. He instituted a series of contests designed to promulgate the lowest acts and instincts of which the human species is capable," such as 'Molest a Child Week' (109, 111).

To describe the social and political situation of the United States in the post-war years, Burroughs adopts the notion of the 'American non-dream.' In the interview "The American Non-Dream" (Burroughs [1969] 2010), he denounces the country's attack on human consciousness: "America is not so much a nightmare as a *non-dream*. The American non-dream is precisely a move to wipe the dream out of existence. The dream is a spontaneous happening and therefore dangerous to a control system set up by the non-dreamers" (102; emphasis in the original). Burroughs' tropes of invasion, possession, and control reflect the author's identification of post-war society with nothing less than a conspiracy. In a similar way to Burroughs, Ginsberg ([1959] 2015) had already stated that "Recent history is the record of a vast conspiracy to impose one level of mechanical consciousness on mankind" (145). Burroughs, however, takes this one step further in the belief that his contemporary society was already fully immersed in this process, denouncing the existence of a 'reality film' in which the illusion of reality is fabricated—a postmodern simulacrum—and conveyed to make the present, which he would call 'pre-sent' (Ayers 1993, 228).

Throughout his works, Burroughs experiments with several techniques: cut-ups, which consist in collage; fold-ins, which create sequences by overlapping folded pages; and collaborations, such as the book *The Third Mind* (1978), the result of the combination of Burroughs' and Brion Gysin's minds, among others. These have the

purpose of reacting to the conspiracy of imposed levels of consciousness and systems of thought, the conspiracy of the word and the image. If language is the programming tool of the 'reality studio,' different uses of language are the deprogramming and deconditioning solution, a more practical alternative to the aforementioned solution of silence. Spontaneity is shown to be the appropriate counteraction to pre-imposed models of understanding. The dynamic is that of operating a liberation and stimulating an opening and a fluidity which institutionalized entities, both social systems and systems of thought, reject; closure, stability, and boundedness are necessary to their existence.

Several parallels may be noted between Burroughs' experimentation with psychoactive substances like ayahuasca and his formal experimentation. Burroughs directly relates the text to individual perception and awareness, transforming it into a means to expand consciousness. As Ginsberg tells in his lectures on the Beat Generation at the Naropa Institute, the Buddhist-inspired university where he set up the Poetics Program, the act of writing becomes for Burroughs "an investigation into the nature of 'the Word' itself, or even consciousness itself, which had become dominated by word and image. The writing and the cut-up writing later was a cutting up of consciousness, a way of investigating consciousness" (Ginsberg 2017, 153). The liberation of consciousness through a 'cancellation' of the word or, more concretely, textual experimentation therefore opposes the control which would be maintained through language, especially through its logical and linear syntactic aspects. As Ginsberg further explains, language was for Burroughs "a control mechanism. The very word itself, 'in the beginning was the word,' say the theists, trying to assert ultimate control over nature and human consciousness. Burroughs's final revolution was 'rub out the word'" (169).

Psychoactive substances and drugs, either as control mechanisms or deconditioning tools, recur in this discussion too. Whereas junk, any opium derivative, stands for Burroughs for addiction and control, ayahuasca, or yagé, operates for the author in the opposite way. At the end of *Junky*, he describes his curiosity for the psychoactive vine and opposes the substance to other ones in terms of opening and expanding:

> I am ready to move on south and look for the uncut kick that opens out instead of narrowing down like junk. Kick is seeing things from a special angle. Kick is momentary freedom from the claims of the aging, nagging, frightened flesh. Maybe I will find in *yagé* what I was looking for in junk and weed and coke. *Yagé* may be the final fix. (Burroughs [1952] 2010, 152; emphasis in the original).

As Joanna Harrop (2010) notes in her discussion of Burroughs' 'yagé aesthetic,' the effect which the substance had on the author's creative output cannot be dismissed. In fact, Burroughs is considered as the writer of addictive substances mainly because of his emphasis on the social importance of *Naked Lunch* in relation to junk addiction, which was the author's defense of the obscenity charges leveled against his novel (Harrop 10). However, as Harrop argues, the author's formal experimentation attempts to specifically replicate the alteration in consciousness which he experienced through the use of psychoactive substances, mainly yagé. Burroughs' own discussion of the cut-up technique proves this point: for instance, he declares that "to travel in space is to travel in time – If writers are to travel in space time and explore areas opened by the space age, I think they must develop techniques quite as new and definite as the techniques of physical space travel" (Burroughs [1974] 2010, 6). His cut-ups and fold-ins are his way to physically replicate space and time travel in writing, as the emerging sequences combine texts which were composed at different spatial and temporal points. "The Word is divided into units which be all in one piece and should be so taken," he writes in the "Atrophied Preface" explaining his cut-up logic, "but the pieces can be had in any order being tied up back and forth" (Burroughs [1959] 2015,173).

The fact that yagé profoundly influenced Burroughs' thought process is clear in several of his 'yagé letters' written to Ginsberg, especially the 1953 letter which states that "Yage is space time travel" (Burroughs 1975, 44). As Ann Douglas (2010) explains, Burroughs aims to "liberate Western consciousness from its own form of self-expression" (xxiii). The inspiration of the psychoactive vine can be noted in several experimentations. For instance, one of the effects of ayahuasca is to provoke synesthesia, the receptiveness to multiple sensory perceptions simultaneously, which creates associations between, for instance, words and colors, smells, and feelings of touch. In his works, Burroughs often experiments with this different way of thinking, as

in the chapter "The Streets of Chance" of *The Soft Machine*. Here, a physical and neurological examination is undertaken and the subject's thought processes are analyzed through an association in his brain of vowels with colors, "I Red/U Green/E White/O Blue/A Black" (Burroughs [1961] 1992, 93). This chapter makes direct reference to Rimbaud's poem "Vowels" (1883): "A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue … A, black velvety jacket of brilliant flies … E, whiteness of vapours and of tents … I, purples, spat blood," and so on (1, 3, 5). The subject's processes are described in terms of synesthetic units:

> Unit I White: room in Northern hotel… pilots on leave … Unit II Black: Black Genuau dancer beating drum rhythms on the boy's diaphragm … Unit III Green: Vaseline on finger… smells of oil and metal … Unit V Blue: orgasms puff white smoke across a blue sky cut by vapor trails… The units permutate 2 1 3 4 5 Unit II Black: hands beating drum rhythms. (101)

Burroughs therefore recognizes yagé to effectively actuate a shift in thought systems, more specifically in Western thought, which is based on linear and pre-fabricated combinations of words. He would attempt to disrupt this through the use of psychoactive substances and, concretely, in his cut-ups, fold-ins, and synesthetic passages. In the 1956 manuscript of the "*Yagé* Article," Burroughs emphasizes the deconditioning potential of the substance in his inability to describe it through his usual self-expression: "I must give up the attempt to explain, to seek any answer in terms of cause and effect and prediction, leave behind the entire structure of pragmatic, result seeking, use seeking, question asking Western thought. I must change my whole method of conceiving fact" (quoted in Harrop 55).

The word is therefore revealed by Burroughs to be another trope of virus and social control. The author's search for ways to eschew programmed reality and ways of thought through different experiences and writing styles reflects his search for openness and fluidity in a cultural and social system he believed to be based on structures of power, control, and metaphorical addiction and predation. As has been noted, junk—in both a literal and rhetorical way—becomes identified by the author as the paradigm for social control, as it maintains the social, political, and economic junk pyramids.

However, junk is a complex trope in Burroughs' works. At the same time, it proposes another way to understand openness and free exchange, as it renders the body grotesque in its openness to external infiltration and penetration.

Eburne's already-mentioned "rhetoric of disease" (Eburne 1997, 6) exposes the United States' preoccupation with infiltration, pollution, change, non-conformity, and (both literal and metaphorical, when considering the missile) sodomy. *Junk*, with its "*invade. damage. occupy*" rhetoric, therefore represents the threat of dissolution, subversion, and transformation which the United States perceived in relation to its sense of national identity, or national 'body.' The suggestion of openness and acceptance in national politics is reflected in the focus on the grotesque body, the body which exposes its own materiality and degradation and which is in a continuous relation with external realities, defying abjection. Although this notion does not strictly pertain to the grotesque body, in Burroughs' works disembodiment is another way to eschew the confines of the body and to disrupt its separation from the outside world.

A form of disembodiment, a dream-like state may be associated with landscapes as much as with human beings. Interzone, the setting of *Naked Lunch* among other works, consists, for instance, of a mingling of different ethnicities, sounds, and smells; its cultural and sensory load renders the city abstract and inconsistent, rather than material:

> The blood and substance of many races, Negro, Polynesian, Mountain Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian – races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized pass through your body … brokers of exquisite dreams and memories tested on the sensitize cells of junk sickness and bartered for raw materials of the will … A place where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum. (Burroughs 1959, 161-63)

The quality of being ghost-like also pertains, in Burroughs' works, to people. In the same way, multiple substances apart from the known ones behave like junk in that their addictive, junk-like existence is often assigned by Burroughs to human beings as well. In *The Soft Machine* and *Naked Lunch*, bodies are often described as dissolving, evaporating, and inconsistent – "I am a ghost wanting what every ghost wants – a body" (Burroughs 1959, 8), says the narrator, whose body is an "invisible and persistent dream

body" (Burroughs [1961] 1992, 6). Moreover, people may perform an activity named 'visiting,' which consists in a displacement from one body to another, in which the transferred person seems to maintain their conscience and can even converse with the original possessor of the body. "Visiting is so comfortable and habit forming. Visiting *is* junk" (80-81; emphasis in the original), states the narrator. This is one way in which the body is exposed as grotesque; as non-fixed, mutable, and disruptive of its supposed borders.

Whereas people and places often lose their borders, the opposite process may also happen: in the novel, for instance, the process of emphasis on materiality extends from humans to the surroundings, and other material realities may mingle with the reality of the flesh. The narrator illustrates these processes in the narrative, in passages such as "I scored for tea sometime somewhere in grey strata of subways all night cafeterias rooming house flesh," and "I drape myself over him from the pool hall. draped myself over his cafeteria and his shorts dissolved in strata of subways … and all house flesh …" (6). These cut-up passages exemplify a semantic rupture between human and non-human: bodies 'drape' themselves like curtains, the house is 'flesh' and the genitals are 'cafeteria' becoming 'subways'; notably, corporeal realities melt into buildings, particularly material objects in their solidity and structure. Significantly, materiality is one of the key emphases of the grotesque body, whose movement is towards degradation and obscenity.

The tension between materiality and immateriality which takes place in Burroughs' bodies, both degraded by junk and dream-like enough to be able to possess and be possessed, reveals the permeability and instability of the body as an entity and of its borders. As Eburne (1997) elaborates, junk specifically represents a subversion of the body: the injection of junk is an "internalization of an abject substance" (11) which transforms the reality of the body from the inside, as Burroughs observes in *Naked Lunch*:

> The physical changes were slow at first, then jumped forward in black klunks, falling through his slack tissue, washing away the human lines … no organ is constant as regards either function or position … sex organs sprout anywhere …

> rectums open, defecate and close … the entire organism changes color and consistency in split-second adjustments. (Burroughs 1959, 9)

Further, as it was previously mentioned, Burroughs claims that the transformations which drugs operate on the body occur at cellular levels. In his Prologue to *Junky*, he describes the motions of shooting and withdrawal in the habit of the junky and how the organism follows this movements in "replacement of the junk-dependent cells": "A user is in a continual state of shrinking and growing in his daily cycle of shot-need for shot completed … Junk is a cellular equation" (Burroughs [1952] 2010, xv-xvi). The perpetual transformation of the body of the junky reveals its lack of fixedness and stability in the grotesque sense.

Burroughs' grotesque body, however, is not in harmony with nature and the universe, which is one of Mikhail Bakhtin's characterizations of the grotesque body. Whereas Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque underlines a relation to the "essential aspects of being" (Bakhtin [1968] 2009, xxi)—the cycles of nature, humanity, the cosmos, and the rest of society—Burroughs' depictions of the grotesque body result in an openness which is ultimately destructive and, as Eburne notes, all-consuming (12). Junk is therefore all-consuming as much as it is consumable, just as the sexual object in *Naked Lunch* is often destroyed with a violent death at the moment of orgasm; junk and sodomy are mechanisms of disruption but, at the same time, exemplifications of the junk pyramids and the predatory social structure, a "commodity of a hierarchized and violently repressive exchange structure" (12). Simultaneously, different layers exist in Burroughs' discussion of the disruption of the body: the paradigm of junk is one of social control as well as of the grotesque, and materiality is also explored in "its relationship to the economic underpinnings of late-capitalist existence" (Breu 2011, 206). The writer's conflicted attitudes towards junk and sodomy, or the sexual act in general, may be said to emblematize his conflicted relationship with the United States and the 'body politic' that the grotesque body makes reference to. Where his libertarian political identity shows in his propositions of openness and exchange, his cynicism about free market capitalism and analysis of its predatory nature show in his tropes of totalizing possession, predation, and destruction.

In his depictions of the body, Burroughs pushes the notion of grotesqueness to new limits: the bodies he describes are in continuous metamorphosis, often turning into animals such as crabs, scorpions, and insects, and bodily parts are apt to merge or become independent. The Egyptian in *The Soft Machine*, for instance, has "its eyes eating erogenous holes," and his face "got an erection and turned purple" (Burroughs [1971] 1992, 20). In the "Ordinary Men and Women" chapter of *Naked Lunch*, Benway tells the story of "the man who taught his asshole to talk": this is the previously mentioned 'carny man's routine,' in which the orifice becomes independent to the point of substituting the mouth completely, and the carny man finally finds that his mouth is progressively being eliminated by an overgrowth of "what the scientists call un-D.T., Undifferentiated Tissue, which can grow into any kind of flesh on the human body" (111). This passage is significant in that it symbolizes the physical and metaphorical victory of the lower stratum of the body over the higher one, of sexuality over reason, intellect, and individuality. This degradation, which brings about a literal silencing of the mental faculties, is the epitome of grotesque physicality. Throughout *Naked Lunch*, Lydenberg (1987) suggests, the body is either amputated or "condense[d] into one insatiable organ of need," as the carny man's routine exemplifies: the orifices violently fight for dominion over one another; "Each orifice, trying to fill its emptiness by devouring other life, seeks exclusive domination over the body host" (29).

As previously illustrated, in Burroughs' works, the trope of the grotesque body may be said to represent the United States' 'body of land' and sense of national identity. However, the author has on some occasions made explicit the understanding that the body is a symbol of the personal self as well. For instance, in the process of 'visiting' mentioned before, the themes of possession and invasion are extended to identities, which are able to move from one body to the other, proving to be dynamic and unstable. In his essay "Immortality" (1976), Burroughs directly attacks the preoccupation with selfness in an argument in favor of cloning, claiming that existence is based on continuous exchanges with other people's selves: "Let's face it, you are other people and other people are you … The illusion of a separate inviolable identity limits your

perception and confines you in time. You live in other people and other people live in you; 'visiting' we call it" (4).

In this essay, Burroughs invokes cloning and ultimately human mutation as "the end of the ego" (3), praising the potential of these practices to open new evolutionary paths for humanity. He believes that human beings hold onto the illusion of a stable, confined, whole subject, "the illusion of some unchangeable precious essence that is greedy old MEEEEEE forever" (3). In satirical tones, he confronts the human preoccupation with selfness, especially in scientists, relating it to a lack of spiritual development:

> Like cattle on the verge of stampede they paw the ground mooing apprehensively… 'Selfness is an essential fact of life. The thought of human nonselfness is terrifying.' Terrifying to *whom*? Speak for yourself you timorous old beastie cowering in your eternal lavatory. Too many scientists seem to be ignorant of the most rudimentary spiritual concepts. (4; emphasis in the original)

Burroughs' considerations on the body therefore evokes grotesqueness—fluidity, movement, instability—in physical as well as symbolic terms, in the body as well as the national and personal sense of being subject. He believes that the self is an illusion which holds people back from expanding their consciousness and accepting the reality of exchanges between what is continuously reframed as the self and all that exists outside: "There is no ego; only a shifting process unreal" (3). Selfness may further be equated with the American preoccupation with national identity during the Cold War, one which manifested, among other ways, in enforced standardization and fear and criminalization of difference. "And where might we position, in our current dystopia, our fragile Anthropocene, the provocative dismembering body of work that constitutes the opus of William Burroughs?" enquires Anne Waldman, addressing Burroughs' engagement with an ultimately grotesque identity; "And the prescience within this 'body' that destabilizes many concomitant and parallel realities, revealing identity and gender to be fluid constructs? … the 'Burroughs effect' defies categories. 'The basic disruption of reality' is what he posits" (quoted in Ginsberg 2017, xv).

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Elisa Sabbadin is in her fourth year of her PhD at University College Cork (Ireland). She received her BA degree in English language and culture from Groningen University (the Netherlands), with a thesis on American Transcendentalists and Beats, and her MA degree in English and American modern literature and film from University College Cork with a thesis on Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs. Her PhD research treats the long line in modern American poetry, with specific focus on Walt Whitman's and Allen Ginsberg's poetry. Her research is funded by the Irish Research Council. Email address: esabbadin@ucc.ie.

THE ALLEGORY OF THE TRIPLE GODDESS IN *HEREDITARY* AND *RELIC*: FEMALE AGING, FAMILY GENERATIONS, AND THE FIGURE OF THE CRONE

Marta Miquel-Baldellou
Dedal-Lit Research Group, CELCA (Centre of Literatures and Cultures in English), University of Leida

ABSTRACT

Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) and Natalie Erika James's *Relic* (2020) are contemporary horror films which present significant intertextualities revolving around triads of female characters and draw particular attention to the figure of the older woman. This article aims to provide an analysis of aging femininities in these two films taking into consideration Robert Graves's mythical archetype of the Triple Goddess, which refers to three distinct mythical figures that join in one single entity and emphasize three different, but inextricably related, phases of life. Since the archetype of the Triple Goddess is paradigmatic of different mythical triads in the classical Greek tradition, it will be taken as an allegory in order to interpret images of aging in these two films, since their female characters are portrayed as members of a triad, but they symbolically represent the same female figure at different life stages along her aging process.
Keywords: Triple Goddess; Greek mythology; aging; generations; life cycle; crone.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary horror films like Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) and Natalie Erika James's *Relic* (2020) explore the ambivalent figure of the crone in domestic dramas which tackle the collapse and renewal of life as revolving around three different generations of women. In Aster's film, the death of the grandmother, Ellen, reveals a series of family secrets involving her daughter, Annie, and her granddaughter, Charlie, and exposes the grandmother's pivotal influence on her younger female successors. Analogously, in James's film, when Edna goes missing—apparently as a result of a degenerative illness in old age—her daughter, Kay, and her granddaughter, Sam, move to live in the grandmother's household where they discover that Edna's condition will inevitably affect their lives. Given the allegorical undertones that the two films present, as representatives of the mythical figure of the crone, Ellen and Edna are portrayed in ambivalent ways, insofar as they are depicted as complex characters that evoke female

empowerment and strength in old age, but also arise as a source of fear and anxiety even for their own relatives. Besides, both films focus on families comprising three female members at different life stages, metaphorically calling to mind a mythical triad that turns into one single entity.

Given the intertextual connections that can be established between *Hereditary* and *Relic*, particularly in terms of their respective three main female characters, this article aims to approach them through the classic trope of the Triple Goddess. As Carl Jung and Carl Kerényi (1978) argue, and Erich Neumann (2015) also puts forward, the Triple Goddess is an archetype that evokes a classic pattern of triads whereby deities have been recurrently arranged in cultural manifestations. By means of a mythical approach, in both films, the female characters belonging to different generations—and, respectively, representing maidenhood, womanhood, and old age—will be interpreted as members of a mythical triad and as individuals whose identities symbolically blend in one another. Considering that the trope of the Triple Goddess not only introduces the figure of the crone into the picture, but also reveals her inherent ties to different generations of female figures, it turns into a particularly appropriate trope to approach horror narratives with mythical undertones that address women's cycle of aging.

In the context of age studies, Kathleen Woodward (1999) argues that the classic Freudian model of development is limited to two generations and consists in the separation of the parent from the child (149). Alternatively, as Woodward further explains, Julia Kristeva devises a model based on the premise that motherhood triggers the psychic identification of the younger mother with the older mother (151). In contrast with the Freudian dominant model of two generations in competition with each other, Kristeva's developmental model paves the way for the possibility of psychically inhabiting different generations simultaneously. Henceforth, Woodward (1995) claims that, in order to foster generational models that favor continuity, the figure of the older woman must acquire fundamental relevance, thus stating, "turning our attention to the figure of the other woman, the older woman, as the third term is precisely the way of moving forward, of thinking prospectively rather than retrospectively" (86). It is thus

argued that it becomes necessary to favor a tripartite model of development that comprises three generations of women and encompasses the figure of the older woman.

Dovetailing this claim, there has been a proliferation of contemporary horror films revolving around the trope of female aging that focus on older women as catalysts for younger generations of women in families, as is the case of Ellen in Ari Aster's *Hereditary* and of Edna in Erika James's *Relic*. Critics like Barbara Walker (1985) draw attention to the need to restore older women to the honored place they possessed in ancient matriarchal communities as endowers of life. More recently, Dawn Keetley (2019) refers to the narratological purpose of the character of the older woman, describing her as a "narrative strategy which ruptures the classical narrative arc" (60), which has usually privileged other life stages. Bearing in mind Kristeva's notion of blurring different family generations of women and Woodward's claim to defend the presence of the older woman, Robert Graves's classic archetype of the Triple Goddess, devised in 1948, amalgamates these notions insofar as it comprises three female generations, including the older woman, thus featuring as a particularly suitable trope to approach female aging from a mythical perspective. Drawing on Graves's premise, the Triple Goddess materializes in three characters, as goddess of the sky, the earth, and the underworld, each deity representing a particular stage of progression. As Graves (2013) explains, "as Goddess of the Underworld she was concerned with Birth, Procreation and Death," then "as Goddess of the Earth she was concerned with the three seasons of Spring, Summer and Winter," and finally, "as Goddess of the Sky she was the Moon, in her three phases of New Moon, Full Moon, and Waning Moon" (377). Graves draws on examples from Greek mythology in which the figure of each single goddess is represented by three aspects, while the three figures together turn into a triple goddess. As regards female aging, Graves connects each of the three phases in nature's cycle that every goddess represents with a stage within women's life that encompasses youth, adulthood, and old age. Accordingly, the Triple Goddess is represented as a maiden when she is connected with birth as goddess of the underworld, with spring as goddess of the earth, and with the new moon as goddess of the sky. Subsequently, she is portrayed as an adult woman at the stage of procreation as goddess of the underworld,

at summer as goddess of the earth, and at full moon as goddess of the sky. Finally, she is pictured as a crone when she is associated with death as goddess of the underworld, with winter as goddess of the earth, and with the waning moon as goddess of the sky. The Triple Goddess embodies the female cycle of life along the stages of maidenhood, womanhood and female old age, in which not only does the old woman play a central role, but she also exerts unparalleled influence on her younger counterparts.

In contemporary horror films, the third manifestation of the Triple Goddess, embodied in the figure of the crone—a grotesque female figure, to use Mary Russo's term (1995, 1)—is often characterized as a source of empowerment as well as a cause of oppression. In the context of film studies, Peter Shelley (2009) argues that the figure of the crone often fulfills this dual role as either a "mentally unstable antagonist or as the woman in peril protagonist" (8). This ambiguous characterization influences the way in which the crone joins in with the rest of female members in the triad and the way they approach the figure of the older woman. In this respect, the prevalence of the crone paves the way for establishing another stage in the development of female Gothic as established by Ellen Moers (1976, 90), which coincides with different turning points along the course of women's lives. If a first stage of development explores female anxieties about marriage and sexuality, and a second phase tackles the fears involved in motherhood, in addition to the figures of the maiden and the mother as representative of these stages, contemporary narratives of female Gothic are drawing attention to the third aspect of the Triple Goddess, the crone, thus contributing to giving visibility to women's old age.

Drawing on the trope of the Triple Goddess, it can be argued that the three female characters in Aster's film *Hereditary*—comprising the grandmother Ellen, the mother Annie, and the granddaughter Charlie—and in James's film *Relic*—encompassing the grandmother Edna, the mother Kay, and the granddaughter Sam—evoke the goddesses of the sky, the earth and the underworld, insofar as they are associated with a series of elements that call to mind these female deities. In relation to the goddess of the sky and its moon phases, all the female characters in the films indulge in artistic creativity, although this creative genius is also tainted by the haunting menace

of mental disorders. With regard to the goddess of the earth and its seasons, the female representatives of different family generations present an inherent connection with the landscape, which is related to their ancestors, while the symbolic layers of the land resemble the blurring process of memories. Finally, in relation to the goddess of the underworld and its life stages, the female members of these families make their way across rooms and passages in the family household, at the same time as the house replicates their bodies and their eventual physical decline. In the films that will be analyzed, the elements with which these female characters are associated recall positive mythological triads, like the Charites, the Horae and the Moirai, and negative counterparts, such as the Graeae, the Erinyes and the Gorgons.

THE GODDESS OF THE SKY: THE INFLUENCE OF THE MOON AND THE FEMALE CYCLE

As one of the materializations of the Triple Goddess, the different phases of the moon represented by the goddess of the sky are analogous, according to Juan-Eduardo Cirlot (2001), to the life cycle that goes through youth, maturity, and old age (215), and, in particular, to the physiological cycle of women (214), which the three female characters in *Hereditary* and *Relic* enact. Besides, the influence that the lunar cycle may exert on artistic creativity is also represented by the female triads in both films given their artistic skills, but also the mental condition associated with their respective female genealogies. Given its ambiguous qualities, as Cirlot contends, the moon has conventionally been considered as both celestial and infernal owing to its dual role as Diana and Hecate (216). This ambivalence is also highlighted in the portrayal of the female triads in *Hereditary* and *Relic*, since, on the one hand, they are evocative of the mythical triad of the Charites in relation to their fondness for the arts, but also of the Graeae in connection with their interrelated mental condition as represented by their symbolic shared mind's eye.

THE AGING FEMALE ARTIST AND HER ARTISTIC GENEALOGY

The three women embodying different family generations in *Hereditary* and *Relic* devote themselves to different artistic vocations that manifest their individual creativity. Correspondingly, their shared fondness for the arts establishes an inherent connection that binds them together and contributes to founding the symbolic paradigm of the Triple Goddess in relation to the goddess of the sky and the different phases of the moon that they represent. Insofar as they constitute a trinity metaphorically allied through art, the three female generations of women in the films bring to mind the mythic triad of the Charites or Graces, who comprised Euphrosyne, Aglaia, and Thalia. This triad was worshipped as goddesses of human creativity, who were also associated with the Muses.

As female artists, the figures of the grandmother, the mother, and the granddaughter in both films establish links among them as they grow older and inherit their artistry from their female predecessors. Nonetheless, it is the grandmother who establishes an artistic legacy that perpetuates itself in the family along its female lineage in order to reach future generations of women. In both films, the character of the older woman—Ellen in *Hereditary* and Edna in *Relic*—reveals her fondness for music, as Ellen's daughter looks at photographs in which her mother is dancing and celebrating, and Edna dances with her granddaughter, as she also used to do with her daughter when she was a child, thus bringing to mind the mythical figure of Euphrosyne, considered the goddess of music and merriment in the mythical triad of the Charites, and often represented as a dancer.

In Aster's film *Hereditary*, the female members of the Graham family display a shared talent for different artistic skills. Ellen, the grandmother, stitches and decorates doorstep mats with the names of their recipients, which she places at the threshold of the house, as if separating two different dimensions. In doing so, Ellen's artistic inclination symbolically unveils her role as a spiritual mediator between reality and artistry, but also between the living and the dead. Ellen's daughter, Annie, works as a professional artist who makes a living out of constructing dollhouse miniatures and dioramas, which often replicate the daily lives of her family members, as she makes figurines that represent her own relatives performing domestic tasks in the household.

As an architectural storyteller, Annie duplicates the structures of her abode, so that her dollhouse reproduces her family home as an architectural double that symbolically turns its inhabitants into actors subjected to the will of a mysterious all-powerful force. Annie's daughter, Charlie, designs homemade toys with domestic utensils and elements from nature, which she envisions as dolls, but also as magic tokens. Charlie also keeps a notebook with her drawings, as she is constantly scribbling down and portraying members of her own family, thus establishing a magical synergy between actual individuals and their artistic projections, insofar as the drawings in the notebook find reflection in real life. In correspondence with the Platonic premise about the mimetic quality of art, the artistic tokens that each family member reproduces replicate their individual assets and their relationships with the rest of the women in the family. Ellen's doorstep mats explicitly mark the transition between two dimensions, Annie's dioramas reproduce the architectural structures of the family house, and Charlie's makeshift toys and drawings duplicate her next of kin. Their respective artistic manifestations disclose the pervasive connections that bind them together based on their mutual fondness for the arts.

In analogy, the three generations of women portrayed in *Relic* also display artistic vocations which establish a bond of artistry among them that extends beyond that of kin. The grandmother, Edna, possesses a higher number of artistic gifts in comparison with her daughter, Kay, and her granddaughter, Sam. Edna's home is decorated with colored wax candles which she carves with a knife to replicate natural ornaments. As the pillar who sets the foundations of this artistic creativity, the older woman is exposed as a source of inspiration and as an artistic mentor, who complies with Anne Wyatt-Brown's (1993) models of late-life creativity (8), whereby women experience a late revival of their creativity in old age. When Kay and Sam arrive at Edna's home after a long absence, they discover Edna's old sketchbooks through which the artistic vein of the family matriarch is unveiled. Besides, as Kay is sitting at the piano, it is revealed that Edna taught both her daughter and her granddaughter music lessons, while Sam proved to be a more skilled apprentice than her mother. As music resonates across the rooms

in the family household, it is suggested that a latent artistic genealogy blurs the boundaries among the different family generations that each woman represents.

Each female member in these respective families exhibits her artistic skills, which replicate the creative genius of her elder predecessor, hence establishing an artistic genealogy that binds them together as an incarnation of the Triple Goddess represented by the goddess of the sky and the moon as its emblem. The different phases of the moon as exerting influence on the female cycle also evoke the phases of creativity of this triad of women artists, with a particular focus on the older woman, who is personified by the characters of Ellen and Edna. Nonetheless, the creative genius that each family member inherits as legacy of the older woman also involves the haunting suspicion that the degenerative disorders befalling the grandmother will also prevail in future generations of women in the family, thus reaching out to her younger successors.

THE MIND'S EYE: FEMALE AGING, COGNITIVE DISORDERS, BLURRED IDENTITIES

The older women in both films, Ellen and Edna, suffer the effects of illnesses related to old age, such as dementia and senility. The classical mythical triad of the Graeae—which comprises three sisters called Deino, Enyo, and Pemphredo—takes the form of three elderly women whose inherent alliance is symbolized by the fact of sharing one single eye, while, at a figurative level, their mind's eye underpins their shared mental faculty, which contributes to blurring their respective identities. The degenerative illnesses that befall the older women in both films emphasize the intermittent sense of attachment and estrangement among the three generations of women as embodiments of the Triple Goddess in its incarnation of the goddess of the sky and the influence of the phases of the moon in connection with the obscure workings of the mind.

The eldest female member in both films suffers from a degenerative illness on account of her old age, and her condition progressively affects her relationship with her younger relatives. As Amelia DeFalco (2009) claims, dementia can become a most extreme display of ruptured selfhood inasmuch as it challenges the notion of identity (14), and analogously, Pamela Gravagne (2013) argues that illnesses like Alzheimer's

disease call into question personhood (132), thus bringing to the fore how identities become blurred by the effects of cognitive disorders in old age. As these films show, the feelings of the younger relatives towards their elders range from offering care and protection out of love and pity to experiencing fear and disaffection, since the younger generations feel at odds to identify the older woman as a family member because of her increasingly bizarre demeanor.

In *Hereditary*, when Annie joins a therapy group after her mother has passed away, she explains that Ellen "was old and she wasn't all together at the end" (00:20:00) adding that she suffered from dissociative identity disorder, which was aggravated during the last years of her life, when she was also diagnosed with dementia. Annie admits that she was never on good terms with her mother and concedes that "not that she was even my mom at the end" (00:21:30) hence unveiling the increasing sense of alienation that Annie identified in her mother owing to the effects of her degenerative illness.

Correspondingly, in *Relic*, Kay believes that her mother's disappearance is caused by the fact that "she forgets things" and that "she has started wandering" (00:36:21) As Kay explains, Edna had phoned her once to tell her that she suspected someone had broken into the house and that she was scared because she believed this stranger was still hiding inside. Edna abandons her abode and goes missing as a result of her disorientation and out of fear of this stranger. Following her return, she displays some peculiar behavior that becomes menacing to her relatives, but also to herself, as she mistakes her own fingers for wax candles when she is carving. As a result of her disorder, Edna gradually develops some hostility toward her younger relatives, since she believes they are not her relatives, but just pretending to be, thus exclaiming that she thinks they are "waiting for the day" and "hoping I'll go to sleep and I won't wake up" (00:50:48). Furthermore, after offering one of her old rings to her granddaughter, Sam, Edna accuses her of "trying to steal" (00:40:30), since, owing to her illness, she does not remember having given it to Sam as a present.

Analogously, as evocative of the Graeae and their iconic shared mind's eye—which contributes to distorting their individual identities and emphasizing their

condition as a triad—in *Relic*, the blurred identity boundaries among the three women are signaled by means of either misidentifying or ignoring the appellatives whereby each family member is known to one another. Although Kay refers to Edna through her family appellative as Mother, Sam continually addresses her own mother as Kay, thus giving evidence of an ongoing process of attachment and estrangement. Besides, when Edna and Sam dance together, Edna is momentarily disoriented and mistakes her granddaughter's name for that of her own daughter. When Edna succumbs to illness and her ways become increasingly alienating, even on the verge of resorting to violence, Kay stops referring to her as Mother and, out of despair, she even makes a point of stating that, given her changed physique and character, "Mum is not her anymore" (01:14:09). Inasmuch as names and appellatives become blurred, the identities of the three female members are also mystified, thus establishing further connections amongst them and evoking the Graeae, whose shared eye symbolically underpins the inability to distinguish among their respective selves.

When the grandmother's sense of identity becomes destabilized owing to illness and old age, her younger female relatives also feel obliged to adjust their respective positions and roles within the family. In both films, grandmothers establish fonder bonds with their granddaughters than with their own daughters, as Ellen takes care of Charlie as if she were her own child in *Hereditary*, and Sam keeps good memories of her grandmother from her childhood and quarrels with her mother, Kay, when she considers taking Edna to a nursing home in *Relic*. Conversely, the mothers in both films, Annie and Kay, display some bitterness toward the figures of the grandmothers, which also conceals a latent sense of guilt for having deserted them in their later years. This pervasive resentment appears to underscore the dread of transforming into their own mothers, which Woodward (1999) describes as the ancestral fear prevailing across generations of women (158), which underscores their blurring identities.

In both films, as Annie and Kay attend to their mothers in their old age, the former exchange roles with the latter, since the aging daughters must take care of their elderly mothers, who in turn had nursed them as children. In doing so, Annie and Kay gradually replicate their mothers and symbolically replace them in their family role

along their aging process, whereas, owing to their degenerative illnesses, Ellen and Edna display stubborn and self-indulgent ways which are reminiscent of those of a child, and bring them closer to their own granddaughters, thus complying with Aristophanes's classical notion of envisioning old age as a second childhood. At a symbolic level, the mothers grow older and undergo a process of premature aging, as they turn into the mothers of their own mothers, whereas the grandmothers figuratively grow younger, as they turn into the children of their own daughters. As illustrative of this exchange of roles, in both films, Ellen and Edna encourage their daughters to engage in children's games, insofar as Ellen leaves posthumous messages to Annie, challenging her to unravel some clues in order to sort out a mysterious puzzle in *Hereditary*, whereas Edna asks Kay to check if there is anyone hiding under her bed in *Relic*, thus defying her to take part in a creepy hide-and-seek game as if she were reverting to childhood.

The incidence of mental disorders involves a progressive blurring of identities among the three women which evokes the manifestation of the Triple Goddess as the goddess of the sky along the different phases of the moon and, in particular, of the mythical triad of the Graeae. The inherent relationship that is established among them symbolically reflects their shared mental faculties, as the grandmother's degenerative illness urges her younger successors to adjust to her transforming cognitive abilities. As their minds collapse and their identities blur, these triads of women feel connected with one another by means of their attachment to nature and its rhythms, as the seasonal cycles reflect the women's transitional passage across diverse, but inextricably related, stages of life.

THE GODDESS OF THE EARTH: THE DOUBLE-EDGED COURSE OF AGING

The three female characters in the films also suggest the figure of the Triple Goddess in its incarnation of the goddess of the earth. As Cirlot (2001) claims, the change of seasons corresponds with the orbits of the sun (282), as one of the hemispheres of the earth represents the light (93), but at the same time it also reflects the phases of the moon (282), whereby one of the hemispheres of the earth is linked to the dark (93). The inherent relationship of the triads of women with nature in both films establishes a

connection between their aging progress and the cycle of seasons, which brings to mind the mythical triad of the Horae in relation to nature, but also the triad of the Erinyes as agents of punishment on behalf of the elders.

METAMORPHOSING INTO THE LANDSCAPE: THE SEASONAL CYCLE AND WOMEN'S LIFE STAGES

The symbolic connection established between the trinities of women and the landscape in the films is evocative of mythical triads of goddesses that embody the interaction between female aging and the cycle of seasons. As Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands (2008) claims, degenerative illnesses related to old age reveal how the mind ties together the body and the landscape (271). In particular, the three female characters in the films evoke the triad of the Horae, who were regarded as goddesses of nature and seasons, hence comprising Thallo as representative of spring, Anxo as symbolic of the summer, and Carpo as suggestive of autumn. Given their association with the annual cyclical progression, the Horae were also worshipped as goddesses of time and, by extension, of aging, thus reflecting the life stages of youth, adulthood, and old age.

The pervasive images of the landscape and its interaction with the female characters in *Hereditary* and *Relic* are enacted through a series of scenes picturing trees and motifs like medallions in the shape of a tree. These scenes underscore women's transition between life stages for each of the family members, but also, as they join in a single unity as the Triple Goddess in its manifestation as the goddess of the earth, they embody one single woman along her aging process in resemblance with the mythical triad of the Horae and the cycle of seasons.

Insofar as the aging process is recurrently evoked in the films and each woman represents a different generation, in addition to the myth of the Horae, their symbolic connection with nature conjures related mythical passages involving female figures and the seasonal cycle. In particular, the myth of Ceres and Persephone has conventionally explained the cycle of seasons, as Persephone's descent into the reign of Hades and her separation from her mother Ceres marks the beginning of winter. In *Relic*, as Kay and Sam look for Edna, they reverse the myth of Ceres and Persephone, which depicts Ceres

going into the underworld to retrieve her missing daughter Persephone, since, in the film, it is rather the grandmother's disappearance which signals the start of the cold season and it is the daughter who is in search of her aging mother. In the original myth, following the orders of Hades, Persephone is unable to abandon the underworld because she has ingested some pomegranate seeds. Likewise, in *Hereditary*, as Ellen is lying in her coffin, some seeds are placed on her lips, which symbolically mark her journey into the underworld. When Joan, Ellen's friend, invites Annie for tea, Annie removes traces of tea herbs from her lips after drinking, which evokes the seeds placed on Ellen's lips in the previous scene. Besides, when Charlie is at a party, she accidentally eats some cake containing nuts that cause her to suffer a severe allergic reaction which indirectly causes her death, thus suggesting another mythical journey into the underworld owing to having ingested some seeds. Inasmuch as these mythical references evoke the cycle of seasons, they are also indicative of female aging, since each female character represents a life stage, but the three of them configure an individual aging woman.

The close bond established between body and nature is visually represented in scenes in which the women's corporealities literally blend in with the landscape. In *Hereditary*, after she dies in a car accident, Charlie's head is covered with ants, as so is the family household, as if it were corrupted by the effect of a plague. Charlie constructs her own makeshift toys with limbs from birds, such as pigeons, and she develops a symbiotic interaction with them seeing that, after severing the head of a pigeon, Charlie eventually meets the same tragic end in a car accident. Analogously, in *Relic*, upon her return from the woods, Edna's feet are covered with moss, while her disheveled hair and stained limbs conjure the virtual image of a tree. In subsequent scenes, Edna's skin exhibits what looks like bruises, but are, in truth, layers of moss which gradually corrupt her body, as also happens with the house walls, and which will also eventually take hold of Edna's female descendants. Given their inherent connection with nature, and particularly, with trees, the female characters in *Hereditary* and *Relic* also bear resemblance with the Dryads, which were nymphs whose life force was connected with

the trees they resided in, and whose shapes amalgamated both human and natural features.

The connection between the female characters and trees becomes pervasive throughout both films. In *Hereditary*, at Ellen's funeral, as she is lying in her coffin, attention is drawn to her necklace, a golden pendant with interrelated shapes. At first sight, the symbol resembles the branches of a tree as a natural element, but it also evokes its genealogical counterpart as a family tree. Ellen's daughter, Annie, is wearing the same necklace with the pendant, which explicitly identifies her as her mother's successor in her absence. When Annie's daughter, Charlie, is killed in a car accident, the telephone pole into which she crashes bears the same emblem carved on Ellen's pendant, which signifies that Charlie also becomes the recipient of the family's necklace, following her predecessors, but also inheriting their tragic doom of cyclical decay and regeneration.

The link between each of the pieces that make up the necklace chain in *Hereditary*—which symbolically binds together the three female generations in the family—finds a counterpart in *Relic* through the pervasive presence of the trees in the family household and in the woods surrounding it, which evokes the cyclical course of seasons and the triad of the Horae. When Edna goes missing, her daughter Kay looks for Edna in the forest and, as she calls out Edna's name, the echo of her words reverberates across the landscape. At night, Edna's granddaughter, Sam, also goes out and calls her grandmother's name in the woods when she hears some noises, which reinstates the former reverberation and underscores the ancestral connection between nature and the female members in the family. Besides, the tree on the glass window at the house gate refers back to the shack where the family's grandfather perished as a result of a degenerative illness, which inevitably reverts back to Edna and the condition that is befalling her in old age. In both films, the emblem of the tree thus contributes to blurring boundaries between past and present as well as within different family generations, but also brings to the fore unresolved conflicts between the predecessors and their offspring.

The synergy established between the seasonal cycle and the aging process of these three female characters is evoked in scenes that accentuate the symbolic metamorphosis of the women with the landscape, thus creating a symbiosis as they reflect one another. Despite veiled intertextualities with myths that explicitly refer to the cycle of seasons, such as that of the Horae, these films draw more attention to the figure of the elderly woman. The presence of the older woman in both films also underscores a haunting sense of guilt, which is explicitly brought to the fore when it is unveiled that her successors might not have given her the importance she deserves, particularly in her later years.

IN FEAR AND RESPECT OF THE OLDER WOMAN: MEMORIES, PHOTOGRAPHS, MIRRORS

The lives of the younger female characters in *Hereditary* and *Relic* are influenced by the latent and pervasive presence of the totemic figure of the older woman. In *Hereditary*, the Grahams attend Ellen's funeral after the long illness that has caused her to grow detached from her relatives, whereas, in *Relic*, Kay and Sam move to the family home after a long absence to take care of Edna in her old age. Insofar as Annie must assemble the personal belongings of her late mother in *Hereditary*, and Kay and Sam return to the house where they spent their childhood in *Relic*, memories are stirred as younger relatives indulge in recollections of the family's matriarch. These moments of reflection highlight their relationship with their female predecessors and suggest some progressive estrangement, which appears to have increased in old age, as the older women's increasingly bizarre conduct turns them into alienating figures, even for their younger relatives. Nonetheless, as a result of the symbiotic connection that is established among the three female characters, the younger members gradually adjust to the uncanny influence that the elderly woman exerts on them, thus recalling the vindictive mythical triad of the Erinyes.

As a fearful mythical triad, the Erinyes or Furies comprise Alecto, Megnera and Tisiphone, who are particularly concerned to ensure that the youth should respect the elderly and, as guardians of old age, they are characterized as crones that punish those

descendants who neglect their elders. Insofar as the Erinyes eventually became known as the Eumenides and were identified as agents of justice, by means of compiling mementos and keepsakes from the past, the three female characters in these two films are evocative of this mythical triad, since the female members in this trinity concern themselves about the protection of the family unit and respect for the older predecessors, thus emulating the figure of the Triple Goddess in her manifestation as the goddess of earth, by means of motifs that evoke the passage of time and female aging, such as tokens and pictures.

The physical action of compiling mementos involves recovering events from the past so that the habit of collecting gifts spatially evokes the mental process of recollecting memories. These keepsakes remind their owners of their elders, particularly the matriarch in the family, in resemblance with the triad of the Erinyes owing to their concern to ensure that the family elders are revered with due respect. In *Hereditary*, following Ellen's death, her daughter Annie collects her mother's belongings in cardboard boxes which she compiles next to each other as visual memories that bespeak of different moments in her mother's life. Analogously, in *Relic*, when Kay and Sam arrive at Edna's abode, some of the rooms are packed with boxes that contain their personal belongings from childhood and youth and, in the living room, Edna's pottery and little decorative boxes also lie next to an urn presiding the mantelpiece, which function as reminders of the past struggling to stand the test of time. The spatial disposition of mementos from the different female members displays turning points in their lives that join together, as personal memories remain inextricably linked to those of other family members. The urn on the mantelpiece in *Relic* and Ellen's boxes in *Hereditary*, in mythical resemblance with Pandora's box, contain, but also conceal, memories which remain latent to be exposed and unravel the fate that awaits them as female descendants of the older women.

In relation to the triad of the Erinyes, the female characters in both *Hereditary* and *Relic* remain receptive to the presence of the older woman, which has the effect of vindicating her role as a member of the trinity. A sense of her perpetuity is enacted in *Hereditary*, when, following Ellen's death, Annie browses through her mother's family

albums and discovers photographs in which her mother appears dancing and celebrating while she is venerated as if she were a queen. These pictures seem to unveil an entirely unknown personality which differs from Ellen's apparently secretive nature, while they also document passages from Ellen's past which were unknown to her daughter and bestow a coveted status upon the eldest family member that extends beyond the limits of her earthly existence. In *Relic*, Kay witnesses Edna holding her family album and literally eating some of its collected photographs, as she is deeply wary that these pictures will eventually be destroyed, like anything else that her house enfolds. Edna's attachment to her old photographs implies that she considers them physical embodiments of her former self subjected to corruption and the passage of time, which she struggles to preserve by ingestion or interment. Edna thus establishes a symbiotic relationship with these photographs, insofar as she states that she wishes she could also bury herself in order to escape the corrupting force that threatens to destroy them, in what arises as a metaphor of aging which is also obliterating herself.

In the family households of *Hereditary* and *Relic*, since pictures of the grandmothers as younger women and recent pictures of their aging female descendants are placed next to each other, time is metaphorically brought to a halt and memories become blurred. In *Hereditary*, at Ellen's funeral, a recent picture of hers stands next to her coffin, thus juxtaposing her frozen image to her body liable to endure the effects of time. When Edna is reported to be missing in *Relic*, the police ask Kay to provide a recent picture of her mother, and Kay chooses a photograph of Edna's last birthday, which contrasts with her mother's lately gloomy appearance. Besides, in *Hereditary*, pictures of Ellen as a younger woman, as she was nursing her granddaughter Charlie when she was a baby, are pinned on the manor walls and, analogously, in *Relic*, in Edna's bedroom, her chest of drawers is decorated with photographs of her youth, standing next to photographs of Kay and Sam. Pictures work as alternate mirrors of imagined selves that perpetually preserve the youth of their beholders, particularly as photographs are hung on the looking glass, thus overlapping past images and current projections that distort the edges of aging.

In both films, the older women, Edna and Ellen, resort to their female descendants as rejuvenated mirror images which help them perpetuate themselves and subvert the dictates of time. In a scene from *Hereditary*, Ellen's figurine is positioned inside the doll's house while Annie stares at her, thus facing each other and creating a mirror effect, as Annie's younger face and Ellen's aging body are juxtaposed in the same frame. In *Relic*, Kay and Sam symbolically turn into Edna's younger mirror image, as a shot shows them standing next to one another and looking into the mirror as they are brushing their teeth, while this scene is juxtaposed to a replicating shot in which Edna is looking into her aged reflection in the mirror while she is also performing the same action. As opposed to Jacques Lacan's mirror stage whereby the infant embraces her unified mirror image as opposed to her still fragmentary inner self, drawing on Woodward's notion of the mirror of old age (1986), the aging subject becomes disaffected with the fragmentary image that the mirror reflects back and contrasts with her unified inner self in old age. In both films, the older woman reverses this premise by gazing at her younger successors as alternative mirrors that invoke the alluring image of her former self.

Tokens and photographs from the older woman turn into virtual mementos which elicit memories that coexist with her younger descendants, thus symbolically blurring their respective identities and the life stages that each woman physically represents, while emphasizing their status as a single entity. In spite of their initial estrangement with the aging matriarch, her female descendants gradually succumb to her pervasive influence, hence evoking the triad of the Erinyes and the importance bestowed upon paying tribute to the elders. As the trinity of women join together in the family household, their abode becomes a container of time and a place where its rooms and corridors reflect the aging process that befalls each of these three women, but also envisions them as an aging woman going through different life stages.

THE GODDESS OF THE UNDERWORLD: HOSTING AND ABJECTING THE AGING FEMALE BODY

As one of the manifestations of the Triple Goddess, the incarnation of the female cycle involving birth, procreation and death is embodied in the goddess of the underworld, and it is recreated by means of the aging process befalling the three female characters in *Hereditary* and *Relic*. According to Cirlot (2001), the region of the underworld acquires ambivalent connotations, inasmuch as it reverts back to the earthly mother as a source of existence and as a symbol of the original abode, but it also evokes the land of the dead (3), which brings to mind the burial ground and the termination of earthly life. Scenes portraying the women in these films conjure the mythical female triad of the Moirai as regards their symbolic transition across the household along their aging process, but also the triad of the Gorgons owing to the grotesque qualities that are conjured through images depicting their aging bodies and eventual death.

ARCHITECTURAL TRANSITIONS: ORGANIC HOUSES, CORPOREAL PASSAGES

The household arises as an extension of the family lineage in both *Hereditary* and *Relic*, insofar as the rooms evoke each of the family members and their different life stages. In addition, though, corridors and staircases relate to each other in analogy with the genealogical connection that is established among the different women in the family, which symbolically unifies them and reflects aging as a fluid process. The dynamics of separation and connection evoke the figure of the Triple Goddess and the tripartite manifestation of the goddess of the underworld moving along the stages of birth, procreation, and death. In resemblance with Ariadne's thread in the labyrinth of Daedalus, the female representatives of each family generation wander the different rooms and corridors of the house as suggestive of their passage across different life stages until they ultimately realize that the thread of life binds them together in front of a latent menace. In particular, in relation to the classic female trope of weaving and its connection with time, the mutual aging process befalling these women and their separate life stages calls to mind the mythological triad of Moirai or Fates, whose purpose was to ensure that all individuals lived their lives according to the fate that they had been assigned, which was represented by a thread spun from a spindle.

The Moirai arise as a trinity that reflects the passage of time, since Lachesis returns to the past, Clotho focuses on the present, and Atropos anticipates what is still to come. As representative of the passage of time, the triad of the Moirai are related to a symbolic and literal thread of life which also connects its three members, involving Lachesis as the measurer of the thread of life that each individual is allotted, Clotho as the spinner who twists the thread, and Atropos as the personification of the unavoidable fate that cuts the thread of life. As their respective life stages interweave, in resemblance with the rooms connected in the household, the three family generations in the films symbolically reflect the roles of the Moirai, whose symbolic threads representing the past, present, and future juxtapose with one another. In *Hereditary*, each female member possesses her own room and is associated with a particular life stage and place within the house—Ellen with the attic, Annie with her workshop, and Charlie with the tree house—and, in *Relic*, when Kay and Sam move to live in Edna's house, they are also assigned their respective rooms. Although different parts of the house are associated with each of the three women and their specific life stages, these architectural boundaries become blurred, and so do the women's life stages.

In analogy with the Moirai and their symbolic interrelation by means of the thread of life, in the films, the rooms are connected through corridors and staircases, while a series of trapped doors and hidden passages conceal a latent force that foretells the fate that is to befall the dwellers and that remains related to their aging process. In the gothic tradition, an inherent connection between family manors and their owners is suggested—for example, in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839)—as the process of decay of the houses reflects the decline of the respective families. In *Hereditary*, the Grahams notice an increasingly fetid smell, while in *Relic*, the house walls are gradually covered with moss. Etymologically, the family name of the Grahams literally refers to "gray home," thus underscoring the decaying atmosphere pervading the family manor. Furthermore, in the households portrayed in both films, there are particular locations which enclose this mysterious corruption: in *Hereditary*, the attic—which can only be accessed through an overhead door—and in *Relic*, the big wardrobe—concealing a secret door—

enclose a series of family secrets that threaten to disrupt the stability of the house. Besides, in spite of her actual absence, the presence of the grandmother haunts the household, thus revealing the inherent connection that binds the family house with the figure of the matriarch. In *Hereditary*, when the Graham family gathers around the dinner table, Ellen's recent loss becomes more noticeable, as she no longer occupies her seat at the table, whereas, in *Relic*, while Edna is missing, Kay catches sight of the armchair on which her mother used to sit, as its emptiness proclaims that she is missing, but also turns into a reminder of her presence. As the figure of the older woman remains latent, the trope of aging and the passage of time are intermittently brought to the fore across the rooms in the household.

The family home hosting the female dwellers symbolically becomes a container of time in the films. In *Hereditary*, Charlie's ghostly clicks of the tongue resonating in the house even after her death and, in *Relic*, Sam's bouncing knocks on the walls as she feels trapped in the labyrinthic passages of the house, denote the intervallic aging process of the female dwellers as if replicating the rhythmic sound of a clock. Moreover, images of aging are conjured architecturally as the family household finds its replica in miniatures lying next to each other as if imitating a series of Russian dolls. In *Hereditary*, the tree house next to the house replicates the family household and so do Annie's dioramas, which turn into doubles of her own abode. In *Relic*, the former shack resembles the family house insofar as the original window glass from the shack is transposed on the gate of the manor. Mirror effects, as houses replicate one another, and reverberating echoes, as sounds resonate across the manors, imitate the symbolic juxtaposition of life stages and the aging transitions that the women within these households undertake. In this respect, the houses resemble living organisms that turn into virtual doubles of their dwellers along their aging process.

The abodes blur the boundaries among generations and phases of life, since the houses acquire an organic condition that reflects the simultaneous aging process of their dwellers. The household also resembles a female organic entity, like a gigantic womb, going through different stages of pregnancy and awaiting the moment to give

birth to a new reality, in resemblance with the Moirai and the thread of life reflecting different stages of life from birth to death.

In *Relic*, as Sam enters the wardrobe in her grandmother's room, she discovers that, rather than a closet, it is a door that reveals a cavity which leads to a figurative labyrinthine womb, marking a transition from the room in which it originates towards an unknown territory. This claustrophobic passage grows bigger and smaller at intervals, hence symbolically giving evidence of its changing quality as a living entity. As Sam feels compelled to make her way along this intricate organic passage in order to escape, her progression resembles the process of labor preceding the moment of birth, when she must break through the wall to find her way back to the living room. As a female body, the house undergoes pregnancy and labor, as it gives birth to its female dwellers at different life stages, from youth to old age, thus engaging in an everlasting cyclical process from generation to generation, since life gives way to death, and death turns back to life in a perpetual process of regeneration.

Analogously, in *Hereditary*, Ellen's spectral presence presides over the family home and blurs the boundaries between life and death, and the physical boundaries of the rooms into which the household is divided. Besides, as Annie invokes the ghost of her deceased daughter on the ground floor of the house, she is eventually led to the attic to discover the remains of her own mother. As she dies a similar death to that of her daughter, Annie follows the same fate of her two female relatives to eventually join them and configure a spectral female trinity.

In both films, as the representatives of different generations make their way through its rooms and corridors in the family household, they symbolically move along different life stages, like the Moirai, while the house marks their transition along its cavities as if it were a reflection of the women's bodies which come together in the same abode.

THE AGING FEMALE BODY: ABJECT, UNCANNY, GROTESQUE

A latent sense of corruption appears to preside over the abodes in both films, thus evoking the invisible, but relentless, passage of time. In their characterization, the three

female characters in both films bear resemblance with the mythical triad of the Gorgons. In artistic manifestations, the Gorgons—which encompass Stheno, Eurycle, and Medusa—have often been portrayed as possessing hair made up of snakes, producing a guttural sound resembling the growling of a beast, and staring through a powerful gaze that turn all those who behold them into stone.

Along their aging process, the triad of women in these two films display instances of the Kristevan notion of the abject, which is defined (among other things) as the inability to distinguish between self and other at specific phases of life at which "meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1982, 2), such as, at birth, when the infant releases itself from the mother and, at death, when the body turns into a cadaver (3). As indicative of the concept of abjection, Kristeva refers to corporeal fluids, like urine and milk, which are suggestive of bodily processes that the aging process entails. Analogously, critics like Margrit Shildrick (2002) describe the circuit of bodily exchanges (105) that disclose the pervasive liminality attached to the aging body. In the films analyzed, the notion of abjection prevails insofar as the identities among the three female characters become blurred and arise as a source of anxiety, particularly at the advent of old age.

In *Hereditary*, one of Annie's miniatures portrays a scene in which she is breastfeeding her daughter Charlie, while Ellen stands aloof and casts a rather intimidating gaze on them. Annie confesses that, shortly after her daughter's birth, Ellen "immediately stabbed her hooks into" Charlie (00:21:21), mostly acting as if she were her real mother in spite of being Charlie's grandmother. Symbolically, Ellen's characterization on behalf of her daughter brings to mind Medusa and the biting snakes in her hair as an emblem of circularity, since, in her preternatural condition, Ellen nourishes on the young child, but previously, Ellen had nurtured her daughter and Annie had breastfed Charlie. These images endorse the cyclical nature of life and death, since, as DeFalco (2009) claims, aging reveals the illusion of boundaries (126), which are often blurred.

Similarly, in *Relic*, Kay becomes aware of her mother's incontinence, which urges her to draw her mother to the bathroom so that she can take a bath; subsequently, Sam also bathes in the same bathtub, thus replicating her grandmother's movements. The

act of sharing the same bathtub and the ritualistic action of taking a bath acquire connotations of pregnancy, as if Edna and Sam were surrounded by amniotic fluid which nourishes the body, but their growing process was also conditioned by a dormant presence that threatens to corrupt their bodies. As she is in the bathtub, Edna notices the darkish skin patches that are covering her body, whereas, when Sam is taking a bath, she becomes aware of a menacing shadow waiting outside the bathroom. In addition to evincing the liminality of the body, the concept of abjection underlines the overwhelming presence of the body and the related anxieties that the process of growing older brings about.

In addition to abjection, the figure of the older woman in both films also conjures the notion of the uncanny, as old age reveals itself as possessing familiar, but also, alienating qualities. As Woodward (1986) notes, Freud refers to the shock of recognition upon meeting his aged double as an experience of the uncanny, describing it "as something familiar that has been repressed" (107). In *Relic*, the corrupting force that pervades Edna's body eventually turns her into an estranging figure and as the incarnation of the aging Other, to use Simone de Beauvoir's term (1972), which prompts disaffection from her younger relatives, insofar as they are no longer able to identify her as their respective mother and grandmother. Correspondingly, as the older women in the families gaze at their younger counterparts and their identities become increasingly blurred, they metaphorically unleash an aging process that will also befall the younger generations in a reverberating mirror effect.

Given the symbolic link between the three female characters in *Hereditary*, which is evocative of the triad of the Gorgons, in one scene of the film, Annie and Charlie are sitting at their workshop table, with their backs turned. Their identities blur as their hair looks almost alike, which leads Annie to project the image of a child despite being an older woman, and makes Charlie look like an adult woman in spite of her blatant youth. Similarly, also with a special focus on the character's hair, in one scene of *Relic*, Edna's gaze emerges from behind her long grey hair, which is covering her face rather than her nape and it is disclosed that, instead of standing with her back turned, as the audience would expect, Edna is actually gazing at Kay without her noticing it. In these

two scenes, owing to their characterization, the female characters arise as a source of the uncanny, inasmuch as their familiar traits are repressed in favor of their alienating features. Besides, as they exchange glances, it is implied that the younger and older women become symbolic doubles of each other. As Otto Rank (1971) claims, the figure of the double becomes a forerunner of death as well as an agent of protection against impeding dissolution (86), which is displayed as the younger female characters come to terms with the figure of the older woman, an embodiment of their aging self, which they manage to identify, but they also initially refuse to embrace.

As the bodies and identities of the female triads in the films become increasingly distorted, they evoke Russo's (1995) notion of the grotesque, defined as the "cavernous anatomical female body" (1), which is described as multiple and changing (8). In *Hereditary*, this distorting process of identities among the three female bodies is made effective as bodies are deprived of their individuality upon being beheaded, once more evoking the triad of the Gorgons through the myth of Medusa's decapitation. In a scene that bears resemblance with such myth, the granddaughter, Charlie, dies as a result of being decapitated in a car accident, while her brother, Peter, is staring at her in the rear window, in the same way as Perseus stared at Medusa's reflection in his shield to protect himself. Charlie's death is subsequently echoed when her grandmother's headless body is found in the attic of the house, while, in a spell of frenzy, the mother, Annie, also beheads herself in a final scene that acquires manifest mythical undertones. As their bodies become eventually reunited, their limbs symbolically join each other to converge in a single body which reassembles the different life stages that each woman in the family embodies as representative of their respective generations.

In analogy, in *Relic*, Kay stays in to nurse her mother and remove the remaining layers of dead skin from her body, thus exposing its darkish flesh, which Kay, as a daughter, finally conforms to embrace, hence blurring the physical boundaries that separate them and, symbolically, reverting back to pregnancy at the advent of the aging mother's death. As Edna emerges as a newly born being, leaving behind her former body and performing a process of regeneration as an ancestral monster, this scene calls to mind Ursula LeGuin's (1997) claim of the aging woman giving birth to her third self

(250). As LeGuin claims, "the woman who is willing to make that change must become pregnant with herself" and "must bear herself, her third self, her old age" (ibid.). Besides, while the three women lie next to each other in bed, Sam notices the dark circle growing on her mother's nape, which foretells that the corrupting force that has debased her grandmother's body is also beginning to act upon her mother's frame.

The iconic final scene in *Relic* brings to mind Gravagne's (2013) claim that degenerative illnesses in old age symbolically display the different layers of the self (151), blurring past, present and future, thus envisioning aging as a fluctuating experience (22) and as a process of becoming (19). In intertextual connection with Gustav Klimt's painting "The Three Ages of Woman" (1905), this final scene in *Relic* ratifies the symbolic unity between the three women, as if they were a single female entity going through different stages of life simultaneously, while embracing the grotesque aging female body.

In both films, the symbolic fragmentation and eventual gathering of the female members to join a triad turn into an allegory of the cycle of female aging and its fears as represented by the triad of the Gorgons. As DeFalco (2009) argues, the process of growing old reveals that identity is relational (134), since the visual juxtaposition of the three female bodies displays how the contiguous life stages impinge on each other, thus revealing that the three aging women symbolically belong to the same aging body, which is defined as grotesque, abject and uncanny, but is also eventually acknowledged and embraced.

CONCLUSION

As contemporary horror films, *Hereditary* and *Relic* revolve around three women who belong to different family generations, but are inextricably linked to one another. They become paradigmatic in their use of the classical trope of the Triple Goddess and in their display of elements that associate the female characters with different mythical triads of goddesses. Feminist critics, such as Valerie Mantecon (1993), have argued that the figure of the crone in the Triple Goddess has often been endowed with negative connotations. Conversely, more recently, theorists like Jane Ellen Harrison (2012) have

related the archetype of the Triple Goddess to mythical triads that also acquire positive undertones. In the films analyzed, insofar as they illustrate the archetype of the Triple Goddess and give particular attention to the figure of the older woman, the three female characters in each film present intertextualities with mythical triads evoking fear as embodiments of ancestral dread, like the Graeae, the Erinyes and the Gorgons, but insofar as they are depicted as sources of female empowerment, the women in the films also bring to mind the classical triads of the Charites, the Horae and the Moirai.

The female triads of Ellen-Annie-Charlie in *Hereditary* and of Edna-Kay-Sam in *Relic* become paradigms of the archetype of the Triple Goddess insofar as they bridge the gap among the three members of the triad, as suggestive of the life stages along the course of women's aging process. In particular, the characterization of this triad privileges the figure of the crone, who is portrayed as a complex character that defies stereotypical depictions of female old age, and her presence acquires fundamental significance for the younger members of the triad. As Simone de Beauvoir (1972) claims, "if we do not know what we are going to be, we cannot know who we are: let us recognize ourselves in [...] that old woman" (14), thus bespeaking of the overlapping quality among life stages which prompts us to embrace the aged female Other as our own. The crone is no longer envisioned as an embodiment of termination, but she arises as the endorsement of the cyclical nature of existence, since life stages, as represented by the three women, are not only juxtaposed, but also mutually imbricated. By resorting to the trope of the Triple Goddess through its different female triads, *Hereditary* and *Relic* establish an inherent connection between the figure of the older woman and her younger counterparts, thus constituting a single entity that enacts the female cycle of life.

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Marta Miquel-Baldellou (BA, MA, PhD) is a postdoctoral researcher and a member of the Centre of Literatures and Cultures in English at the University of Lleida. She is currently taking part in a three-year research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. She has also been granted a postdoctoral scholarship to work on a research project in relation to narratology and comparative literature by the Spanish Association of Anglo-North-American Studies (AEDEAN). Her main research areas are comparative literature, popular fiction, film studies, and age studies. She has presented papers at different international conferences, and her articles have been

published in volumes edited by international publishing houses, such as Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Peter Lang, Transcript, Rodopi/Brill, Palgrave Macmillan, and Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. Email: marta.miquel@udl.cat.

FROM HARLEM WITH LOVE: AN ALBUM OF LIFE IN *THE SWEET FLYPAPER OF LIFE*

Leonardo Cascão
University of Coimbra

ABSTRACT

The Sweet Flypaper of Life (1955) is the result of the collaboration between the photographer Roy DeCarava and writer Langston Hughes. Both authors were Harlemites, DeCarava was born in Harlem and Langston Hughes made Harlem his home after moving from Missouri to New York City. This essay intends to explore the ways in which *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* depicts a representation of the neighborhood of Harlem at a time when the Civil Rights Movement was just beginning. It will look at the power that DeCarava's photographs and Hughes' text have on creating a specific visuality of African American life, based on the Harlem community, rendering itself to be seen as a family album. The essay will firstly focus on contextualizing the creation and publication of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* and afterwards offer a reading of the book using the family album metaphor as a form of agency in the acknowledgment of the African American community, focusing its representation in the aestheticization of beauty, thus distancing itself from the social and racial issues that were usually exposed.
Keywords: African American; visual studies; visuality; aesthetics; photography; community.

COMING A LONG WAY

In 1955, the publication of Langston Hughes' *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* followed Brown v. Board of Education, the Supreme Court's outlawing of school racial segregation in the United States, by just a year. The case was deemed one of the cornerstones of the civil rights movement, helping establish the fact that "separate but equal" was not, in fact, equality. The portrayal of discrimination is, however, absent from the narrative, as the book only depicts black people. The narrative takes place at the beginning of the civil rights movement, which gained momentum and expanded into the 1960s — the protests, the black power movement, the "black is beautiful" cultural motto — and the opening line, in the voice of Sister Mary Bradley, shares her will to stay alive and "see what this integration the Supreme Court has done decreed is going to be like" (1).

Given the existing representations of Harlem and the black community at the time, the book works as a countervisuality, which is to say that it positions itself in opposition to most common representations that were presented as the norm, or in

Nicholas Mirzoeff's words, the visuality. Following Mirzoeff's work (2011), "[v]isuality's first domains were the slave plantation, monitored by the surveillance of the overseer, operating as the surrogate of the sovereign" (2) thus forming the pre-established authority of visuality. The intention behind this construction of visuality was to present its authority as self-evident and legitimize its domination. This process is not comprised merely of visual perceptions, but rather it is a discursive practice with material effects of organization, categorization, and segregation. Founded in plantation practice, such visuality separated groups as "means of social organization," to "prevent them from cohering as political subjects," while making this "separated classification seem right and hence aesthetic" (Mirzoeff 2011, 3). Thus, countervisuality is "the means by which one tries to make sense of the unreality created by visuality's authority from the slave plantation to fascism … while at the same time proposing a real alternative … one that depicts existing realities and counters them with a different realism" (4). We find this different realism in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* through its portrayal of familial representations of the neighborhood instead of focusing on the more common exposure of the poor economic and social conditions endured by many African Americans. This notion is reflected by Maren Stange's words (1996), in "'Illusion Complete Within Itself': Roy DeCarava's Photography":

> The *Flypaper* photographs are part of a body of work on the daily life of family and community that was without precedent; no one previously had photographed Harlem "from an artist's sensibility," as Sherry Turner DeCarava points out, "no one who lived there" had photographed DeCarava's neighborhood except with "commercial or documentary intent," and "[n]o one had photographed black people in … [his] manner or even as a subject worthy of art." An early impetus for the project was a desire to photograph his mother's neighbor, and, as Galassi's essay notes, the central sequences on family life were photographed especially in the homes of two families whom DeCarava came to know well. (67)

Even though Roy DeCarava had taken the photographs prior to their compilation in the book, the photographer was not able to get them published until Langston Hughes wrote the text to accompany them. Through his fictional text about an imagined family, narrated by the character of Sister Mary Bradley, Hughes was able to lessen white

audiences' resistance to the pictures while he geared it to an African American sensibility. In his strategy, Hughes is able to appeal to white publishers and the white readership and at the same time speak to African Americans through his "complex network of signifying, conveying meanings that might have escaped many non-African American readers" (Weiner 2012, 156). The result is a piece of work that sold out its first printing of 25.000 pocket-size copies that were soon supplemented by a printing of 10.000 more (Galassi 1996, 22). DeCarava's photographs portray African American daily family life, placing it against the background excitement of the city. African American photographer and filmmaker James Hinton acknowledged DeCarava as the first photographer to devote serious attention to black aesthetic in photography and the black experience in America (Duganne 2008, 187).

In the 1996 retrospective on Roy DeCarava's work, Peter Galassi, curator for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), mentions how Hughes is able to mask the meanings of the images, through the accompanying text he provided them (Galassi 1996, 22), stating that the photographs carry so much meaning that Hughes' text can dilute some of their power. However, understanding how the text influences our reception of the photograph is very helpful to observe the way in which the narrative is relatable to African American audiences and comfortably read by a white readership, as it provides alternative interpretations to pictures by focusing on a familiar story with intercommunity characteristics, i.e., characteristics shared by multiple communities. The consequence of this construction is a book that does not victimize black people but at the same time depicts them realistically, with due aesthetic concerns, but with a textual sentimentality that resonated with a white audience. As Gillian Rose points out (2001), in *Visual Methodologies. An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*, looking carefully at images entails looking at how they offer particular visions of social categories (11), going on to quote John Berger on how images of social difference work not simply by what they show, but also by the kind of seeing they invite (12). More than 20 years before Berger's considerations, DeCarava and Hughes were able to create a piece work that was inviting to a white readership allowing a comfortable

approximation of the realities between communities without overly disturbing the social order of the time.

It is, therefore, important to distinguish what marks the difference between DeCarava's photographic register of the African American community and what other photographers had done before him, whether one is talking about white or black photographers. For this we need to look at black representation in photographic registers made by white people and at black representation in photographic registers made by black people.

As Sonia Weiner summarizes in "Narrating Photography in 'The Sweet Flypaper of Life'" (2012), up until this point, pictures taken by white photographers often included representations of naked slaves, slaves working in the plantations or at the home (tending to the white families' children) and even photographic registers of the lynchings. These registers perpetrated humiliating stereotypes and instilled notions of poverty and displacement. On the other hand, prosperous members of the African American community in the late 19th and early 20th century were eager to show off their status. Yet, their photographic registers had minimal circulation in white mainstream media, being published in local African American papers like *Our World*, *Ebony* and *Sepia* (Weiner 2012, 158).

The collection presented in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* shows a reversal from the 1930s documentary procedures, where quotes and accompanying narrative were used to provide context to the social conditions and regional affiliations of the subjects documented. As Caroline Blinder (2018) points out, DeCarava's photographs of Harlem are more lyrical than informative, rendering an intimate vision of community more usually seen as dispossessed and disenfranchised than as neighbors and equals (194).

DeCarava's endeavor was to distance his work from the documentary form that preceded it and furthered condescending and paternalistic attitudes which deepened the notion of African Americans as the 'Other.' The photographer's artistic focus goes along with Susan Sontag's considerations on the instrumentality of art, "an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility" (Sontag [1966]

2018, 40). I will expand on how DeCarava instrumentalized his art, balancing aesthetics and politics, in the next section.

"TANGLED UP IN LIVING"

The Sweet Flypaper of Life is a reminder of the delicate meanings one can find in art, a fineness of sensibility that eludes a blatantly political reading. Not that DeCarava's images will escape those readings entirely; most of his subjects are black, which means that much of the response to his images will have a sociological impact, addressing the so-called marginalization of the people depicted. But there is no such thing as the marginal in DeCarava's photographs. Women, musicians, vegetation, Harlem: all of it is alive with the experience of being (Als 2019, 67).

What DeCarava did was (re)present African Americans as humans; as a community that was not simply defined by multiple forms of victimization, poverty, and hard life conditions. On top of that, the narrative that Hughes created to frame the photographs is so realistic and convincing that the text can easily be read as factual, granting credibility to Sister Mary's narration, thus deepening the connection with the reader. With *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, DeCarava and Hughes were able to portray a sublimation of life in Harlem through the representation and perspective of its largest community, the African Americans, by building the narrative in ways that differed from the typical negative representations, focusing on positive and familial aspects of the neighborhood.

In its organization, the book consists of 140 pictures spread throughout about 100 pages, in different sizes and framings, each accompanied by text that helps to bring out additional meanings to every photograph. Just like a family album, the book gives the reader a story of the people of Harlem not by following a plotted narrative but by displaying moments and situations charged with descriptive emotion that defines Harlemites in the moments they are captured by the camera: by reopening the pages of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, one can pick-up right where we left of and glimpse at Harlem life then and there.

It is my perspective that reading DeCarava's and Hughes's work as an album can be helpful in establishing the familial connections not just between Sister Mary's relatives, but between the whole community. It is the voice of Sister Mary that claims "I'm proud of me and mine, children, relatives and all! I got some fine people in my family, just like we got some fine people in our race" (34), followed by a small ensemble of photographs of people with artistic professions, like music, acting, and painting, appealing to a cultural sensibility and alluding to the Harlem Renaissance.

When approaching *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* from the aforementioned perspective, I believe it is important to consider the manner in which the captions of the photographs that build fragments of the narrative create a link between the past, the present, and the future. For instance, Sister Mary tells how she can still be persuaded to sing the blues and how, when she does, she remembers her husband and the love she felt for him, comparing it to the love her daughter Melinda feels for her husband, Jerry. By doing so, Sister Mary effects a form of agency that is remote to so many African American women; a form of agency in the telling of her story, and in its more or less hidden meaning, the story of her community: "My blues ain't pretty./ My blues don't satisfy –/ But they can roll like thunder/ In a rocky sky" (45).

Sister Mary's blues are the African American community's blues. They symbolize the community's background of cruel oppression and violent discrimination, but they carry with them a strength, resilience, and endurance, longing to speak louder than an inhumane history. In "Reading the Woman's Face in Langston Hughes's and Roy DeCarava's 'Sweet Flypaper of Life'", Thadious M. Davis (1993) quotes R. Baxter Miller's idea that "what made the black woman central to Hughes' world was her role as griot and keeper of memories" (23). The narrative is intergenerational, not letting go of the memory of a communal past, but maintaining a focus on the changes the future may bring.

The connection with the past is a very deep-rooted African American issue, as historical racial issues are still very present in how they spill into the present. In *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, Barack Obama reflects on how the

African American family carries on its back the weight of a history of oppression, struggle and repulse by the white gaze:

> I saw that my life in America – the black life, the white life, the sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I'd witnessed in Chicago – all of it was connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away, connected by more than the accident of a name or the color of my skin. The pain I felt was my father's pain. My questions were my brothers' questions. Their struggle, my birthright. (Obama [1995] 2004, 430)

So, despite DeCarava's own rendition of his work in artistic terms, it is inevitable to say that *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* has underlying social meanings, conveyed by both image and text. As Carolyn Finney (2014) stated,

> The power that images and words have in stigmatizing a people or community can have far-reaching psychological and material consequences. How one's identity is constructed through representations calls into question whose social realities are maintained and sustained by such representations and who benefits from the perpetuation of these depictions. (67)

Approximating the narrated reality to the audience, DeCarava gives the reader images of the New York subway as the means of transport that "at rush hour mixes everybody – white, black, Gentile, and Jew — closer than you ever are to your relatives" (28). This is a good strategy to instill the notion of closeness to the audience as people do come together at various stages of their life or their day. The African Americans photographed here are not a distant reality to the white readership.

The passage dedicated to the New York subway shows a photograph of a woman at the top of the stairs of the subway (29) which can render more than one interpretation. The older woman is in most likelihood a lower-class worker, someone whose work imposes physical exhaustion on her body, and she has, at the end of her day, to climb the stairs of the subway to make her way home. However, the light is focused on her as the photograph is taken from below. DeCarava is portraying the black will ascending, especially after the outlawing of segregation. The importance of ascending, in terms of social status and respectability, has been represented in African American culture for many years before integration in 1954. Even after the end of

tiresome working days, Sister Mary and many others still make the effort to change from their work clothes to present the best version of themselves at home, exposing the strife for dignity and dignified appearance. In the aftermath of the outlawing of segregation, DeCarava distances the representation of Harlem from prevailing stereotypes of the black community.

DEMYSTIFYING STEREOTYPES — "SOME FOLKS MAKE THE PUZZLE, OTHERS TRY TO SOLVE THEM"

One of the main achievements of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is the demystification or erosion of stereotypes towards African Americans, and the way the book is able to do so through the aestheticization of the life of those represented either through the photographs or the accompanying text. As pointed out before, the prevailing representations of the black community often focused on humiliating stereotypes and on images of violence that strengthened stereotypes and prejudice. The following section focuses on how *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* tackles two of those stereotypes: the myth of the vagrant black father and the subjugation of black women. In its familial, yet complex, depictions and intertwining of characters as fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, grandmothers and neighbors, DeCarava and Hughes create a narrative that helps approximate those characters' lives to the life of anyone who reads them, shining a light upon a majorly black neighborhood which cannot escape racial objectification.

One central point of the narrative is Rodney Belle, one of Sister Mary's grandchildren. He is compared to his brother Chickasaw who, unlike him, has goals of achieving higher status, is hard-working and well adjusted:

> He always goes to work dressed up. Chick's as different from Rodney as day from night. Could dress his self when he was three years old. Gets up early in time to take the bus all the way downtown to work, don't like subways. But Rodney don't hardly get to work at all no kind of way, says daylight hurts his eyes. Never will integrated with neither white nor colored, nor work, just won't. (17)

Once again, the political issue of integration is present, as Sister Mary recognizes her grandchildren's different possibilities towards it. The ability to work and the aspiration to professional success, however, is not stated in racial terms, as Rodney's inability will

not allow him to be integrated with the colored either, conveying the hard-working and endurance facet of the African American community.

In its reconfiguration of racial representation through a focus on positive aspects, the book tackles the issue of the absent black father figure that has been very present in different forms of American media. Throughout the book, there are photographs of fathers spending time with their children, being close to them. Sister Mary gives the example of her son-in-law Jerry, married to her daughter Melinda, who hosts parties every Saturday night. When the party is over and one of the babies cries, Jerry is the one who goes and takes care of it, as he "laughs and loves that child to sleep" (46-49). The whole section displays photographs of Jerry embracing his children, carrying many of them on his lap. Despite the faults he may have, he is a family man "crazy about his children – and his children are crazy about him" (48).

There is, here, a subversive representation to the stereotype of the black, single-parent household, building a counternarrative — something that serves as resistance to hegemonic narratives and stereotypes — to a prejudiced notion that lives to this day, without turning it into a one-leveled issue, but rather showing its complexity by contrasting different realities within the community[1]. The work is also a good example in the subversion of the more common representation of African American women, which is a worthy theme to be explored. After all, the voice of the narrative is female, as it is signed by Sister Mary at the end, displaying her picture in her best clothes: "Here I am" (98). Despite not being ready to die, at that point Sister Mary has declared her old age many times and how tired she is after having worked all her life to take care of her family and extended family, so it is easy to read her character as the typical black

[1] A 2020 article from *The Washington Post* states that "data from the National Center for Health Statistics shows that the majority of black fathers do, in fact, live with their children. The same study also showed that black fathers are more likely to feed, bathe, diaper, dress and play with their children on a daily basis than their white and Hispanic counterparts." The article follows the Dad Gang movement, an initiative that aims to debunk the misconceptions about black fatherhood, created by Sean Williams, a stay-at-home dad, who after being repeatedly congratulated for "sticking around" created an Instagram page to "showcase the reality of black fatherhood and rewrite the narrative," exposing and fighting the racist myth of the missing black father that lives on through an album of family representations. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2020/06/19/dad-posted-joyful-photos-black-fathers-shatter-stereotypes-then-it-became-movement/.

mammy from the more usual representations of African American women up until then. Thus, it can be surprising to regard the photograph of a well-dressed woman, with a brim-hat, jewelry, and a brooch, standing straight in front of a building, not with a defeated look but with a calm semblance and elegant manner.

The same happens with other women depicted in the book. Chickasaw's girlfriend, much like him, is a girl from a respectable family who lives in the building with an elevator (18). In her photograph we see a young woman with posture, empowered, and gazing deeply, penetrating the camera into the eyes of the watcher. Sister Mary's middle daughter is portrayed smiling, joyful and beautiful, not lingering in the failure of her marriage and letting herself be defined by her divorce, "she laughs about that – so I reckon it didn't hurt her none" (33). These are not the prevalent representations of the African American woman in American literature. In literary and photographic depictions black women had been placed at the mercy of white masters and mistresses and of the black men in their lives. The representations of women that we find in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* go against the representations that rooted the victimization of black women in images of passivity, poverty, and subjugation, thus strengthening DeCarava's endeavor to not portray the community from an underprivileged perspective, and fostering my reading of the work as a family album that is focused on positive aspects.

HARLEM STATE OF MIND

The Sweet Flypaper of Life is a love letter to the Harlem community from the perspective of the insiders. Sister Mary, the narrator, is originally from South Carolina, which she is "planning to visit once more before she die[s]" (1) to see how the Supreme Court ruling of integration would work there. The pictures, along with the text, give the viewer a different perspective from life in the South to life in New York.

The rhythm of Harlem is imprinted in the book, both in pictures and text transpiring the motions, the bustle of the city where something is always happening. "New York is not like back down South with not much happening outside. In Harlem something is happening all the time, people are going every which-a-way" (58) — this

is the caption of a photograph of a woman contemplating the streets from her window. A very deep sense of intimacy is created with the people pictured in the book as we enter the living space of the extended family, navigating their lives into tight intimate interior spaces crammed with people. Contrary to Blinder's opinion that by focusing on the interiors the book does not move towards a liberating vision of the African American's desire to break out (197), I believe that its power derives precisely from the blurring of limits between those who are represented and those who watch, as the reader is, in this way, allowed to step into the privacy of the family's home.

It is also a comparison in terms of quality of life and opportunities; New York is more developed than the South in this regard and should offer more opportunities for African Americans. Racial politics are, therefore, not entirely missing from the book. In the descriptive passage (72-84) of how much is going on in the streets, the reader is immersed in photographs of people working in physical jobs like construction and coal-shoving (73-74), people buying and selling, picket lines and street meetings "talking about "'Buy black' … 'Africa for the Africans' … And 'Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hand'" (79-82). The picket lines photograph (79) carries an uncanny resemblance to Margaret Bourke-White's *The Louisville Flood*[2] photograph from 1937, taken after the Ohio River flooded Louisville, Kentucky. Bourke-White's register

> shows African Americans lined up outside a flood relief agency. In striking contrast to their grim faces, the billboard for the National Association of Manufacturers above them depicts a smiling white family of four riding in a car, under a banner reading "World's Highest Standard of Living. There's no way like the American Way. (Whitney Museum)

As a powerful depiction of the gap between the propagandist representation of American life and the economic hardship faced by minorities and the poor" (Whitney Museum).

[2] Whitney Museum of American Art. https://whitney.org/collection/works/8061.

IN CONCLUSION — "SOME JUST SET ON A PARK BENCH … AND HOLD THEIR HANDS"

As *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* reaches its conclusion, the comparison between life in New York and life in the South lingers as Sister Mary mentions how "it's too bad there're no front porches in Harlem" (66). The reader is then guided through a section of photographs (of a man holding a baby, sitting in front steps of a building, an older woman and a young boy leaning on a doorway and an entire family even just sitting in patio furniture in the street, in front of a wall where the phrase "God is Holy Jesus" is written on – perhaps a soft reminder of the more religious environment down South (66-70). Through its textual distinction but photographic approximation with the South, this section provides a solid notion of the sense of community that exists in Harlem, maintaining the idea of an extended family as the foundation and of the book.

In conclusion of this essay, I want to highlight the depth that visual elements provide to literary stories, and vice versa, as a powerful device to shape interpretation. A feeling of belonging can emerge from the values that are formed beyond the understanding of race. DeCarava's and Hughes' work functions as resistance to more common representations of the African American community — as countervisuality and counternarratives —, defying stereotypes and challenging the self-validated authority of the depictions of the community that propagated thus far. The representations at stake focus on aesthetics and sociocultural values that were able to appeal to wider audiences. The choice to portray intimate representations of familial images in DeCarava's photographs weaved through Hughes' accompanying text is a very empowering tool in establishing the African American community's claim for visibility and representation in the United States. *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is a portrait of African American resilience and an album of endurance that places family at the center as the foundation of the community.

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Leonardo Cascão is currently a Research Fellow and PhD candidate in Anglo-American Studies (Literature and Culture) at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University

of Coimbra. His main research interests include English and American literature, film, and drama studies. His current focus is on studies of affect and intimacy in close relation to experiences of citizenship, particularly through the representation of these themes in contemporary English and American life writings. Leonardo also works as a literary translator. Email: leonardo.cascao@uc.pt.

MARGINALISATION AND UTOPIA IN PAUL AUSTER, JIM JARMUSCH, AND TOM WAITS

Adriano Tedde (author)
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Reviewed by Marco Petrelli

Projecting a triumphant future for the United States of America in *Democratic Vistas* (1871), the ever-optimistic bard of the young nation, Walt Whitman, writes: "[America] will be empire of empires, overshadowing all else, past and present, putting the history of old-world dynasties, conquests behind [itself], as of no account—making a new history, a history of democracy, making old history a dwarf—[America] alone inaugurating largeness, culminating time." But this vision of unparalleled grandeur is less totalizing than the previous quote alone might suggest. Whitman also cautioned the States about the "dangerous sea of seething currents, cross and under-currents, vortices—all so dark, untried" that stood between the newborn American democracy and its fullest realization—a perilous path threatened by the evil forces of greed unleashed on the nation by the unfettered capitalism that characterized the Gilded Age. Fast-forward a century or so, and Whitman's hopes turned out to be a rather utopian—and even naive—reverie: the Great Depression and, more recently, the Reaganian dark ages and the subsequent Neoliberal hegemony, have populated America with a mass of destitute, forgotten people purposely barred from the enormous wealth that the financial oligarchies are keeping on amassing. After all, as Nancy Isenberg writes in *White Trash* (2016), American economy has always required an expendable class of workers to feed its cancerous growth.

This shadow America represented by the poor, the downtrodden, the dispossessed and the homeless is at the center of Adriano Tedde's book through three of the most representative artists that, in the 20th and 21st centuries, have dedicated their works to the darker sides of the land of the free: Tom Waits, Jim Jarmusch and Paul

Auster. Through the different media of music, cinema and literature, these authors have given voice to the US demimonde, contributing to a counter-epic of the margins consistently at odds with the triumphalist narrative of American exceptionalism. Drawing from a wide range of sources—spanning from the already mentioned Whitman's *Vistas*, to Scott Sandage's *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (2005)—for his critical framework, and engaging with the classic "Myth and Symbol" tradition of American Studies, Tedde weaves a tight intertextual conversation between Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, showing how their often harsh critique of the United States' barren materialism is also informed by a utopian desire to envision a different America, a society "based on love and togetherness" (2).

In part one of his study, Tedde introduces and defines the core-concept of the book, what—referencing Michael Harrington's eponymous, seminal book on poverty from 1962—he labels the "Other America": "a nation that does not exclude the weak but aim[s] to generate a community […] that evolves 'from 'I' to 'we'"" (14). He then goes on to illustrate how Waits, Jarmusch, and Auster approach this humanity living on the fringes of mainstream society, the "losers, drifters and boozers" who populate the songs, films and novels Tedde dissects looking for common topics and themes. In doing so, he highlights a shared poetics "that pays attention to details and shows respect for those aspects of ordinary life mostly considered insignificant" (29).

In the second part of the book, this underworld, belittled but not at all insignificant, is explored vis-à-vis the magniloquent myth of the American Dream, the master narrative Waits, Auster, and Jarmusch confront and deconstruct through their oeuvres. Tedde breaks down this cumbersome and ubiquitous idea and isolates some of its basic constituents, its mythologems, tracing how the three authors approached them. The chapter presents a discussion on freedom, nature and regeneration, but maybe the most relevant aspect of the American Dream taken into consideration here, at least in relation to the main authors, is the myth of the road—still an untarnished symbol of American progress and optimism. Reconnecting the mythology of the road to its original roots through the classic works of James Truslow Adams—*The Epic of America* (1931)—and Frederick Jackson Turner—"The Significance of the Frontier in

American History" (1893)—and spotting their resurgence and rewritings in the authors' "on-the-road" narratives, Tedde draws an anti-myth of the US westward expansion which he aptly calls the "Road to nothing." The teleology of American exceptionalism is turned into a cul-de-sac, or maybe into a void of uncertainty in which the promises of progress are made null.

But again, in analyzing these stories of lives gone askew, the book makes it clear how Waits, Jarmusch, and Auster are no nihilists—quite the opposite, in fact. Part three, "The Democratic Hero," illustrates how the failures and hardships of the Other America stand as a challenge to the wealth-obsessed national ethos and to the still solid popular belief that everyone is master of their own destiny. By focusing on American wastelands, street life and parables of downward mobility, these authors are working to close the almost metaphysical gap between the haves and the have-nots, questioning "the idea of the otherness of the poor and the existence of a so-called culture of poverty" (111), Tedde explains. Going back once again to the American Renaissance, this time through the philosophical austerity of Henry David Thoreau, the author creates some interesting intertextual connections between the revered thinker and works such as Auster's *Leviathan* (1992), Jarmusch's *Paterson* (2016) and Waits' *Frank's Wild Years* (1987), illustrating how living with "as little as humanly possible" is to be understood as a meaningful rebellion against the oppressive cult of US materialism. The simplicity sought by the maladjusted protagonists of these stories might be dictated by necessity in the first place, but it turns into a civil disobedience of sorts in the long run. "Simplicity," writes Tedde, "eventually leads to the discovery of new or forgotten values that offer an alternative to consumerism" (132). Wealth and success, the weave of the American Dream, are rejected and critiqued through the *oeuvre* of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, and, as Tedde eloquently shows, the attacks to the mainstream US way of life contained in these works, their *pars destruens*, are a first step towards the definition of a more creative stage, a *pars construens* that seeks to infiltrate the monolith of neoliberalism with a poetics able to instill doubts in its Panglossian rhetoric, and, more importantly, to envision, verbalize, and hopefully disseminate a different, better idea of what America, and this world writ large, should be.

Part four, "The Enemy of Conventional Society," is especially preoccupied with textual and aural strategies used by Jarmusch, Auster, and Waits to mirror the state of permanent economic and existential crisis brought about by the Neoliberal age "from Ronald to Donald," as Tedde writes. This section of the book describes how the dismal truth hidden below capitalism's celebratory propaganda is exposed in all its ugliness in Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), *Invisible* (2009) and *Leviathan* (1992); and Jarmusch's "trilogy [...] of material deterioration" (150) comprising *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), *Down By Law* (1986) and *Mystery Train* (1989) among the others novels and films scrutinized by the author. The decay and injustices described by these works, writes Tedde, are "the product of a process of self-destruction that has a long history in America, as long as American history itself" (154). At the core of the novels and films here analyzed there is the refusal to fall in line with the dominant neoliberal paradigm, and impetus which is paired with the will to salvage the detritus produced by such a culture to recycle the material and metaphorical debris discharged by the contemporary modes of production. This is especially evident when it comes to Tom Waits, whom Tedde labels as a "junk collector" (158), and whose unorthodox instrumentation—gathered from rubble and scraps—demonstrates how what is discarded by Neoliberal America (objects, but also people, alternative ways of life, and political stances) can still be used to create art—maybe the quintessential defiance of a market economy centered upon disposable things and planned obsolescence.

And the meaning of an art stubbornly bent on depicting (and dignifying) everything contemporary America deems useless, unworthy or a failure is precisely the point of arrival of Tedde's compelling analysis. The last chapter, titled "Art as resistance," ties together all the threads unfolded throughout the book to reach a *summa* of the social and political value of Jarmusch, Auster and Waits' art. As the author himself writes:

> Weaving fictional stories that pay attention to the marginal realities of the American society, Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits have exposed the contradictions of a capitalist system that increases economic wealth exponentially but cannot assure basic dignified standards of living for all. With their accounts of injustice, poverty, failure, moral and material deterioration,

> these three contemporary artists build their own American resistance against dominant tendencies of selfishness and greed. (167)

Through the words of two radical, fundamental US writers of the 20th century like James Agee and Richard Wright (just a couple of Tedde's numerous and always effective intertextual connections), *Marginalisation and Utopia* ends by declaring that an artist worth of their name should be "a deadly enemy of society," and that any art worth its salt should show its audience "a new and strange way of life." Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch, and Tom Waits have consecrated their art and lives to this mission, and thanks to Adriano Tedde's engaging book, we can now gain a comprehensive understanding of these game-changing authors who, in all their differences, "have always talked [...] with one voice" (1).

Marco Petrelli is assistant professor of American literature at the University of Pisa. He authored *Paradiso in nero* (2020), *Nick Cave. Preghiere di fuoco e ballate assassine* (2021), and several essays on topics such as the American gothic, African American literature, the literature of the US South, Geocriticism, and graphic narratives. His latest essay, "A Theory of Southern Time and Space: Memory, Place and Identity in Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*" was published in *The Southern Quarterly* 58.3. E-mail: marco.petrelli@unipi.it.