

# A Genealogy of Genius in Gertrude Stein's *Four in America*

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the contentious nature of Gertrude Stein's *Four in America* (1947) as an epitome of the fundamental tension at the core of her biography and oeuvre: caught between resistance to the totalizing power of Fascist politics which threatened her as a gendered and racialized subject living in Nazi occupied France and her conservative sympathies, Stein flipped her delicate position into an instrumental one, controversially navigating a grey zone of power and vulnerability and, ultimately, supporting the Vichy regime of Marshal Philippe Pétain. I contend that in *Four in America* Stein appropriates and counters patriarchal history by writing the counter-biographies of four American high-profile figures – a creative act which places a Jewish, female, and lesbian author in charge of the nation's master narrative – but she critiques and reconfigures the canon only to reestablish it through the same male characters; in this sense, she traces a new genealogy of American society while also reproducing the status quo. This condition of powerful vulnerability grants the author the intellectual independence of a genius.

## KEYWORDS

Gertrude Stein, Genius, Modernism, Fascism, Genealogy

*Patriarchal Poetry their history their origin...  
She knew that is to say she had really informed herself.  
Patriarchal poetry makes no mistake...  
(Gertrude Stein, "Patriarchal Poetry")*

In June 1945, Gertrude Stein and her partner, Alice B. Toklas, went on a tour of Germany along with the American GIs who had been the victors in the War; an experience which the author reports in the subsequent issue of *Life* magazine in an article entitled "Off We All Went to See Germany." Stein's text is accompanied by some pictures taken during the journey, including the closing one in which Stein and a few American soldiers are portrayed at Hitler's retreat in Berchtesgaden making the Nazi salute. Stein describes this visit as "more than funny it was absurd and yet so natural" (57). The jocular atmosphere is somewhat mentioned as the reason why they "all got together and pointed as Hitler had pointed" (57), yet it is hard for us to make sense of this performance: it is a display of power in which the Nazi salute is re-contextualized into the American victory, a realignment which is "absurd" but also "natural."<sup>1</sup>

I argue that this perplexing image epitomizes a fundamental tension at the core of Stein's biography and oeuvre: caught between resistance to the totalizing power of Fascist politics which threatened her as a gendered and racially vulnerable subject living in Nazi-occupied France and her conservative sympathies, Stein flipped her delicate position into an instrumental one, controversially navigating a grey zone of power and vulnerability and, ultimately, supporting the Vichy regime of Marshal Philippe Pétain. The controversial direction to which she metaphorically – and in the case of the picture literally – points intertwines hegemonic and counter-hegemonic stances, reactionary and progressive forces, and may be identified in a number of Stein's works as well.<sup>2</sup> This article investigates

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars stressed the feminist over the reactionary intent of this political gesture, such as Jean Gallagher, who sees it as "an impulse toward mimetic and iconographic outrage" (146).

<sup>2</sup> Stein is famous for her experimental texts which defied current narrative norms, yet her literature is ultimately conservative, when not overtly reactionary, in content, be-

the contentious nature of *Four in America* (written intermittently over the 1930s and published posthumously in 1947) as a particularly effective instance of power negotiation between the oppressive agent (the normative apparatus) and a potentially endangered subject (Stein herself). In *Four in America* Stein appropriates and counters patriarchal history by writing the counter-biographies of four American high-profile figures – a creative act which places a Jewish, female, and lesbian author in charge of the nation's master narrative – but she critiques and reconfigures the canon only to reestablish it through the same male characters; in this sense, she traces a new genealogy of American society while also reproducing the status quo.

My analysis spotlights these two divergent dynamics within the text: on the one hand, the *generation* of models challenging patriarchy, heteronormativity, and other relative hierarchies and, on the other, the *reproduction* of unfair power structures. Building on the notion of genealogy, I will also pay particular attention to Stein's construction of the idea of genius, a loaded theoretical and hermeneutic category which she endorses and transforms, but also a word with the same etymological root as genealogy. Stein's narrative revision of facts in *Four in America* is a genealogy of a distinct history but also of a controversial attitude embracing and rejecting, ultimately intertwining power and vulnerability; although she is a vulnerable subject, she assumes the authority to generate a distinct narrative of nation-building, but she employs this power to reproduce the existing ethos. The insistence on the system of genealogy draws upon the etymological root *gene*, meaning "to give birth," with biological implications which are inescapably female, though many of its derivatives have been historically associated with political governance and, hence, with maleness. The particle *gene* links together words as diverse as "genealogy," "gender," "genre," and "genius," thus accounting for the complexity of Stein's political and intellectual stance.<sup>3</sup>

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cause it reproduces traditional power structures. Her choice of unconventional forms and revolutionary genres does not match the political and cultural authority she wishes to perpetuate. See, for instance, Rachel Galvin's analysis of Stein's "idiosyncratic poetics" and "Modernist reactionism" in "Gertrude Stein, Pétain, and The Politics of Translation."

<sup>3</sup> My critique will gloss over the ethical implications of such a stance to try and look into the grey zone of life in Nazi-occupied territories without preconceptions, I will be

The scholarly debate over the interconnection between Stein's politics and poetics may be roughly divided into two main strands: critics such as Marianne DeKoven and Lisa Ruddick interpret Stein's production as fundamentally feminist and deconstructive,<sup>4</sup> while others, including Wanda Van Dusen, Janet Malcom, Rachel Galvin, and Barbara Will suggest that her reactionism may be found not only in her ambiguous relations with Fascism, but also in some of her literary undertakings – most explicitly, her translation of Marshal Pétain's speeches and the relative introduction, a text on which I will return later on. Beyond this interpretive spectrum, Brenda Wineapple proposes “to reconceive the place of moral questions in art and aesthetics,” factoring in a kind of political disenfranchisement which she sees as typically Modernist, as well as the actual impossibility of settling these ethical questions regarding Stein's life without resorting to “unsubstantiated speculation, psychobabble and jargon” (“The Politics of Politics” 43). While I agree that Stein's political ambiguity is no exception in canonic Modernism, I believe that her case is particularly noteworthy – at least, as far as American authors are concerned – because her vulnerable position in Nazi-occupied France made her conservative views and the relationships she entertained with French collaborationists exceptionally puzzling and, consequently, still open to debate.

Against this theoretical background, my article is interested in looking at one of Stein's most cryptic texts by interrogating its politics of representation as possibly imbricated in the author's personal connections with reactionary stances, while also taking into consideration the historical framework in which it was written. I argue that since *Four in America* was produced within a complex interstice in which power and subversion coexisted, it reproduces the same intellectual structure within the text; on the one hand, the narrative employs a technical transgression of the

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careful in addressing ideological issues when dealing with personal trajectories and public ramifications which were “marked by idealism, commitment, and hope as well as by narrow-mindedness, fear, and often deadly compromise,” perceived as life-saving (Will, *Unlikely Collaboration* 21).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, DeKoven's reading of Stein's experimental prose as “open-ended, anarchic, irreducibly multiple” and, for these qualities, an alternative to “the privileged language of patriarchy” which is, instead, “linear, orderly, closed, hierarchical” (xiii, xiv).

biographical code, an effort that can be seen as subversive, but, on the other hand, its subject confirms and reinforces the canonical understanding of a national genealogy as inescapably male. Therefore, her text comes across not only as cryptic but also encrypting, implicitly pointing to the entanglement of bibliography and biography as controversial but also crucial and, for this reason, it will be investigated in what follows.

So far, Barbara Will's *Unlikely Collaboration. Gertrude Stein, Bernard Fay, and the Vichy Dilemma* (2011) has been the most extensive study of Stein's fascist implications and collaboration with the Vichy regime. Such an investigation has necessarily at its center the unfinished manuscript of Stein's translated pages of Pétain's speeches. According to Will, "[t]hey are evidence of a propaganda project in support of Vichy France that Stein began in 1941, one she hoped somehow to sell to a skeptical American public" (xiii). Through her research, Will found out that it was at the suggestion of Bernard Faÿ, a Vichy official and a close friend of Stein's, that the author agreed to translate a set of these speeches into English and tried to have them published in the US.<sup>5</sup> Faÿ played an important role in Stein's perceived and actual vulnerability, and he seems to have enabled the power she eventually acquired to push back against such a condition. An ideologue of the Action Française and of its hatred for those who were considered anti-patriotic, including Jews and foreigners, Faÿ studied at Harvard, became the first professor of American Studies in France and the director of the Bibliothèque Nationale under the collaborationist Vichy government. In fact, the US retained a special status in Faÿ's political imagination:<sup>6</sup> Stein described him as "a French college professor only like so many Frenchmen the contact with Americans during the war made the romance for them" (*Everybody's Autobiography* 106). Most of all, he was, according to Toklas, Stein's "dearest friend during her life," since they met in 1926 till her death in 1946 (Will, *Unlikely Collaboration* xiii).

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<sup>5</sup> Stein's translations were never published in the US. In fact, Bennett Cerf, Stein's editor, handwrote on the copy of the introduction he had received from Stein: "For the records. This disgusting piece was mailed from Belley on Jan. 19, 1942" (Van Dusen 70).

<sup>6</sup> This is also evident from a piece he wrote for *The Harvard Graduate's Magazine* in 1920, where he describes the US as a nation of people "made of joys, of confidence, and of universal ambition" (Will, *Unlikely Collaboration* 35).

Stein began writing *Four in America* some years into her friendship with Fay. Despite being written after 1932, a period when her work became less innovative and experimental (DeKoven xiii-xvi), *Four in America* is an example of Stein's "unquestionably progressive" writing and "radically antiauthoritarian, antipatriarchal poetics" (Will, *Unlikely Collaboration* 53, 20). Following the example set by prominent male predecessors such as Plutarch (*Parallel Lives*, second century AD) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (*Representative Men*, 1849), who canonized some male historical figures through rhetorical discourses with an educational purpose, in her work Stein selects four founding fathers of the US as a nation and an ideal – Ulysses Grant, Wilbur Wright, Henry James, and George Washington – and reimagines their lives and their roles in American society and culture, thus appropriating their names and powers. She begins by displacing these men from their historical solidity, and then shifts "them from that past tense to her speculating subjunctive, putting them into the play of her meditative questioning" (Schmitz 754).

I believe the relocation of these personalities onto the ontologically dependent level of fiction is an important antipatriarchal act which empowers Stein as a female author. Despite her acknowledgement of the gendered norms defining a genre like the biography, which led her to choose only men, she manages in her *fictional* accounts to gain authority (and, thus, control) over their lives, making their very existence depend on her imaginative act. She showcases this fictional framework with metaliterary remarks and a prose always in-the-making, constantly doing, undoing, and redoing itself as the characters' lives. In the words of Thornton Wilder, who wrote the introduction to *Four in America*, the book is "being written before our eyes; she does not, as other writers do, suppress and erase the hesitations, the recapitulations [...] She gives us the process" (xiv). This is a rhetorical strategy which emphasizes her authority in creating a new genealogy through these figures reproduced and canonized as geniuses – a performative and political operation placing her in control of the criteria which account for a genius. Wilder also notes that the notion of authority is key in Stein's text, raising questions about creative agency, authorship, and "the relations between personality and genius" (xv).

In a number of her works, Stein returns over and over again on the

definition of genius as associated with personality. For her it is essentially a gendered category, which has to do with fluidity nonetheless: she famously defines herself as belonging to this category, despite stating that it is “maleness [that] belongs to genius,” a statement followed by the interrogative phrase “Moi aussie, perhaps” (qtd. in Will, *Gertrude Stein* 58). On this matter, Stein is in accordance with the parameters of the category of genius as theorized by Otto Weininger in *Sex and Character* (1903):<sup>7</sup> while “genius is linked with manhood, that it represents an ideal masculinity in the highest form” (113), “homosexuality in a woman is the outcome of her masculinity and presupposes a higher degree of development” (66), meaning that Stein’s homosexuality may have been instrumental in granting her the same intellectual status as men and, hence, the same potential to be a genius. In *Everybody’s Autobiography* (written in the same years as *Four in America*, published in 1937), Stein further interrogates the connection between genius and gender, drawing a comparison between herself and her brother in which she subversively binds genius to personality, rather than to gender:

Slowly and in a way it was not astonishing but slowly I was knowing that I was a genius and it was happening and I did not say anything but I was almost ready to begin to say something. [...] I was the genius, there was no reason but I was, and he was not there was a reason for it but he was not and that was the beginning of the ending and we always had been together and now we were never at all together. (79-80)

Although she is a woman and her brother a man, Stein defines herself as the genius in the family and presents this declaration as the reason why she eventually parts ways with him. By going against conventional gender roles, Stein claims for herself the authority to say who and what a genius is, a powerful accomplishment which, in turn, seems to designate

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Will argues that Stein was “enthusiastic” about Weininger and, ultimately, it is in his discussion of genius where his influence on the author is most notable. See *Gertrude Stein*, 63-67.

her as a genius. Indeed, performing this cultural shift she demonstrates the intellectual independence associated with genius by several theorists, including William James (Stein's professor of psychology at Radcliffe College) and Emerson.<sup>8</sup> In particular, in his famous essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson identifies the cypher of genius in "the faculty of perceiving in an unhabitual way" (234), as Stein does in defying gender norms and perceiving herself as a genius despite conventional wisdom. By presenting herself as a genius she becomes one, granting herself the autonomy and authority to establish her persona within a superior intellectual realm.

Along the lines of self-determination, Stein's gradual awakening in *Everybody's Autobiography* crafts a new personality as well as a new idea of genius. The "something" she is "ready to begin to say" seems to be something which begins, which hasn't been said yet ("I did not say anything"); it is the beginning of something new, it is the right to begin to say something new, it is a shift from the passivity of the past ("I did not say anything") to the generative potential of the present as a beginning. It is a new genealogy of herself as a genius, a narrative breaking away from the definitions imposed on her by patriarchal and racist institutions – it is the "unhabitual" (to quote William James) genealogy of a new form of genius in general. Through her notoriously cryptic language, Stein acquires a new self in/for being a genius, a feminine genius which, in Julia Kristeva's understanding, is "the breakthrough that consists in going beyond the situation" (220), and, I would add, it is the defiance of long-established tenets in independently developing an alternate genealogy reshuffling gender- and race-based hierarchies. In this sense, the terms genius and genealogy, with their ideological implications, seem to be articulations of the root *gene* retrieving its semantics linked to maternity and femininity, as opposed to power and patriarchy. Moreover, since the forms in which

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<sup>8</sup> "Genius means little more than the faculty of perceiving in an unhabitual way." William James 195 (1892). See also Emerson: "I read the other day some verses written by an eminent painter which were original and not conventional. The soul always hears an admonition in such lines, let the subject be what it may. The sentiment they instill is of more value than any thought they may contain. To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, – that is genius" (234).



Stein develops her genius put pressure on the codified understanding of gender and literary genre, this further interference is strictly linked to her retrieving the root *gene* as female begetting, thus engendering a counter-hegemonic “genealogy of the woman,” which, in a patriarchal society, “has been collapsed into the man’s” (Irigaray 3). In this regard, Stein’s breakthrough is a beginning, she is ready to begin to say, to narrate a distinct genealogy of the feminine genius by means of gender and generic shifts and through the exploitation of male characters: by rewriting the founding fathers’ lives she flips gender power relations and rewrites the genre of biography too.

One may argue that Stein’s conception of genius is devised with an essentially antipatriarchal purpose. Indeed, in several texts, including *The Making of Americans* (1925) and *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937), she addresses the theoretical and genealogical archetype of the father in dismal tones, grounding it in mere tradition and questioning its logic.<sup>9</sup> The critical edge of her reflections is the analogy Stein points out between biological and political fathers; on some occasions she equates national leaders to fathers, thus calling into question the very structure of patriarchal society:

Fathers are depressing, [...] [t]here is too much fathering going on just now and there is no doubt about it fathers are depressing. Everybody nowadays is a father, there is father Mussolini and father Hitler and father Roosevelt and father Stalin and father Lewis and father Blum and father Franco is just commencing now and there are ever so many more ready to be one. Fathers are depressing. (*Everybody’s Autobiography* 136-37)

In this iteration of political genealogy Stein recognizes a “depressing” nature; “there is too much fathering,” too many male politicians which her paratactic and repetitive syntax makes all the same, all “fathers.” The

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, *The Making of Americans* begins with the image of “an angry man” dragging “his father along the ground through his own orchard” (5). Nation-building, or the building of national identity seem to constantly rely on the figure of the (dismissed) father.

subversive message of this view is supported by Stein's unconventional narrative form and her playful usage of literary genres;<sup>10</sup> this is a double reconsideration of gendered and generic tropes within both the form and the content of her writings which further propels Stein's self-identification as a genius, meaning a self-reliant, "unhabitual" thinker. In this regard, she defends "the uniqueness of 'who' an individual is (as against his various determinations, or 'what' he is) which was threatened by various forms of totalitarianism" (Kristeva 222).<sup>11</sup>

However, Stein's defiance of intellectual totalitarianisms is often mitigated by her involvement in conservative circles and her ultimate implementation of a hierarchical comprehension of society; it is as if she aims at carving out a niche for herself within the male canon rather than dismantling it for good by denying any kind of order. And yet I believe that Stein's stance is more complex than this, factoring in several philosophical principles and practical assumptions pertaining to the existential self-perception of a queer woman of Jewish descent living in Vichy France. As such, she was a particularly vulnerable subject – she and Toklas could have been seriously harmed were it not for her personal connections and political affiliations – who must have ruminated on her unsafe condition besides and in relation to her understanding of power relations and empowering actions. In Stein's case, the threat of a *vulnus*, understood as a suffered wound, becomes the presumed motivation for supporting an unjust government inflicting wounds on others. Her positionality swings between the poles of a problematic moral code, made of multiple vulnerabilities, intersectional exclusions and inclusions,

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<sup>10</sup> At the heart of *Everybody's Autobiography* is a parodic appropriation of the form, content, and style of autobiography as she did with *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* before. Nora Doyle contends that in the latter Stein played with the genre of the domestic memoir, "a specifically feminine form of autobiography that was popularized in the nineteenth century and [...] often took the form of a dual narrative of the domestic life of the author and the intellectual trajectory and genius of her husband" (44).

<sup>11</sup> Another interesting connection between Stein's personal life and *Four in America* is traced by Edward Burns and Ulla Dydo who notice that "[w]hen, in *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein said that fathers were depressing, she was thinking not only of her own father but also of Wilder's" (xvi). Indeed, by the time Stein was writing *Four in America*, Wilder had become a close friend of hers and his father was slowly dying.

and subversive gains of power, within which she manages to carve a space for discursive practices plotting her own emancipation. In so doing, Stein seems to reject and yet embrace her potential vulnerability, inhabiting a peculiar condition of powerful vulnerability: when she appropriates and rewrites the historically and theoretically loaded concept of genius by being the author of the made-up biographies of important male figures, she is also in control of their lives, and although she adheres to patriarchal norms and canons, she reclaims for herself a generative space equal to the geniuses' she sketches. Her vulnerability is similarly interstitial, sustained by the friction between opposing forces, simultaneously cause and effect of power structures in which her freedom and self-expression are implicated in the very reactionary background that made them possible. Therefore, Stein may have resorted to the very category of genius as an exceptional position allowing her to go against both the dogmatic identity associated with her genealogy in terms of gender, religion, sexual orientation, and nationality (which would normally prevent her from being a genius), and the fixed authority of fathers as male leaders. It follows that Stein's antidogmatic and antiauthoritarian prose asserting reactionary stances is impossibly ambiguous, as cryptic as her style.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The intricacy of Stein's rhetorical resistance and thematic conformity is dwelled on by Judith Halberstam as well, in relation to the definition of Stein as a queer subject. In this regard, Halberstam's theory of queerness proves to be an interesting way to look at how Stein undoes clear-cut distinctions and a phenomenological lens to uncover her counter-hegemonic formulations. According to Halberstam, "the possibility of rethinking the meaning of the political through queerness" is substantiated "by embracing the incoherent, the lonely, the defeated, [...] the contradictory and complicit narratives [...] in the past as in the present" (148); in other words, he suggests queerness can be a paradigm to address incongruous and puzzling questions without setting them straight. Halberstam briefly discusses Stein's case in the chapter dedicated to "Homosexuality and Fascism" in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) in which he dwells on power and what he calls "classificatory dominance" as instrumental to shed some light on the analytical and ethical entanglements and on the hybridity at the core of Stein's texts, framing them as generative without resolving their ideological tensions. For this reason, I believe that this theoretical scheme may allow a broader comprehension of the collision between Stein's performed, imposed, and negotiated identities, as well as of her elusive prose, without settling their contradictions.

In the next section, I will discuss *Four in America* as an antiauthoritarian yet conservative example, because it portrays Stein's powerful vulnerability, intertwining the genealogy of herself as a creative genius and the reproduction of old patriarchal precepts. In this sense, it reveals how the power she enjoys is limited by a number of socio-religious and gender components which cannot but impact her public thought and its moral stakes. Her powerful vulnerability is also the factor which holds her accountable for using her cultural and media influence to support and collaborate with the very dominant structures imperiling her – an operation of “conservative resignification” which projects the ideological subversion back into accepted meanings to amplify its authority, thus being “immanent to power” and not in “a relation of external opposition to” it (Butler 15). Of the four different counter-biographies included in Stein's work, I will focus on George Washington's, in which the juxtaposition of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic instances is more evident. Besides, the first US President is the figure Stein most explicitly identifies as “a father.”

Stein resignifies Washington as the patriarch of American letters, although she repeatedly describes him as: “first in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen,” (*Four in America* 162) a political definition she would later tweak and employ for Pétain in the introduction to her translation of his speeches. In this latter text, in order to make the American public sympathize with the Marechal, Stein resorts to the figure of Washington and to the symbolisms of military life and national pride:

We in the United States until just now have been spoiled [spoiled] children. Since the civil war until today, when the action of Japan has made us realise the misery the grief and the terror of war, all this time because we have tender hearts we have always felt for others and helped them all we could but we did not understand defeat enough to sympathise with the French people and with their Marechal Petain, who like George Washington, and he is very like George Washington because he too is first in war first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen, who like George Washington has given them courage in their darkest moment held them together through their times of desperation and has always told them the truth and in telling them

the truth has made them realise that the truth would set them free.  
 ("Introduction to the Speeches" 93)

The emphasis on "the misery of grief," "the terror of war," and "tender hearts" mobilizes the emotional sphere for nationalist purposes, while the protagonist, be it Pétain or Washington, is described as capable of giving "courage" and holding the people together, like a father. According to Van Dusen, Stein performs a "sacralization of the Maréchal as national savior and benevolent father" which succeeds in masking Pétain's role as a Nazi collaborationist (75); this narrative portrait familiarizes Pétain for the American public through the figure of the founding father, but Van Dusen always stresses the influence which "Stein's vulnerability as a racially marked foreign resident" may have had on this complimentary parallel (70).<sup>13</sup>

Consistently with the idea of nationalism, Washington is portrayed as "the father of his country" as early as the second page of the account (Stein, *Four in America* 162), and the phrase is then repeated twice. When it first appears, it immediately precedes the definition of "first in war first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen" discussed above, while on the second occasion, the passage reads: "George Washington was and is the father of his country. No not by themselves they will be unknown. Autumn scenery is beautiful and it is regularly satisfied as an occasion. They will occasionally visit me" (163); here the emphasis seems to be on the inclusion of several tenses ("was and is") and of different subjects: the "unknown" selves and, crucially, the narrator, "me." The subsequent occurrence begins too with a reference to the author herself and with a self-legitimizing statement:

I can say what I have to say. George Washington did not write a play.  
 He wrote at a novel every day. He who was the father of his country.

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<sup>13</sup> In this sense, for some critics Stein's translation shows "compositional submissiveness" and concedes "authority, interpretation, and interrogation to the voice of Pétain" (Will, *Unlikely Collaboration* 140). For others, the text reflects Stein's own interest in securing protection for herself and Toklas (Galvin 270).

I wish to say all I think about pleasant scenes which are not scarce nowadays.

George Washington was fairly famous because he wrote what he saw and he saw what he said. And this is what I do. And so what do I do.

I say he wrote what said he did. (168)

The fact that Stein imagines “the father of his [and her] country” as somebody who writes and creates narratives as she does, suggests that she believes her enterprise to be fundamental, even foundational, as in the expression “founding father.” Not coincidentally, Washington’s biography contains a section called “Or a History of the United States of America,” possibly implying that those who are in charge of “history” are not only those “first in war,” but also those who get to write it.

In the first part of Washington’s alternate biography, “Scenery and George Washington. A Novel or a Play,”<sup>14</sup> Stein elaborates on her speculation on Washington as a writer, somebody “who knows what a novel is” (207). Like the other counter-lives she writes, the chapter about Washington is consistently metanarrative: as noted by Wilder, the act of imagining a different genealogy is presented as a process and not a result, a rhetorical strategy amplifying the possibilities of her generative power. Consider the following example: “George Washington was not meant for two. Now think what a novel is. All you who know think do try do think what a novel is. George Washington knew. He knew it too. He did know what a novel is, and he was used to it. He was very well planned to be used to it” (Stein, *Four in America* 191). A possible interpretation pauses on the idea that Washington was “used” to novels, meaning *accustomed* to fiction but, conversely, it could also be as in *employed* to narrative ends. That is, is Washington the novelist an author or a character, or is he both (“planned to be used to it”)? And what is Stein’s role in this transaction? Is she passively commenting on Washington’s fictional personality or actively using him for her personal gain, as she may have done in the case of the introduction to Marshal Pétain’s speeches? In regard to the (re)production of literature,

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<sup>14</sup> Washington’s counter-biography was originally published in 1932 as a stand-alone piece with this title in *Hound and Horn*, vol. 5.

it may be interesting to compare these considerations about Washington and “what a novel is” with an excerpt from the counter-life of Henry James, whom Stein transforms from a writer into a general (thus performing a sort of identity swap between him and Washington). In the following text, Stein raises questions about the connection between writer and audience and, most importantly, she asks whether the audience, broadly conceived, may affect or change the author, once again amplifying the possibilities of one’s imaginative acts:

This brings me to the question of audience of an audience.  
What is an audience. [...]  
Do you know who hears or who is to hear what you are writing and how does that affect you or does it affect you.  
That is another question.  
If when you are writing you are writing what some one has written without writing does that make any difference. [...]  
On the other hand if you who are writing know what you are writing, does that change you or does it not change you. (121)

Hence, at the core of Washington’s and James’ fictional accounts lies a reflection on literature and on authorship/authority and the ways in which they interact with external factors, such as contextual purposes and audiences – in other words, on how a writer’s biography can influence their bibliography. The references to “affect” and “change” further blur the lines defining the notion and/or the identity of the author, expanding the possibilities to conceive of new, multilayered literary genealogies. Yet this potentially synergic understanding of authorship reproduces the *exempla* of a military general turned into a male author and the opposite; at least at the level of content, there is no generation of a founding “mother.”

The artificial construction of the text is even more amplified when looked at against an intertextual background. In *Everybody’s Autobiography* Stein comments on the writing process of *Four in America* and the subsequent efforts to have it published:

I was beginning writing and I began to write the *Four in America*. I was bothered about it. I have always been bothered but mostly I’m

bothered because after all I do as simply as it can as commonplacely as it can say what everybody can and does do I never do know what they can do, I really do not know what they are, I do not think that any one can think because if they do then who is who. And anyway except in daily life nobody is anybody. So in the *Four in America*, I took four Americans, Washington, Henry James, Wilbur Wright and general Grant, and I wanted them to be what their names would be. (109)

She presents herself as somebody who “really do[es] not know what [the four Americans] are,” so much so that establishing “who is who” may be difficult and, in fact, “nobody is [actually] anybody” when disengaged from their “daily life.” This inferred cognitive blank empties the four biographies of their individuality and turns them into imaginative potential (“I wanted them to be what their names would be”). This take signals the constructiveness of this narrative enterprise and of this act of female empowerment through the begetting of new lives (“I want them to be”), while in the use of the conditional (“would be”) lies the potential for the new genealogy, as well as the frailty of the counter-narrative.

Overall, the text of *Four in America* encourages readers to interpret and deconstruct it through its metaliterary structure and the Steinian use of repetitions, assonances, and rhymes:

This is a novel too.  
 This is what George Washington knew.  
 He did not know it there but he knew.  
 And if in any way there is no way.  
 There is no way in which there is any way.  
 His way.  
 It is all too precautions.  
 But no change where.  
 I could I would I should.  
 They may as well care.  
 Fall means fall or fallen.  
 But any novel is true.  
 And they like out loud with clouds. (196)



Stein outs the text as fiction (“this is a novel too”) and Washington as being aware of being a fictional character. Yet, “any novel is true” and, at this point, the epistemic status is impossible to determine: is Stein’s fictional biography of Washington true? The novel seems to be as real as life, because it is depicted as a truthful equivalent: “George Washington might be some one and that one was one who was not the one. So George Washington can lose one lose one as a name. And then there. A novel is there” (197).<sup>15</sup> In other words, a founding father “might be someone who was not the one,” and, then, a new genealogy “is there.”

Stein’s narrative is performative, giving birth to new lives; it is a gender-charged discursive site in which she becomes the mother of new patriarchs, marking the beginning of a new genealogy of American culture and revising its authorial constructs. Corroborating the idea of generation through narration is, again, her insistence on beginnings: “All this is in the beginning not all the truth. But George Washington was not begun. And so and so to speak it is the truth” (214); equally important is her reiteration of images of birth: “In this light he was as young as young as a novelist is. He may well be well born. And he. He is” (192). Interestingly, Stein includes even a cross-species counter-genealogy: “If it is possible to know that a monkey came down from a man not a man from a monkey and this is so as perhaps it is so that when they find a man in America surrounded by elephants and reptiles and others there is no monkey. And this is the background of America from George Washington [...] How they are capable to have it change” (206). To a certain extent, this reflexive trait undermines the dominant position Stein occupies as the author of the counter-biography. But it is the eventual reproduction of fathers as *exempla* which most radically endorses the patriarchal system she seems to overturn, thus designing the generative power she enjoys as always already vulnerable to male supremacy. Nonetheless, Stein shows the ability to think in an “unhabitual” way, distancing herself from the status quo, as geniuses do.

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<sup>15</sup> The significance of names (and of nouns in general) as placeholders for one’s identity is a key trait of Stein’s prose. Cf. also with a passage from “Patriarchal poetry their origin their history their origin:” “Patriarchal Poetry in pieces. Pieces which have left it as names which have left it as names to to all said all said as delight. Patriarchal poetry the difference” (263).

I have investigated Stein's powerful vulnerability; from the position of a subject who, despite her class and economic privilege, came to occupy a precarious position under Nazi rule, she found not only narrative but also political solutions to regain her safety and, thus, plot her freedom. Stein's collection of counterfactual biographies in *Four in America* can be interpreted as the genealogy of counter-hegemonic identities and poetics which go beyond the gender and generic paradigms of the patriarchal society. Yet these revised entities are in fact imbricated in disturbingly hegemonic power structures because they negotiate their foundations in order to maintain their rhetorical and political capital while challenging only some ideological tenets. In this sense, Stein employs her authority to generate new alternatives while also reproducing old precepts. In conclusion, the photo showing Stein and the American soldiers making the Nazi salute at Hitler's retreat seems to (inadvertently) showcase the performative appropriation of symbols (as of narrative codes) through which Stein has been able to flip adverse contingencies to her advantage, as well as the unnerving vicinity between her and Nazi-Fascism.

### **AUTHOR'S BIONOTE**

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