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Introduction: A Vocabulary of Reclaim

Fredric Jameson's reflections on Henry James in his groundbreaking book *The Political Unconscious* (1981) made abundantly clear that the shaping of an aesthetics for the novel bespeaks a specific cultural formation, that is, it amounts to "a genuinely historical act" (209). The form of a novel, thus, cannot be uncoupled from an idea of culture and society: it both mirrors the cultural system and the ethical values that contain it and fosters an ongoing reflection on them which might contribute to their change. This is the conceptual context against which we would like to read and present this special section: a bottom-up reflection on the ideas that shape the cultural system of the new millennium and their structuring vocabulary.

As our call for papers maintained, the purpose of our "mapping" was to present the main theories, forms and themes currently emerging in contemporary US novels. We are aware that such a scope might be considered too ambitious. It may also be easily argued that only distance allows for this kind of mapping or that our belonging in the landscape we want to map could compromise clarity, let alone objectivity. We hope, however, that despite the limits this ambition and this lack of distance entail, our mapping can still create a space for productive explorations and for important (if difficult) questions. In other words, this special section does not aim at providing a comprehensive map. Nevertheless, we believe that it can present an interesting starting point to reflect on the very notion of post-postmodernism, or, more broadly, on the cultural system of the New Millennium as it is articulated in contemporary American novels.

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Each one of the seven essays collected here reveals some of the themes, forms and theories worth presenting as significant "historical acts" and thus currently contributing to the creation of, borrowing Raymond Williams's famous expression, the "structure of feeling" of the present tense American novel. In Williams' view, feeling precedes thought but should be read as shaping a structure, concretizing the affective core, the underlying skeleton that sustains and allows more systematic definitions. We thus propose to read the articles of this special section as attending to emergent trajectories that are viewed by the contributors as having a certain representativeness.

Together, the essays collected in this issue are first and foremost representative of a lively debate (see, among others, Basseler and Nünning 2019; van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen 2017; Rudrum and Stravis 2015; Holland 2013; Moraru 2011; Kirby 2009; Green 2005) concerning the contours of literary histories, canon-formation and, more broadly, but relatedly, the definition of what comes after postmodernism.

The most obvious feature that surfaces is heterogeneity thanks to a choice of primary texts written by very diverse authors, including Don DeLillo, Denis Johnson, Sam Lansky, Valeria Luiselli, H.M. Naqvi, William T. Vollmann, Jesmyn Ward, Hanya Yanagihara, that are read through different critical lenses, such as transnationality, intermediality, queer theory, memory studies, theories of autofiction and theories of the post-postmodern. It is nonetheless possible to detect a transversal cultural concern which gives this diversification a common denominator, or, to return to Williams, a consonant feeling. We locate it in the downplaying of the prefix post- and the contextual amplification of the prefix re- to create what we might term a vocabulary of reclaim. This umbrella term tries to capture the tendency to resort to various verbs that articulate the need to engage *again* in acts of cultural definitions which are crucially interwoven with a reflection that concerns identity at times ethnically or racially or sexually inflected or autofictionally refracted. The verbs are worth listing because they detail the generic expression we have proposed – a vocabulary of reclaim: redefine, reframe, rewrite, reposition, remap, reestablish, reinvent, redirect, to which we must add the powerful noun rememory so dear to Tony Morrison.

If the novel is to be viewed as the place of the representation of experience, the kind of experiences depicted in the novels chosen by our contributors

follow a clear movement: away from the universalizing of a generic subject into the specificities of individuals and experiences that are recognized as Americans in spite – or we should say – because of their peripheral positioning. Then, macroscopically speaking, postmodernism looms large in the background, be it in terms of a still vital repository of crucial insights, be it as a metaphorical force of disruption and deconstruction. The legacy of the blurring of generic boundaries, most notably the fiction-nonfiction divide, for example, can be found in more than one contribution. On the other hand, we can detect a shared need to (re-)appropriate a more affective tonality which diffuses intersubjective cynicism and manifests a search for a communal centering of the self, a tentative need to belong and to be recognized as belonging to some sort of community. This search for a common denominator should not, however, divert our attention from the diversity of the landscape here presented. The structure of feeling we are trying to name is sometimes more manifest sometimes hidden within the folds of other (dominant) discourses. Our hope is to invite our readers to enter this challenging and fascinating conversation to give a name to what we read and to what we are.

Within this framework, Cinzia Schiavini's essay, "Questioning the Borders of Contemporary US Fiction: H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*, 9/11 and the American Novel" adopts Amy Kaplan's understanding of America as a relational concept (2004) to redefine the borders of the contemporary US novel. Building on Caren Irr (2014) and Claudia Nordinger (2018) among others, Schiavini argues that transnational writers such as H.M. Naqvi perform in their narratives an "Americanness" that interacts with and participates in the American literary canon, especially after 9/11 brought minorities to interrogate their liminal status and fluid geographical position. In describing the inability to cope with the 9/11 backlash and in the attempt to redefine stereotypical ideas about Muslim identities, Naqvi's novel encapsulates the effect of deterritorialization of American culture and the assumed knowledge it entails.

As if responding to Schiavini's questioning of the reframing of the borders of the US novel, Cristina Iuli's article, "Extinction, Rememory and the Deadly Work of Capitalism in Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*," further examines its transnational status by focusing on ideas of rememory and rewriting. Luiselli's novel is exemplary of the current need in American

Literature to deconstruct learned preconceptions, such as what it means to be a native or a migrant and, as Iuli argues, it mixes different genres and narrative devices to attend to the link between US history and (colonial) capitalism. Indeed, the different kinds of archive presented in Luiselli's novel become an invitation for the readers to delve deeper into the ethics of preservation and extinction. Moreover, in the many intermedial references and the multiplicity of semiotic modes employed in the text there is a self-referential discourse on the contemporary novel as media ecology.

Still reframing the notion of border, but of a different kind, Ian Jayne's "Queer Realities: Disidentification, Utopic Realism, and Contemporary American Fiction" presents an analysis of André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* (2007), Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015), Brandon Taylor's *Real Life* (2020) and Sam Lansky's *Broken People* (2020) as exemplary novels of a literary realist mode characterized by "queer utopic", a term Jayne uses to describe narratives engaging with the temporal, spatial, and affective dimensions of queer life. That is, by drawing on José Esteban Muñoz (1999; 2009), in his essay, Jayne attends to the recent attempt at remapping the cultural logic of American realism according to current tendencies towards queer utopias. But in order to foreground the utopic capacities of queer possibilities, in their heterogeneity, the contemporary narratives analyzed in Jayne's article need to disidentify with realism through various narrative devices including narrative voice and self-reflexivity.

The need to redefine assumptions about minorities' identities is also at the center of Chiara Patrizi's analysis of Jesmyn Ward's fictional and nonfictional discourses. In her essay, "'We Ain't Going Nowhere. We Here': Survival and Witness in Jesmyn Ward's Fiction and Nonfiction," Patrizi builds on Christina Sharpe's metaphors of living in *the wake* and performing *wake work* (2016) to understand Ward's writing as a political act. Indeed, Patrizi remarks that Ward's narratives necessarily deal with both personal rememory, because of her traumatic experiences, and postmemory, because of the burden of survival of the past generations. Ward mixes fiction and nonfiction to (re)position her novels within the African American tradition, and asks her readers to become witnesses to her representation of the black condition in the twenty-first century. In so doing, she emphasizes not only the role of the teller, but also that of the listeners within the history of blackness.

Together with historical novels and autofictions, postmemorial narratives are also one of the foci of Paolo Simonetti's article "The Self in/and History: Historiographic Autofiction in Contemporary US Literature." Simonetti investigates the relationship between history and fiction in the contemporary US novel and suggests a new subgenre: historiographic autofiction. Through the analysis of William T. Vollmann's novel *The Rifles* (1994) and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), he remarks how the current proliferation of memoirs and autofictional narratives aims at satisfying the post-postmodern need for authenticity and sincerity and reflects on the character-author relationship. The article builds on Amy J. Elias's concept of metahistorical romance (2001) and Marjorie Worthington's definition of American autofiction (2018) to describe historiographic autofiction as the authorial impulse to put to the fore the writers' relationships with their own characters as an unstable object of their research and reinvention.

Angelo Grossi's essay "'War Is Ninety Percent Myth': Post-postmodern Revisions of Vietnam in Denis Johnson's *Fiskadoro* and *Tree of Smoke*" focuses on the role of memory too, especially with regard to amnesia. Indeed, drawing on Timothy Melley (2012) and Jean Baudrillard (1983), Grossi suggests that it is in amnesia that the two novels locate an idea of personal and collective renewal, as that symbolizes the crisis of historical referentiality. Attending to Johnson's novels becomes a way to investigate how post-postmodern narratives put to the fore how to live a purposeful life once the end of the world has already happened. That is, according to Grossi, *Tree of Smoke* and *Fiskadoro* place their post-postmodern "change of focus" (McLaughlin 221) in the reconstruction and in the re-establishment of a quest for meaning and redemption that explores the functions of the limits of history and memory.

Circling back to September 11, 2001 as the chronological center of our mapping of the contemporary US novel, Daniela Daniele's article, "'*In A Tumbling Void*': DeLillo's Late Lyrical Prose," analyzes DeLillo's late representations of contemporary America arguing for the emergence of a prose poetic characterized by a sense of intimacy and frugality and able to capture the instabilities of the present time. According to Daniele, *The Silence*, in line with DeLillo's most recent novellas, is composed by fractured, "imagistic" narrative fragments that reflect a collective apprehension and

a post-traumatic tendency for the "understatement," so that DeLillo's stillness and silence become metaphors in dialogue with the effects of the information overflow envisioned by Thomas Pynchon in the 1960s. Indeed, through a "post-traumatic style," the author redirects his literary focus, as Daniele remarks, to convey an affective and intimate discourse that hints at a renewed notion of domesticity and at a rhetoric of silence that spatializes inner time despite the current age's sense of finitude.

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