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What the Times Require: American Poetry at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

Comprehending artists in a mass, musicians, painters, actors, and so on, considering each and all of them as radiations or flanges of that furious whirling wheel, poetry, the centre and axis of the whole, where else indeed may we so well investigate the causes, growths, tallymarks of the time – the age's matter and malady?
(Walt Whitman¹)

The Poem and the Age

Alain Badiou, the French philosopher, seems to have taken Whitman's suggestion to heart when in *Le Siècle* (2005) he investigates through poetry "the causes, growths, tallymarks of the time – the age's matter and malady." His interpretation of "the totalitarian" twentieth century finds its source in an in-depth reading of "Vek," a poem by Osip Mandelstam, whose title – also the title of the book – he translates as "The Century." Poets and writers as diverse as Stéphane Mallarmé, Fernando Pessoa, Saint John Perse, Bertolt Brecht, and André Breton supply both the literary representations and the perspective from which Badiou chose to "grasp 'the century' as a category of the century itself" (6).²

Although most of the aspects he explores are relevant to an understanding of our time and of contemporary literature in the United States, Badiou's almost exclusive focus on Europe and on the first part of the century leaves the picture incomplete. Yet my aim is not to fill in the historical

and philosophical scene he left unexplored by examining the ideologies of selected U.S. poets of the twentieth century. Rather, I attempt to read the turn of the twenty-first century in the U.S. by investigating, like Badiou, the subjective responses by poets and writers to events and aspects of the time.

Focusing on the year 2000, I concentrate in the first part of this work on a poem by Lucille Clifton and a novel by Don DeLillo, inferring from them the emergence of a post-humanist agenda. In the second part, I explore the name “America” and the narratives it is associated with in three recent, and emblematic, poems: Alicia Ostriker’s “Ghazal: America,” (2012) and Richard Blanco’s “América” (1998) and “One Today” (2013). I argue that since Walt Whitman, U.S. poetry has taken “America” as “the centre and the axis of the whole,” i.e. the very place through which to “investigate the causes, growths, tallymarks of the time – the age’s matter and malady” (872).

A growing number of poets and writers – women and men from different ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds – have begun to narrate stories of identity, language, and nation that must be read as counter-histories to the Grand American Narrative, stories that shape different futures.³ Moreover, most of the poets, in one way or another, hark back to the originator of an “American” time in poetry, Walt Whitman. For him, indeed, “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem,” where “past and present and future are not disjoined but joined” (Whitman 5).

Part I: “When New Time Folds Up”⁴

“The Times”

In the year that saw the U.S. Supreme Court grant the presidency to George W. Bush, Jr., “known for his connection to oil interests” (Zinn 674), the watershed year that hinged two millennia together, Lucille Clifton and Don DeLillo, a poet and a novelist, gave voice to the sense that this was the end of an era, perhaps of the “American Century.” They did this by casting light on the human and environmental havoc brought about in the

country by the conjunction of technological innovation and globalization, consumer capitalism, and the exploitation of natural resources. In verse and in prose, however, they not only projected negative images of the times but, in different ways, also prefigured post-human(ist) futures.⁵

“It is hard to remain human on a day / when birds perch weeping in the tree,” Lucille Clifton’s “The Times” begins, starting on a sad note like a dirge. If the birds’ humanized tears signify, like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, suffering and an endangered environment,⁶ in this opening poem in *Blessing the Boats* (2000) they are also a prelude to the disaster affecting the human and social sphere in a country that must be the U.S., for “another child has killed a child,”⁷ and the speaker in the poem is manifestly a “person of color” who refuses to identify with a dysfunctional white society:

another child has killed a child
and i catch myself relieved that they are
white and i might understand except
that i am tired of understanding. (Clifton 13)

The speaker’s linguistic subjectivity, signaled by the use of a small “i,” must be read as a sign of non-identification both with the towering capital “I” of white society in the U.S. and with English discourse. More specifically, she manifestly disowns a culture that glorifies violence and the hyperindividualist ideology that, supported by a political class put into power by a thriving weapon industry, promotes a free market of semi-automatic weapons and the widespread use of firearms, and, pitting individual freedom against social cohesion and social health, hides behind the inviolability of the Second Amendment.⁸

if this
alphabet could speak its own tongue
it would be all symbol surely;
the cat would hunch across the long table
and that would mean time is catching up,
and the spindle fish would come to ground
and that would mean the end is coming
and the grains of dust would gather themselves

along the streets and spell out:

these too are your children this too is your child.

Progressing from an empathetic attitude that simply registers what is happening, to a proactive role, the speaker opens up her discourse to include in it the messages the birds, cat, and fish send with their dysfunctional behavior. It is as if the next necessary step for humans were to extend the “self” and include the animal “selves” and their language within their intelligence of the world, thus opening up to a more complex and extended sense of identity. But it is the last line in the poem that marks the most radical move on the part of the speaker. By stating “these too are your children this too is your child,” she is not simply addressing every reader, every American citizen; she is disclaiming both the logic of opposition/dominance and the politics of difference/separatism that have led to the kind of segregated and time-frozen multiculturalism that immobilizes society in its gridlocked compound antagonism. And it is in this line that the voice of the woman Lucille Clifton seems to join that of the speaker in the poem to highlight interdependence and to promote a politics and an ethic of racial collaboration against the divisive and ultimately self-destructive forces of antagonism, competitive separation and the “sliding scale of human worth” (Anzaldúa 541) that comes with racism.

The final addressees of and in the poem are the little “i”s who must become agents of change, with their stories and their multiple personhoods. Claiming the reciprocal belonging of difference and rejecting, as Heidegger might put it, the “equal or identical (which) always moves toward the absence of difference, so that everything may be reduced to a common denominator,”⁹ Clifton invites her readers to change their future. Far from joining historian David A. Hollinger in imagining a simply *postethnic* America, Clifton projects both a *postethnic* and a *post-human* America, if by that we understand that the poem is an invitation not simply to reject the Anglo-white myth of American exceptionalism and the myths of Enlightenment on which the U.S. republic and its liberal economy were grounded, but to act coherently, building a future on the strength of the most current findings about our empathetic, embodied mind.¹⁰

In this poem the African American Lucille Clifton shows a perspicacity and a sensibility that reveal, in a process that parallels that of Toni Morrison in *A Mercy* (2008), how close she has come to the cultures of the first inhabitants of the land. The “American” history that had been made to start with the European colonization of the continent seems to have come to the end of its cycle. So much so that the unwritten message in this poem appears to be that the people living in the land in the twenty-first century need to recover and use the knowledge condensed in indigenous myths and lifestyles, i.e., that the destinies of people, land, and animals are intertwined. To borrow from the title Kathleen Fraser gave to her collection of poems, for Clifton “new time” has to “fold up” on Native American old time to have a future.

It is not surprising, then, that the most pertinent comment to Lucille Clifton’s poem is offered by Joy Harjo, a Native American poet who, in a prose poem in a collection also published in the year 2000 and significantly titled *A Map to the Next World*, writes:

This is an insane system. Those who profit from this system have also determined, by rationale and plundering, that the earth has no soul, neither do the creatures, plants or other life forms matter.... There is no culture rooted here from the heart, or the need to sing.... Power is based on ownership of land, the work force, on the devaluation of life. (Harjo 17)

It is just such a “devaluation of life” that the speaker in Lucille Clifton’s poem both denounces and rebels against.

In its few lines, Lucille Clifton’s poem underscores the demise of a number of representative western and “American” paradigms: the paradigm of the U.S. as the virgin land renewing the human lease on the world and the Romantic myth of the naturally good child¹¹; the Biblical myth of human hegemony over the animal and natural worlds, reinforced by the Cartesian paradigm of self-sufficient rational man in which the Enlightenment, the American Revolution, and even the declaration of universal human rights are rooted; the western paradigm of a homogeneously and unidirectionally flowing historical time, moving in tune with physical time and with the time of the spirit (of God), the laws of progress and human, social and political evolution which have so well served American exceptionalism. The pluralized “times” in the title and the anticipation in the

poem that “time is catching up,” while containing a warning, also express the author’s proclamation of a multiple, complex time, moving at different rhythms in different natural and cultural contexts, thus challenging representations of a uniform “American time” that constricts all histories into synchronicity with that of the Anglo-American hegemonic group of early immigrants.¹²

In the poem, finally, the myths projected, the stories told, and the words written to represent such a time not molten into air¹³ have been reduced to “grains of dust,” pulverized into the dirt, the minimal dust that are sounds and letters, out of which new words and new myths must be shaped. For, together with the power of cultural paradigms, the meaning and time sense of words and their power to represent reality and lived experience have been eroded.

In the fragmentary “Witness,” a poem written by Kathleen Fraser in response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, a line reads: “In language under erosion our trust in corrosive repetition” (81).

Language loss, associated with “our on-going willingness not to know,” leads in this poem to a renewed sense of time as if the traumatic events had also blown up the speaker’s closed, free-floating time bubble and forced her “back / inside time” (83). Compounding Fraser’s loss of language and recovery of (global) time, Clifton’s loss of the master-narrative of U.S. exceptionalism in a poem also written in response to the terrorist attacks introduces a concurrent awareness that (the American) space has lost its centrality and has taken its place next to “otherwheres” in a world that is definitely one: “thunder and lightning and our world / is another place no day / will ever be the same no / blood untouched / they know this storm in other wheres / ... / but God has blessed America / we sing /and God has blessed America / to learn that no one is exempt / the world is one all fear / is one all life all death / all one.”¹⁴

In *Cosmopolis*

Lucille Clifton’s “The Times” reveals its full representative power when read side by side with Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* (2003), a novel set “In the

year 2000. *A Day in April* in Manhattan, New York, “the world city” (DeLillo 88). This novel, like Melville’s “*Bartleby*,” also tells a story of “Wall Street,” the beating heart of the U.S., and of a globalized financial market. Its white protagonist, a real villain who lives in a time-frame of his own, is the ambitious and extremely rich New York financier Eric Parker, whose every act is “self-haunted and synthetic.” Nothing exists “around him.... only the noise in his head, the mind in time. When he died he would not end. The world would end” (6). Self-centered and incapable of emotional attachments and empathetic feelings, Parker is totally uninterested in other human beings. Secluded in his limousine for a whole day, like Ahab on the *Pequod*, Eric consults with a cosmopolitan set of competent employees who enter and exit his space. Driven through the city, he navigates the web of finance from within his car from morning to night, before getting “to sudden messy ends.”

Erik Parker lives in a building eighty stories high, “the tallest residential tower in the world” (8), with a reflecting surface that skims and bends “the river light and mime[s] the tides of open sky” (9) appropriating the outside to the inside by joining them. Parker feels contiguous with that building, drawing from it “strength and depth.” Like the bank towers he sees from a distance, towers are the ultimate embodiment of the rational, self-contained mind and its power: “Tall, sheer, abstract.... They were in the future, a time beyond geography and touchable money and the people who stack and count it” (36). However, the tower, like money “talking to itself,” “has lost its narrative quality” (77).

For Eric Parker as well, language is no longer capable of expressing the disembodied time of the internet and finance capitalism. This is why he prefers the word “tower” to “the word skyscraper,” in which he finds an “anachronistic quality” (9). Perhaps the word “skyscraper,” as each of those soaring buildings in Chicago and New York was first named at the end of the nineteenth century, reminds him of a time when skyscrapers still carried with themselves the heaviness of human beings and their creativity, of physical labor, material production and concrete money, and the word could still narrate the asceticism of the puritan frame of mind that had hatched American capitalism. “Even the word computer sounds backward and dumb” (104) to his ears, as if the technological advances of the end

of the century had already consumed their time potential. As “the true futurist” (95), he “wants to be a civilization ahead of this one” (152), even though his “futurism” is “now,” and looks bleak and futureless.

Manifestly an end-of-century American incarnation of the European “new man” so dear to Fascist, Nazist and Communist ideologies at the beginning of the “totalitarian” twentieth century as analyzed by Badiou (see Badiou 8-9), Parker also instantiates a major difference. No longer simply modelled after the Nietzschean overman (superman) and his ability to shape the world according to his will, Eric Parker seems the utmost negative embodiment of American technological hubris, the new media and the web all at the service of hegemonic free-market finance and power. No surprise, then, that at the end of the day he is shot by a former employee who seems more nemesis than proper killer; for, just like Ahab, Parker himself engineered his “own downfall” (DeLillo 190).

Since Eric Parker’s purpose when leaving home that morning was to get a haircut, he is finally driven before the end of the day to an Italian-American barber shop in an immigrant neighborhood where he used to go with his father and where time seems to fold up. Once he gets there, he does indeed feel “what his father would feel standing in this place” (159). But the move towards recovering part of his past in a man who had rejected it (because “Power works best when there’s no memory attached” (184)) is also the first step toward his own destruction. And, indeed, at the end of the day, after having finally dismissed his limousine, he walks into the building where his killer lives.

The killer, Richard Sheets, who has adopted the name Benno Levin to author his Confessions and “make a public act of [his] life” (149), is an engineer who has been fired by Parker and is now living “a situation not of his choosing” (153) in a dilapidated tenement in the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood of Manhattan. Nonetheless, as co-narrator of the story, Benno also plays a role to which it is worth paying attention. Before finally dealing the deathblow, Benno tells Eric: “you wanted me to be a helpless robot soldier but all I could be was helpless” (195). After being dismissed, Benno has indeed become an outcast, one of those deranged persons who are the waste of the competitive capitalist system. Like the speaking “i” in Clifton’s poems, he is “the other, the subject” (187). He is the little, unimportant, man-

worker subjected to the will and power of the man-tower, who perceives him as a “docile and friendless man, raging man, . . . lunatic” (204). But it is this “lunatic” who buys a gun on the internet and wants to kill Parker “in order to count for something” (187).¹⁵ He also writes everything that happens to him at a metallic desk he has recovered from the street and placed in the apartment of the run-down, about-to-be-demolished tenement where he has knocked down “the walls of [his] living space” (154). But that space is precisely what Parker first notices in the living quarters of Benno. The fact that the “walls were down,” has created a “sizable space with wall rubble everywhere” (186), a living space very different from the forty-eight-room apartment he inhabits in his neat, glass tower.

By starkly contrasting the inhabited spaces of the two as if each character were the human incarnation of the building he inhabits, DeLillo not only symbolizes the unequal struggle between those in power and the powerless, but signals the end of a time and the beginning of a potential new time. For it is exactly the untold, counter-story of Benno’s residence that seems to generate new time.

While the narrated story ends with the downfall of the man-tower in the home of the human debris Benno has become, it is the untold story of contrasting ways of conceiving a home that opens up the closed time of the novel. While Eric Parker’s tower and its verticality may well symbolize power, its forty-eight rooms represent both rationality and the divisions and barriers upon which power relies. Benno’s preference for an undivided, horizontal and empty space, on the other hand, embodies a different conception of home, space and power, one whose narrative potential has not been explored by DeLillo in this novel.

This time/narrative potential can be understood with the help of another novel, *Middlesex* (2002), written by Jeffrey Eugenides, a third generation immigrant like DeLillo. At the end of the story its protagonist, the hermaphrodite Cal/lioep, a namesake of the ninth Muse, actually inherits his/her father’s house named “Middlesex,” “a place with few interior walls, divested of the formalities of bourgeois life, a place for a new type of human being, who would inhabit a new world” (Eugenides 529).

Built in one of the rich suburbs of Detroit, the house itself, as we read right in the middle of the novel, was designed by an architect of the “Prai-

rie School,” the famous turn-of-the-nineteenth-century movement associated with Frank Lloyd Wright. This movement exalted contact with nature and natural materials, used technology in the service of human beings, designed one-floor suburban homes developing along a horizontal line, with open floor spaces to contrast the constrictive, divisive spaces of skyscrapers and buildings in big cities. Cal/liope’s home evokes Frank Lloyd Wright’s *The Living City*, a project that was his response to the type of American city incarnated by DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*. In *Middlesex*, hope and the project of a new time for the twenty-first century folds back upon the previous turn-of-the-century, as if the new could only be built by recovering the threads of a history and re-imagining a life project that had been left incomplete in the twentieth century.

However, Frank Lloyd Wright, an admirer of Whitman’s poetry, considered himself heir to the Transcendentalist organic tradition, out of which he chose to highlight individuality, equality, democracy, and freedom. And it is these values Wright brought to the fore when in the entrance to one of the buildings he designed, the Monona Terrace and Conference Center in Madison, Wisconsin, he inscribed these lines of Whitman:

Do I contradict myself?
 Very well, then, I contradict myself,
 (I am large, I contain multitudes.) (246)¹⁶

Part II: Paradigm America

Framing the Paradigm

“I,” “America,” and “democracy” contain multitudes in Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, his “Chants Democratic.” But in *Democratic Vistas* he makes “America” and “democracy” “convertible terms” (930), even if he admits that “democracy” is still mostly an “idea” in his own time, since what he can see around him in the U.S. hardly corresponds to the idea (see pages 933-38). In the Preface to his 1855 *Leaves*, he also makes the word

"America" belong in the same conceptual and metaphorical frame that includes "democracy," as well as "land," "liberty," "equality," "happiness," "language," and "identity."¹⁷ Over time, however, these value-laden words, saturated with conflicting ideologies, have become the carriers of projections of self, nation, and historical futures, different from those shaped by the grand "national" narrative to which Whitman greatly contributed.

Since Whitman's time, the discrepancy between the idea of "America" and the reality of its historical incarnation in "The United States," has been the cause of much criticism, but also of hope. When, early in the twentieth century, in his famous poem "I, Too," Langston Hughes made his speaker claim, "I, too, am America," (46) he was as much denouncing, in poetry, the exclusion of African-Americans from whatever "land," "democracy," "liberty," "equality," "happiness," "language," or (national) "identity" was to be had in the U.S., as rebelling against the restricted extension of these words' universal value to a limited and privileged number of U.S. citizens. To convey his critique, however, Langston Hughes referred back to Whitman, associating and at the same time dissociating himself from the poet, all the while proving that in American culture, and perhaps in the eyes of the world, Walt Whitman stands not only for American poetry but for "America" itself. And it is because of Whitman's association with "America" – whether the word be narrowed to refer to the U.S., or extended to the whole continent – that poets and artists turn to him as *the* model poet who knew how to speak for his place, his times, and his people. And it is to Whitman that they turn again when they want to free themselves from his most nationalist identifications and narratives, focusing on the freeing power of his admitted contradictions and his acceptance of the body and sexuality, as well as multiplicity and complexity at all levels.

As Whitman wrote in "Poets to Come," the words of the artists need interpretation, need to be verified, for they are vortexes in time, spiraling to make space for the time-place of the writer and the multiple times-places of the readers, while hinting at possible directions in historical time. Thus, interrogation of the sense of time in them must be part of their interpretation. And where can we find the model of a contested "American Paradigm" but in Whitman's own poem "America," written in 1888? There, present and future are condensed in the title and in the lines that represent "America"

as a “grand, sane, *towering*, seated Mother,” (emphasis added) the “centre” of many equal daughters and sons, a mother “chair’d in the adamant of Time,” “Perennial with the Earth, with Freedom, Law and Love” (616).

Poets “are the voice and exposition of liberty,” Whitman wrote in his 1855 Preface, where a personified liberty “sits in calmness and light” (17), pre-figuring his towering “Mother” America of 1888. But in the Preface he represented America as a young male heir taking center stage in history and among the continents, looking forward to the nation’s consolidation. In the 1888 poem, instead, America has become a matron frozen in time, as if, anticipating Francis Fukuyama’s *End of History*, Whitman had foreseen both the coming to power of the U.S. and its self-investiture, in time and history, as the final incarnation of the Spirit in the western world.

In a way, the poem appears prophetic. Only ten years later – in 1899 – Rudyard Kipling, aware that by reversing its previous isolationist policy the U.S. was becoming an imperial power, addressed a rather mediocre poem to the U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt urging him to relieve the British empire of its humanitarian task and “Take up the White Man’s burden – / The savage wars of peace.”¹⁸ And indeed, the war against Spain, declared in April 1898 ostensibly to free Cuba, ended a few months later with the U.S. being awarded Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines. That was the beginning of the imperial adventure of the U.S. and the initial stage of what would come to be called the “American twentieth century,” a century that ended with the demise of communism in the western world and the political, military, economic, and cultural hegemony of the U.S. – a hegemony, to quote Badiou, that produced “the triumph of capitalism and the global market.... and a Democracy without shores” (3).¹⁹ But it was at the turn of the twenty-first century that the nation’s decline, which began in the last thirty years of the twentieth century, started to become visible notwithstanding the fact that after the terrorist attacks of September 2001 the U.S. imposed its super military power on the world with a negative international outcome.²⁰

On the domestic front on the other hand, the concept of the GNP’s continual growth, to use Donald W. White’s words, had already been “under attack by the New Left and counterculture who found little value in production and innovations of science and technology,” (383) and even

conservatives like Paul Samuelson recognized “an unsolved problem of modern economies, ‘the quality of life versus mere GNP growth’” while “the toll and abuse on the continent were symptomatic of the ravages of decay” (384). But in the first twelve years of the twenty-first century, the loss of manufacturing jobs to foreign lands; the economic effects of free-market financial capitalism and of a widespread consumerist ideology; the growing poverty of the poor and middle classes; the disastrous state of the nation’s infrastructures; the risks of global warming; the city, state, and federal mismanagement and lack of preparation in the relief effort when in 2005 Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, one of the poorest metropolitan areas in the U.S.; the social unrest that exploded when the financial crisis hit in 2008; and finally the “war on terror” initiated by George W. Bush, Jr. all contributed to a collective re-examination of a U.S.-centered worldview, with its ethnocentric master historical narrative and its misconceptions of Manifest Destiny and “America’s” exceptionalism.²¹ As E.L. Doctorow argues, it is as if the U.S. had inverted its course and its call and started on the road of “unexceptionalism,” a political and ideological trend “that would render the United States indistinguishable from the impoverished, traditionally undemocratic, brutal or catatonic countries of the world” and had in the meanwhile operated to make the wealth of the country available only to a small fraction of the population, “so that the gap between rich and poor widens exponentially.”

It is not surprising, then, that one hundred and twenty years after Whitman’s death, the association of “Democracy” and “America” has become suspicious. Both words, moreover, have come under critical inspection,²² as if words had been depleted and stories, to quote Avital Rondell, had been “exhausted with the failure of models, identities, leaders, promise” (IX). Poets, those representatives of what Muriel Rukeyser in her *Life of Poetry* called “an outcast art,” an art much needed in times of crisis (as the poems written and circulated on and around 9/11/2001 testify), stand in the forefront of the critical community. American poetry, Rukeyser maintains:

has been part of a culture in conflict.... We are a people tending toward democracy at the level of hope; on another level, the economy of the nation, the empire of business within the republic, both include in their basic premise the

concept of perpetual war. It is the history of the idea of war that is beneath our other histories... But around and under and above it is another reality... This history is the history of possibility. (61)

While underpinning the relevance of Rukeyser's poetry for the twenty-first century, Adrienne Rich also indirectly connects her to Whitman. In a 2007 essay included in *The Human Eye* (2009) together with "Muriel Rukeyser for the Twenty-first Century" and tellingly entitled "Poetry and the Forgotten Future," she hints at what remained unsaid in Whitman's poetry as well as in his political stance that now projects a dark shadow on democracy:

Walt Whitman never separated his poetry from his vision of American democracy – a vision severely tested in a Civil war fought over the economics of slavery. Late in life he called "poetic lore ... a conversation overheard in the dusk, from speakers far or hid, of which we get only a few broken murmurs" – the obscurity, we might think now, of democracy itself. (135)

The obscurity Rich finds in democracy, and in Whitman's writing, its dark side, together with the broken promise of liberty and equality, have been explored time and again in the recent past. Poets and writers, however, have also given voice to a largely shared need to begin anew, opening new ground for what Rukeyser calls "the history of possibility," a history where old divisions and ideological and linguistic paradigms are torn down or eliminated as in the house without walls in *Middlesex* and in Benno's "sizable space" in *Cosmopolis*. In 2008 Charles Johnson claimed that "better stories, new concepts, and new vocabularies and grammar" were needed in the twenty-first century, for only in this way could "the dangerous exciting, and unexplored present" be understood (8).

América

In the twenty-first century, poetry has both registered the failure of the "American Century" and, through content and form, anticipated a new turn. It has made space for Johnson's "dangerous exciting, and unexplored

present” by abandoning the idea that poetry must be homogeneous, unitary and lyric, and by reappropriating narrative qualities typical of the epic, where diverse identities and stories can find a place, but with the awareness that each story is “at best, a provisional reading of reality, . . . that one day is likely to be revised, if not completely overturned” (Johnson 8). And it is through and within provisional, multiple immigrant stories that “America” and “Americanness” are being redefined and the threads connecting America to other stories, other countries, other languages reconstructed, making larger transnational human networks visible.

Jeffery Eugenides’ *Middlesex* is emblematic of the new perception – and representation – of identity that runs through poetry and narrative. In the novel, biology rather than history connects the protagonist to her/his ancestors in Greek Turkey. As we are told at the beginning of the story, the protagonist-narrator is born twice, first as the baby-girl Calliope, and then, when at age fourteen the “5-Alpha-reductase” (3) hereditary gene surfaces, as the hermaphrodite Cal/liope, with male sexual traits added to her female body. Cal’s hermaphroditic rebirth, however, transforms this genealogical novel into a novel of resistance and connection, since the family past is tightly woven into a geo-historical conflicting history, a language, and a culture condensed in the very name Calliope and in hermaphroditism itself. This past persists beyond the will of the individual, and even beyond all attempts at assimilation and oblivion, constituting an unavoidable, ingrained link that of necessity connects the American Cal to history, to Greece and to Turkey through a horizontal web of genetic and genealogical narrative relations.

Recovering the past – an attempt that contributed to Eric Parker’s downfall in *Cosmopolis* – is not easy but is the first step in unearthing and making visible all forms of “otherness” and diversity on which to build new “American” stories, using the rubble that had first served to build walls and divisions. There are different ways of recovering one’s past, however, and what was necessitated by biology in Eugenides’s novel is the joint result of “heritage and sympathy” in another author of genealogical novels, Nash Candelaria, who considers himself “a Nuevo Mexicano” even though he has lived in California all his life (Bruce-Novoa 121). Claiming a multiple belonging, he even rejects the essentializing and totalizing identification within the “Chicano” cultural umbrella and maintains that there “can be no one voice that

speaks for our 'culture' and our group. There can be only voices, hopefully many voices, who reflect this diversity" (129). Against Whitman's stance that the poet can speak for all other democratic subjects, all made in his image, Candelaria argues that no one voice is like another, and that it is only by making space for these diverse voices that a common, intertwined, dialogical, multilingual culture can be created in the twenty-first century.

Even young Jewish writers, like Jonathan Safran Foer, have started to explore an Eastern-European past and its connection to the American present. In his novels, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), he builds stories that link a contemporary Jewish New Yorker to his family's traumatic European experience and the *Shoah*. In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, muting events in the past and in the present are associated. Thus, the nine-year-old Oscar's German grandfather symbolizes through his choice not to speak both his own trauma as a German Jew deprived of citizenship, human rights, and country through the destruction of war, and Oscar's loss of his father and of a secure homeland in the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Moreover, trauma in the novel constitutes the narrative thread that, while connecting the U.S. to Europe, also questions America's claimed innocence, both in the past and in the present.

And it is within this context as much as within the American poetic canon that one must read Alicia Suskin Ostriker's "Ghazal: America" (2012). The first of three ghazals centering on America, this is a poem that, besides the manifest intertextual dialogue with Ginsberg's "America," entertains a hidden dialogue with Adrienne Rich's poetry through the form of the Ghazal and its indirect reference to the silenced story of American women in Rich's "From an Old House in America." Both poets stand here for that part of critical and political U.S. poetry that highlights the failure of the U.S. to meet the dream of "America."

In Ostriker's poem, the child's precious early memories of the grandfather, finding their way to the brain and heart through waves of bodily sensations – the fragrance of his tobacco, the color of his sweater, his calming voice – unravel his life-story, testifying to the failure of Whitman's Great Mother "America" to rescue and nourish the immigrant European fleeing his Fatherland:

Arriving on time for the first big war, remaining for the second, sad grandpa
who walked across Europe to get to America

When the babies starved, when the village burned, when you were flogged
log out, ship out, there was a dream, the green breast of America

One thing that makes me happy about my country
is that Allen Ginsberg could fearlessly write the comic poem "America"

My grandfather said no President including Roosevelt would save the Jews in Europe
I adore superhighways but money is the route of all evil in America

If to the grandfather the reality America offers, beyond the dream, is two wars and no democratic defense of persecuted minorities, for the granddaughter it is, as in Ginsberg, "corporate America" and capital as its sole god and value, continuing to falsify the American Dream at the beginning of the twenty-first century. But, while Ginsberg emphasizes subjective suffering and a schizophrenic sense of national and personal identity, produced by the destructive power of Corporate America and anticommunism in the 1950s, Alicia Ostriker's "Ghazal: America" focuses on history as emblematic of the growing power of the American Century, and of the U.S.'s implication in European events, when "no President including Roosevelt would save the Jews in Europe."

Building a parallel between Ginsberg's McCarthyist America of the '50s and contemporary U.S., Ostriker shows us a land ravaged by the latest form of exploitation, flooded by rivers which expose domestic poverty and exclusion, while cluster bombs condense the "evil" of the nation's wars and aspirations to hegemonic world power. And if the Statue of Liberty in the poem becomes both a lure and a trap, in the two couplets that conclude the poem "fear" runs through the land, transforming "America" from dream to nightmare.

Curse the mines curse the sweatshops curse the factory curse the boss
May devils in hell torment the makers of cluster bombs in Corporate America

When I photograph your flooding rivers and meadows and public sculpture Rockies,
when I walk in your filthy cities I love you so much I bless you so much America

People people look there: Liberty the Shekhina herself
Welcoming you like a queen, like a mother, to America

Take the fluteplayer from the mesa, take the raven from his tree
Now that the buffalo is gone from America

White man the blacks are snarling the yellows swarming the umber terrorists
Are tunneling through and breathing your air of fear in America. (148)

Moving from the personal to the political, in the best tradition of feminist poetry, Alicia Ostriker's "America" turns into an invective that reactivates the split between the subjective and mythic America of the dream and the actual nation. Early in the twentieth century, Langston Hughes' famous line "(America never was America to me)," in "Let America Be America Again" (189) had already shown how the segregation of African Americans split the nation down the race line, reserving the American dream to the citizens classified as non-immigrant whites. In the 1950s, when in "Howl" Ginsberg addresses America as "Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!" (17) he reveals a divide operating within white America itself, and in his poem "America," where we read "It occurs to me that I am America. / I am talking to myself again," (32) he anticipates the dramatic split that today opposes the few rich to the many poor Americans and nourishes the revolt of the "Occupy Wall Street" protesters.

Even the form of Ghazal, dear to Adrienne Rich, who used it for her most political poems of the 1970s²³, and typical of classic Persian poetry, contributes to the sense of protest ingrained in the poem, as if Ostriker were deliberately using a form that belongs to an Islamic poetic and mystic tradition to contest the widely shared "clash of civilizations" theory.²⁴ Not only its figurative and discursive content, but the very form greatly contribute to our perception of the poem both as narration and as a series of snapshots condensing the last hundred years of U.S. history. The ghazal, indeed, builds the whole through a series of couplets that offer separate im-

ages woven into mythic cohesion by the red thread which is “America,” its contradictions, its curse. And the reader’s intensely emotional impression of a vampire America feeding on a bleeding America runs uninterrupted by a final stop into the second poem, “Banquet,” as if the U.S. were most of all at war with itself. But, continuing without interruption to mark the co-presence of negative and positive visions, Ostriker mitigates in the concluding lines of the third poem, “What the Butterfly is Thinking,” the loss of sense of order and direction, the feeling of a doomed land, by recovering the mythic dream of America as a Paradise to be regained through a return to nature and to the nourishing roles harmonizing nature and humanity.

If Ostriker’s poem reactivates a long-standing tradition of poetic protest, it does so by joining politics, memory and history, Europe and the U.S., and by highlighting the difference between the myth of “America” and the reality of the U.S. Different again is Richard Blanco’s “América,” in whose accented “é” we recognize the refracting presence of two distinct colonial and post-colonial traditions and languages as well as an echo of José Martí’s “Our América.” Included in Blanco’s *City of a Hundred Fires* collection (1998), the poem “originates from one of [his] earliest memories of the clash between the two cultures that shaped” him (“Biography”) and traces the yearnings and negotiations of a Cuban-American child growing up in Miami. As in most poems by Blanco, it is the lexicon of food and the linguistic and cultural stories associated with it, that articulate the dialectic of assimilation and resistance. Here, the food to be eaten on Thanksgiving becomes the battle-ground where national and cultural identity narratives conflict through roasted “American” turkey and “Cuban” pork. When the child finally manages to convince the women in his family to cook him a “real” Thanksgiving meal, the outcome is a disaster:

Abuelita prepared the poor fowl
 as if committing an act of treason,
 faking her enthusiasm for my sake.
Mamá set a frozen pumpkin pie in the oven
 and prepared candied yams following instructions
 I translated from the marshmallow bag.

I uttered a bilingual blessing

and the turkey was passed around
 like a game of Russian Roulette.
 “DRY,” *Tío* Berto complained, and proceeded
 to drown the lean slices with pork fat drippings
 and cranberry jelly – “*esa mierda roja*,” he called it.
 Faces fell when *Mamá* presented her ochre pie –
 pumpkin was a home remedy for ulcers, not a dessert.

While the poem articulates a story of resistance to and assimilation into mainstream America, it also highlights the opposite: binary ideologies of belonging that separate the immigrant family and the first generation “American” child. However, by doing so, through language the poem also becomes the very place where those dualities – linguistic, national and cultural – co-exist and mix, the space where borders and divisions are torn down and dialogue begins. As a field of energy, and as a time vortex, this poem prefigures the shift that marks “One Today,” the poem Blanco wrote for the second inauguration of President Barak Obama and read on January 21, 2013, characterized by a more inclusive, collective representation of the nation²⁵. A Whitmanian poem in many ways – it even brings in “I Hear America Singing” – “One Today” also moves away from the old bard’s representation of identity, equality, and Americanness.

Narrating the life of a day from sunrise to sunset, showing people in different walks of life and different parts of the country, this song reminds one of the framing structure of “Song of Myself,” though it is Whitman’s sub-texts that better underscore different perspectives in the two poets. For, indeed, it is not the capital “I” of Whitman’s capacious subject but the millions small “I”s Whitman addressed as “you” that, refusing to be the mirror image of his model American man, have become distinct actors and protagonists of their own stories before assembling into a collective “we” speaking with many voices, in many languages, and asking to be heard. And it is this collective “we” that in Blanco’s poem condenses the twenty-first century paradigmatic shift in the representation of an American identity:

... Hear: the doors we open
 for each other all day, saying: hello shalom,
 buon giorno howdy namaste or buenos días

in the language my mother taught me – in every language
 spoken into one wind carrying our lives
 without prejudice, as these words break from my lips.

It is on each and all of these people saluting in their different languages that the sun shines, following adults going to their workplaces, children going to school: “One light, waking up rooftops, under each one, a story / told by our silent gestures moving behind windows.” Blanco’s collective “we,” “vital as the one light we move through,” does not forget that, as in Clifton’s poem, “a child has killed a child,” only this time it is the most recent massacre in Newtown with its “impossible vocabulary of sorrow that won’t explain / the empty desks of twenty children marked absent / today, and forever,” that would silence, but does not bend the resilience of the sufferers, anticipating once again a way of mending a disrupted society.²⁶

Toward its end, the poem finally becomes a symbolic walk toward “home, / always under one sky, our sky,” “a home to be built after recovering the ‘I have a dream’ we keep dreaming” and, “Thank the work of our hands/ ... / jutting into a sky that yields to our resilience.” Until, “With

hope – a new constellation
 waiting for us to map it,
 waiting for us to name it – together.

The Home the New Times Require

The constellation that is “home,” in Blanco’s poem, like the home without walls in DeLillo’s and Eugenides’s novels, is again a blank space, to be mapped and named so as to form a new lexical frame for “America.” By advocating in this way a multilingual artistic language as well, this poem underscores another peculiarity of contemporary American literature, where the distinct domestic-traditional and cosmopolitan-experimental lines of twentieth-century poetry finally converge.²⁷ If Blanco’s poems can be fitted into the metrical, narrative, domestic tradition whose major representative

in the twentieth century was Robert Frost, the first inaugural poet (J.F. Kennedy inauguration), at the same time Rachel Blau DuPlessis, a poet in the experimental cosmopolitan tradition that began with Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound in Europe, also agrees that “in single language, the poem could not be complete,” “since it craves” “multi-lingualism” (58).

And yet, it is to Toni Morrison that we owe a linguistic and narrative paradigm that includes both trends and that Morrison developed over the last years of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. Retelling the myth of the Tower of Babel in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, she critiqued its condemnation of multiple languages in favor of a God-approved single language as a way to Paradise. For Morrison, the decision was “a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives” (“Nobel Lecture”). Projected into American society and, for that matter, on all contemporary multi-ethnic societies, her re-vision of the myth invites us to contemplate the value each language must have for individuals and a society built on difference and complexity, a society that refuses to absorb, assimilate or submerge all otherness within the one, single legalized language-culture.

In her novels, Toni Morrison has also amply explored the racial thread that weaves together African American history and mainstream history in the U.S., linking it back in *A Mercy* to its African origins as well as to the Anglo and Dutch colonizations of North America and to the African-American and Native-American encounter, then turning to an exploration of the actual involvement of African Americans in mainstream history in her most recent novel, *Home* (2012).²⁸

To this novel we owe a vision of the “American home” less reconciling than that in Blanco’s poem. The poem that precedes Morrison’s novel introduces us to a riddle and to the duality of belonging and not belonging, dream and reality: “Whose house is this? / ... / It’s not mine. / I dreamed another, sweeter, brighter / ... / Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key?”

In the novel, Morrison showcases another story of white racism and African American marginalization, but she also spotlights the damaging effects of white violence on African Americans together with their involvement in the imperialist wars of the U.S. The protagonist of her story, Frank Money, is a traumatized, amnesiac, black Korean War veteran who returns

home to Georgia and to his sick sister, Cee. Throughout the novel he keeps being visited by the nightmare of the killing of a young prostitute during the war. The culprit, in the dream, is a white soldier until we learn that it is Frank himself who killed her, out of fear of her sex, out of his power as a male armed soldier in an occupied territory.

The American home Morrison represents here is certainly racist America, but it is no longer the place where African American and white American stories simply run parallel. Rather, like the key that fits the lock, they are also implicated one with the other. The “American” place/home itself, no longer divided by walls circumscribing separate worlds/stories, has become the space where stories are bound together, mingling and overlapping. By the end of the novel, having reconnected to their own cultural roots, Frank’s and Cee’s lives seem open to new possibilities. But innocence, lost forever, can no longer provide the ground on which to build the new home of dream and possibility in the U.S. along the old divisive lines.

Notes

¹ *Specimen Days*, in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* 872. In quotations from Whitman’s texts all page numbers refer to this edition.

² “The maximal interiority” in “the subjectivity that relates to the century” (Badiou 5) provides the element through which Badiou connects these poets’ work to ideologies of the time and to the Real, the countable, for “ethical judgment can only locate its real in the devastating excess of the crime, in the counting” of the millions of victims of totalitarian regimes in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Communist U.S.S.R. (Badiou 2).

³ For an outline of the Grand Narrative in the field of American Studies, see in particular Wise. For a critique of the same at the turn of the twenty-first century, see Pease and Wiegman.

⁴ I owe this concept to poet Kathleen Fraser, the title of whose important collection of poems, *When New Time Folds Up* (1993) intrigued me. By “new time folding up” on old time, she told me in a personal letter, she means “one time capsule folded, as a dream, within another time frame,” which an act of imagination can recover. This is also the sense in which I use it in this essay.

⁵ Their perspectives are “post-humanist” rather than “posthuman,” in that they not so much underscore the “union of the human with the intelligent machine” (Hayles 2), as question the principles that governed classical humanism.

⁶ In the powerfully emotional metaphor of a “silent spring” Rachel Carson conveyed

the environmental risks produced by extensive use of D.D.T. in agriculture. As in Clifton's poem, however, it is birds that in her book provide the most telling examples of an apocalyptic scene: "There was a strange stillness. The birds, ... where had they gone? ... the few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly" (Carson 2).

⁷ The author may have had in mind the 1999 Columbine massacre. With her simple statement, however, she emphasizes both the frequent occurrence of similar events in the U.S., as the recent Newtown massacre corroborates, and the resonance such killings, that mostly affect middle-class white America, have in the press, while the daily shooting of African-American and minority youth in major American cities is hardly registered. In a CNN interview following the Newtown massacre, James Garbarino, the author of *Last Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*, admits that while "not uniquely American ... the mass murder that took place in Newtown, Connecticut, is especially American. Our socially toxic culture promotes paranoia, desensitization to violence, almost unlimited access to lethal weapons, opportunities to practice mass murder via realistic 'point and shoot' video games and games that justify violence as a legitimate form of vengeance in pursuit of an individual's or group's idea of justice."

⁸ Following the Newtown massacre of December 14, 2012, a popular petition was signed calling on the White House immediately to address the issue of gun control. President Barack Obama's answer was a multi-pronged plan for curbing gun violence in the U.S., issued on January 16, 2013 and bearing the highly symbolic title "Now is the Time." However, as Bruce Watson of *Daily Finance* points out "Some of his suggestions would require new laws – an unlikely outcome, given Congress' gridlock and the heavy lobbying of the National Rifle Association."

⁹ I have adapted to racial and ethnic difference a concept that Martin Heidegger uses in his essay "... Poetically Man Dwells ..." to demarcate similarity and difference in poetry and thought. In the essay he distinguishes between "the same" and "the equal," and states that the "same ... is the belonging together of what differs, through a gathering by way of the difference" (216).

¹⁰ Lucille Clifton distills in poetry that kind of awareness that in other fields of knowledge has brought about the downfall of the Cartesian paradigm. As well as studies of computer-human interaction that have brought to the fore the relevance of embodied knowledge (see Hayles), recent studies in the philosophy of language and the philosophy of the mind (see Lakoff and Johnson, Chalmers and Clark, Di Francesco and Piredda), and on the workings of the brain (see Damasio, *Descartes' Error* and *Self Comes to Mind* and Rizzolatti et al.), have proven that our mind is not only embodied but also empathetic and extensively connected to the environment.

¹¹ As for the Virgin Land paradigm, born with the first reports about the land and integrated within mainstream U.S. narratives, it was still ideologically productive in late-nineteenth-century literature and at the turn of the twentieth century. A writer like Gertrude Stein, who celebrated the U.S. as the nation that had created modernity (Stein 73), extending the virgin quality of the land to the people inhabiting it, could maintain

that Americans had a distinctive “virginal quality” (47). In this way, she prolonged into the twentieth century the literary tradition embodied in the stories narrated by such influential writers as Henry James and Edith Wharton, who in their novels represented innocent American citizens confronting a corrupted Old World society. The Virgin Land paradigm was also one of the myths on which American Studies as an academic discipline was based (see again Pease and Wiegman).

¹² This much has also been realized in political and historical thinking. Such diverse historians as Charles Kupchan and Francis Fukuyama (*The Origins*) have recently argued that the U.S. needs to recognize the existence of multiple systems and modernities, and accept that in the future multipolar political and economic systems will arise that must necessarily interact on a non hegemonic basis.

¹³ As in Marshal Berman’s book, where *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (1986).

¹⁴ From “Tuesday,” in her sequence “September’s Song: A Poem in Seven Days.”

¹⁵ Through Benno, DeLillo also casts light on the connection between the loss of a job, marginalization, mental affliction, and the use of firearms.

¹⁶ I owe the reference to Whitman’s lines to Kenneth Price and his *To Walt Whitman, America*. On Frank Lloyd Wright’s *The Living City* see the animation prepared on the occasion of the 2009 Guggenheim Museum exhibition *Frank Lloyd Wright: From Within Outward*. <<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/interact/watch/exhibition-videos/the-living-city-student-animation?tmpl=component&print=1>>.

¹⁷ On linguistic “framing,” see Lakoff 116-117.

¹⁸ “The White Man’s Burden.” The original heading of the poem bore the subtitle ‘An Address to the United States’. Before publishing it, Kipling had sent a copy to Theodore Roosevelt (see Mary Hamer’s Introductory note to “White Man’s Burden”). On the Spanish-American war, and the beginning of American imperialism see Zinn, Chapter 12.

¹⁹ See White for a definition of “The American Century,” and Nye for a distinction between military, economic, and soft (cultural/smart) power and its use in the future.

²⁰ Even Brian Michael Jenkins and John Paul Godges in their Introduction to *The Long Shadow* condemn “the hubris that comes with America’s great military power” (5).

²¹ See Bacevich and Doctorow for the end of American exceptionalism.

²² Emblematic is Jan Radway’s essay “What’s in a Name?” that highlights how much American Studies contributed to the support of “a phantasmatic, intensely longed-for, unitary American Culture” (51). For a continental perspective on “America,” see Bahia.

²³ Her “Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib” were published in *Leaflets* (1969) while her own “Blue Ghazals” were included in *The Will to Change* (1971). On Rich’s *Ghazals*, see Camboni.

²⁴ The author of the much discussed essay *Clash of Civilizations?*, later transformed into a book, Samuel Huntington, provided a world-scale articulation of a widely shared critical attitude. For a critique of the essay, the book, and its critical roots see Edward Said’s lecture, “The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations.”

²⁵ It is worth noticing that the very choice Obama made of a outspokenly gay Cuban-American poet as inaugural poet reflects not only the President’s awareness of the political

relevance of Spanish-speaking U.S. citizens, but also acknowledges before the nation and its legal and political systems the importance of diversity and the tearing down of the walls that had separated white and colored, hetero- and homosexuals, and old and new American immigrants.

²⁶ He refers to the above mentioned massacre of twenty school children and six teachers by the twenty-year-old Adam Lanza on December 14, 2012.

²⁷ See on this Aiken, and DuBois and Lentricchia.

²⁸ But African Americans started on this road a long time ago, and their stories have rightly become part of the new American identity narrative, one that the first U.S. president of mixed American and African ancestry, Barack Obama, summarized in his Victory Speech when narrating the story of Anne Nixon Cooper, making her the symbolic incarnation of a century of American history.

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