# RSA Journal

**Rivista di Studi Americani**

*Journal of AISNA / Italian Association of North American Studies*

**33/2022**


*Sites of Emergency, States of Exception*


**Valerio Massimo De Angelis** and **Giorgio Mariani**, Introduction 5

**Stefano Luconi**, "The Least Worst Place":
Guantánamo in the US "War on Terror" 9

**Alessandra Calanchi**, Out of Exception, Into Emergency:
Fast-forward to Earth Zero 29

**Salvatore Proietti**, The Provisional Utopia and the State of Exception:
On *Ceremony* and *The Stand* 47

**Ali Dehdarirad**, "The Other Side of the Ditch": (De)Constructing
Environmental Crisis in William Vollmann's *Imperial*
and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* 63

**Cinzia Schiavini**, Constructing and Contesting the State(s)
of Exception: Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*
and the American Transnational Novel 81

**Angelo Arminio**, An Alternate History of the Warring States:
Global War in a State of Exception and Democratic
Short-circuit in Matt Gallagher's *Empire City* 105

*Un Forum a puntate*
*Frontiera/Frontiere: Conversazioni su confini e migrazioni tra il Mediterraneo e l'Atlantico* 125

Introduzione: **Valerio Massimo De Angelis** 127

Seconda puntata:
**Paola Zaccaria** e **Lorena Carbonara**,
La svolta TransMediterrAtlantica del pensiero critico dei confini del progetto *S/murare il Mediterraneo* 129

*Articles*

**Stefano Franceschini**, A "Maze of Stone-shadowed Twilight": The Disorienting Nightmarescape of H. P. Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* 147

**Livia Bellardini**, Assessing a Poetics of the Lyric with Claudia Rankine and Jonathan Culler 167

*L'inedito*

Introduction: **Carla Francellini** 189

**Maria Mazziotti Gillan**, "What Is This Absence in the Heart?" 199

*Abstracts* 203
*Notes on Contributors* 209

# Sites of Emergency, States of Exception

Valerio Massimo De Angelis and Giorgio Mariani

# Introduction

In the wake of a COVID-19 pandemic that has elicited various and unprecedented forms of response by national and supranational governments, societies and cultures, and more generally humankind itself, the issue of how to address critical situations that create sites of emergency and call for extraordinary measures has become absolutely central in public debate. The pandemic is an example of the sudden and unexpected (or, better, expected but more or less consciously set aside by decision-makers all over the world) disruption of the structure of individual and collective life at a global level, but is only the symptom of a wider and more general situation that has been rapidly evolving in the last decades, since the so-called "Great Acceleration" of the Anthropocene, usually considered as dating from the end of World War II and the beginning of the Atomic Age, with the explosion of the first atomic bomb in New Mexico in July 1945.

The globalization of a world by now totally "colonized" by the human species up to the point of having changed its geological status had as its primary engine the United States of America, so that until the beginning of the twenty-first century globalization and Americanization were almost synonyms. The interconnectedness of all the elements of the global network has multiplied the occasions of local crises turning into world phenomena, and the various sites of emergency that have been springing everywhere have often had among its main causes the US political, economic, cultural and military strategies, but on the other hand the United States too has become extremely susceptible to events and processes originating elsewhere, in a short-circuit that was made dramatically visible on September 11, 2001, with the final outcome of a series of causes and effects which eventually became causes of other effects across continents. So decades of "emergencies" directly or indirectly created in the Middle

East by US politics collapsed in the backlash of Ground Zero, and this end result triggered another series of consequences by inaugurating a season of "states of exception," at home and abroad, that severely questioned the very foundations of American democracy.

Since its introduction in Western political thought by Carl Schmitt, in the 1920s, the notion of "state of exception" has usually had the meaning of a critical condition that justifies the direct action of the sovereign, beyond the limits of the rule of law, in the name of the public good. Recent theorizations by Giorgio Agamben, Elaine Scarry and Achille Mbembe have pointed out that states of exception have never been "real" *exceptions* to law, but have instead always been predicted *by* law, as an instrument of augmentation of the sovereign's power – that is, of the ultimate source of law, except in modern democracies. The United States is the first country to have been founded *ex novo* according to democratic principles, when the British colonies in North America became a site of emergency from the point of view of the colonists themselves, who believed their *de facto* independence from the mother country threatened by the resurgence of imperial power, and then declared the necessity to create an *exception*, dictated by the "necessity which constrain[ed] them to alter their former Systems of Government," as stated in the Declaration of Independence. In other words, the United States was born as a *State of Exception* in itself, due to the fact that it excluded the sovereign as a legitimate source of power and substituted him with "the People" on the basis of the emergency created by the sovereign exceeding his *potestas* and claiming an *auctoritas* which was not recognized by the colonial subjects – the "exception" of the head of State going beyond the limits set to his power over the colonies finally resulting in the colonies creating a new, different "exception," which obeyed to new and different rules.

It is an ironic contradiction that the first "exceptional" State – born on the assumption that no state of exception could warrant the excessive power of the sovereign – has become an imperial power systematically exceeding the rules of law by imposing on various (national and international) sites of emergency its own rules of exception (and also rejecting instances of superior legality such as international courts). And it is even more ironic that in the current situation, where the site of emergency is the whole world, the United States has first, under the Trump administration, even

refused to recognize that an emergency existed, and then has come to request, under the Biden administration, the suspension of patents to allow the poorer countries access to the vaccines, in the name of a global state of exception determined by the pandemic emergency.

The couplet "emergency/exception" can therefore involve many more meanings than could be expected, and with many different ideological features. This special issue intends precisely to explore how sites of emergency and states of exception have shaped contemporary American history and how they have been represented, analyzed, interpreted and also criticized and deconstructed by American literature.

The first article, by Stefano Luconi, briefly describes the ever-growing recourse to states of exception after the Civil War, and then addresses the ambiguities and contradictions of one emblematic "site of exception" justified by a "state of emergency" such as the War on Terror declared by George W. Bush after the 9/11 attacks – namely, the institutionalization of the US naval base at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba (GITMO) as the main detention facility for American prisoners, where every right of defense has been totally abolished in the name of the defense of rights. In the following contribution Alessandra Calanchi brings us back to the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century to investigate how a number of almost forgotten science-fiction novels project onto the Red Planet and its colonization anxieties about possible catastrophic emergencies that could lead to the extinction of the human species. Seventy years later other anxieties about the dangers of undiscriminated scientific and technological "progress," and about the disruption of the community it could entail, are the focus of two novels as different as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Stephen King's *The Stand*, in Salvatore Proietti's essay, which argues that they both reject Schmitt's and Agamben's state of exception as a way to cope with the difficulties of rebuilding a sense of community after radical crises. Environmental cataclysms and the states of emergency they create are also examined, from an ecocritical approach, in Ali Dehdarirad's article about William Vollmann's *Imperial* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, which shows how the two novels use migration as both a thematic center and a metaphor for states of uncertainty and instability that are the inevitable outcome of states of emergency. In her essay Cinzia Schiavini moves the center of attention to the aftermath of the single recent historical event

(9/11) that justified the most thorough suspension of civil rights in the USA, as represented in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*: the novel identifies the state of emergency/exception not as a temporary response to contingent crises but as a constant identitarian mode in American culture that 9/11 only made come to the fore. The last contribution to this special section of the journal, Angelo Arminio's article on Matt Gallagher's *Empire City*, emphasizes how this uchronian/dystopian novel stages the prospect of the authoritarian degeneration of American society not as the result of some external threat that justifies extreme measures, but as the final outcome of dynamics which have always been inherent to the US brand of democratic state and its imperialist ideology.

Stefano Luconi

# "The Least Worst Place": Guantánamo in the US "War on Terror"

## Prelude

Since President Abraham Lincoln suspended the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus in the area between Philadelphia and the District of Columbia on 27 April 1861, during the civil war (Carwardine 164; Stahr 283-84), national emergencies have seemed to offer the federal government justifications to discontinue compliance with due process rights. Yet, Lincoln's decision was successfully challenged in Ex parte Merryman in 1861, although the president did not hesitate to ignore the verdict that such authority lay exclusively with Congress. Lincoln fared no better when the US Supreme Court ruled in Ex parte Milligan in 1866 that the chief executive was not entitled to have citizens tried before military tribunals where civil courts were operational.

The subsequent rise of a US empire in the late nineteenth century encouraged American jurisprudence to side with the president and to legitimize states of exception during emergencies for national security. This process reached an early climax with Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.'s doctrine of "clear and present danger" in Schenck v. United States (48, 52), a 1919 landmark decision made within the context of World War I that, in order to allow the suppression of anti-draft dissent, determined when an individual's right to free speech under the First Amendment could be constitutionally limited (Linfield 50-54).

Yet, though as part of the much broader consideration of the violation of civil liberties in wartime, it was only during World War II that US courts started specifically to restrict due process as regards habeas corpus. In 1942 Ex parte Quirin concluded that a writ for such a privilege did not apply to eight German plain-clothes saboteurs who had been captured on US soil and that a military court established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt could sentence them to death because they did not wear

uniforms and were, therefore, "unlawful combatants" (3-4, 31, 35). The latter was a third legal status, other than a civilian and a member of the military, that the Supreme Court devised so as to exempt the detainees from the rules and privileges protecting prisoners of war. Similarly, in Johnson v. Eisentrager the justices held in a six to three decision in 1950 that German war criminals who had been apprehended in China while aiding Japanese troops and were confined in a US-managed prison outside American territory had no right to a writ of habeas corpus on the grounds that US courts had no jurisdiction over individuals who had never set foot in the United States. A subsequent decision, however, undermined the ruling in part. In 1973 the Supreme Court judged in Braden v. 30th Judicial Circuit Court that a prisoner's physical presence within a court's jurisdiction was not "an invariable prerequisite" for petitioning, providing that the tribunal could reach the detainee's custodians (495). The specific case involved interstate litigation, as the petitioner, Charles D. Braden, was serving a sentence in a jail in Alabama and had applied to the District Court for the Western District of Kentucky. Still, the ratio of the verdict could potentially affect prospective detainees of the American government outside the United States, too, since a US court could always get to the federal authorities responsible for that imprisonment ("Habeas Corpus").

These rulings set precedents when US jurisprudence addressed habeas corpus issues related to alleged operatives of al-Qaeda. In the wake of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, which caused 168 victims on 19 April 1995, one year later Congress enacted Public Law 132, which – among its provisions – limited in part resort to writs of habeas corpus in cases of terrorism (see Kochan). Nonetheless, against the backdrop of the previous legal controversies surrounding the federal handling of combatants in prior armed conflicts, the US government endeavored to play on safer juridical ground when it came to the treatment of prisoners in its so-called "war on terror" in response to al-Qaeda's attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001.

This article examines the reasons for the selection of a military camp within the US naval base at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba (GITMO) as the main detention facility for American prisoners in the "war on terror." It also outlines the initial support of the jurisprudence for Washington's unilateral approach in crushing the inmates' most basic rights as well as

the ensuing interference of political expediency with the slow inroads of due process and habeas corpus into Guantánamo. The article further argues that the Bush administration turned GITMO into the materialization of a state of exception à la Giorgio Agamben (22) resulting from the emergence of Washington's backlash against al-Qaeda, within the context of the securitization of counter-terrorism policies, and that the failure of the succeeding presidencies to close Guantánamo as a place of confinement have allowed such an exception to become the rule, contradicting and well-nigh obliterating the subsequent transformations of the normative aspects of US jurisprudence concerning inmates' rights in the "war on terror."

## The Aftermath of al-Qaeda's 2001 Attacks

On 13 November 2001 President George W. Bush issued a comprehensive order authorizing the capture, trial by military commissions, and punishment of noncitizens involved in acts of terrorism against the United States. His measure also ensured that the aliens subject to it could be detained for an indefinite period of time without being accused of specific crimes and without the right to seek redress in court for their imprisonment (Bush, "Detention" n. pag.). The president subsequently maintained that "the system was based closely on the one created by FDR in 1942" (Bush, *Decision Points* 167). Nonetheless, while the defendants in Ex parte Quirin did not dispute the fact that they were German military agents, this was not necessarily the case with the detained suspects in Bush's "war on terror," who often denied current and even past relations with al-Qaeda (Eisgruber and Sager 173). Actually, most of GITMO inmates were not dangerous terrorists but – to quote a Congressional hearing – the "unluckiest of the unlucky" (US House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs 49). Major General Michael E. Dunlavey, the commandant at Guantánamo until October 2002, even complained that he was receiving "Mickey Mouse" prisoners (qtd. in Mayer 184). Indeed, the US military captured as few as 5 percent of the detainees on the actual battlefield. Afghan individuals, members of the Northern Alliance (the main local anti-Taliban military coalition), and Pakistani border guards sold 86 percent of the inmates into captivity for bounties promised by American authorities and ranging

from $5,000 to $25,000. As the annual per capita income was roughly $300 in Afghanistan, it is likely that greed and false allegations rather than concrete proofs led to the turning in of many supposed al-Qaeda and Taliban combatants (Khan 66-67). The munificent – by Afghan standards – reward system resulted in "a perverse incentive" (Holmes 336). After all, in a nation with about six million adults and roughly eight million Kalashnikovs, possessing an AK-47 rifle was regarded in itself as an act of hostility against the US troops (Willett 7-8). As Fiona de Londras, a scholar of global legal studies has concluded, "individuals have been captured and handed over to the US as al-Qaeda fighters [...] in return for enormous financial rewards" without the necessity "to present rigorous evidence that the captured individuals are in fact 'combatants' within the 'war on terror'" (96).

Bush started his military counteroffensive against terrorism by specifically launching Operation Enduring Freedom to topple the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and to bring to justice the al-Qaeda operatives who had found sanctuary in that country, conflating two groups that were not the same movement and thereby "creating the very conditions for a long-term, open-ended commitment" to fight in that area (Malkasian 215). Consequently, his administration needed a place where it could enforce the president's order, namely a location where the US government could detain, interrogate, and possibly try legally the individuals it was planning to apprehend without causing the judicial controversies that had previously characterized the confinement and treatment of foreign fighters during past national emergencies such as World War II. Indeed, new disputes could not be ruled out. Human-rights advocates had already objected to the living conditions in temporary internment camps in Afghanistan in late 2001 and interrogation of fighters in military operations was questionable under the Geneva Conventions (Greenberg 1-7). Additional criticism was likely to result from Bush's problematic resort to the term "war." The president used this word to define the asymmetric conflict against such a fluid and transnational phenomenon as global terrorism,[1] but his administration did not consider the supposed alien terrorists as "prisoners of war." Indeed, the US government refused to apply the 1949 Third Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War to al-Qaeda and Taliban detainees on the grounds that they were "unlawful combatants" and, therefore, according to Secretary of

Defense Donald Rumsfeld, did "not have any rights" under such a covenant (Secretary of Defense n. pag.). White House Counsel Alberto R. Gonzales later pointed out that the military campaign against global terrorism had made those rules obsolete, in particular as regards their "strict limitations on questioning of enemy prisoners" (2).

Bush's decision was an act of legal unilateralism because article 5 of the Third Geneva Convention mandates that captured combatants whose status is in doubt be considered prisoners of war until a competent tribunal determines otherwise. But the Department of Justice concluded from the statement of Assistant Attorney General Jay S. Bybee that the White House did not have to comply with such agreements since "customary international law, whatever its source and content, does not bind the president, or restrict the actions of the United States military, because it does not constitute federal law recognized under the Supremacy Clause of the Constitution" (2). Washington's stand also replicated other demonstrations of Bush's go-it-alone style in the legal sphere. The most notable precedents, occurring prior to al-Qaeda's attacks on 11 September 2001, were the successful efforts to prevent the United States from joining the International Criminal Court and the parallel campaign to limit any potential action by this institution against US citizens charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity (Daalder and Lindsay 65-66, 192-93; see also Galbraith). Consequently, both the alleged terrorists' internment, despite the fact that no formal charges were brought against them, and their undetermined confinement, so as to pry intelligence out of the inmates by means that William J. Haynes II, the general counsel of the Department of Defense, called "counter-resistance techniques" (which included twenty-four hour interrogations, stress positions, removal of clothing and other humiliations, sensory deprivation, and use of individual phobias), required a place that was not only hidden from the eyes of human rights activists but that was also outside the jurisdiction of US courts in order to avoid possible legal challenges. This meant that the Bush administration had to extend its powers and to introduce a state of exception concerning the status of its detainees – who were subject neither to the Geneva Conventions nor to federal courts – and their treatment. In other words, the US government resorted to practices that were "illegal" by the standards of international

laws but, at the same time, "juridical and constitutional," according to Washington's interpretation (Agamben 28).

As of 11 December 2001, two months into the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, according to Rumsfeld, the alternatives for the detention of prisoners were Afghanistan itself, American ships at sea, the captives' countries of origins or even locations within the United States (Department of Defense). Later on in that month, however, while the US government was temporarily holding forty-five fighters from al-Qaeda and the Taliban – including American citizen John Walker Lindh – in part at the Kandahar airport in Afghanistan, in part on an assault ship in the Arabian Sea, the choice fell to Guantánamo. The latter location was, in Rumsfeld's eyes, "the least worst place we could have selected" (qtd. in Schrader n. pag.). Eventually, ships were ruled out because they were too small for a prospective large number of prisoners; detention aboard would be too costly for American taxpayers; internment facilities on US territory – including Guam – met the opposition of residents and voters (Seelye n. pag).

The US military compound at Guantánamo had housed thousands of Cuban refugees and Haitian expatriates in the 1990s (Hansen 265-302). Thus, once turned into a detention camp, it would be large enough for the prisoners of the "war on terror." Yet GITMO had another reason for the location of a detention camp to confine al-Qaeda operatives and Taliban fighters, since, as Pentagon spokesperson Victoria Clarke admitted, "we want to talk to them pretty thoroughly" (qtd. in Schrader n. pag.). Though a key facility in what Chalmers Johnson has called the US "empire of bases" spanning the globe (8), Guantánamo was situated on the sovereign soil of Cuba and was not a property of Washington. Indeed, it was part of a worldwide network of overseas and extraterritorial military sites, officially numbering 686 in 2015 but probably many more at the height of the "war on terror," which began to be built when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the destroyers for bases agreement with the United Kingdom in 1940, paving the way for the strengthening of the US global empire and the enforcement of a forward strategy that implies the immediate engagement of hostile threats emerging abroad (see Vine). Although GITMO had been on a permanent lease to the United States since 1903, it had not been formally sold to the US government. Consequently, it could easily fall within the category of an "unincorporated territory," according to the

so-called Insular Cases settled by the Supreme Court between 1901 and 1922 in order to let Washington acquire foreign regions without granting them the prospect of future statehood within the turn-of-the-twentieth-century consolidation of the American empire (Hopkins 513-15). That status defined a sort of legal borderland where the US Constitution could not be enforced. Characterizing Guantánamo as a zone of anomie provided some legal – albeit vague – justification for torture as well as for cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment of prisoners (Kaplan 841-42). Since its "empire of bases" enabled Washington to preserve "formal fictions of nation-state sovereignty" over such installations (Kramer 1371), the lack of US official dominion over GITMO voided the accountability of the Bush administration as to the prisoners' plight. Furthermore, in the opinion of Deputy Assistant Attorneys General Patrick F. Philbin and John C. Yoo, "a district court cannot properly entertain an application for a writ of habeas corpus by an enemy alien detained at Guantánamo Bay Naval Base" (9). Indeed, to explain the selection of GITMO as a place of confinement for alleged al-Qaeda and Taliban members, Department of State lawyer David Bowker acknowledged that the Bush administration intended to "find the legal equivalent of outer space" (qtd. in Isikoff and Taylor 23). Likewise, US navy advocate general Donald J. Guter later pointed out that "what they were looking for was the minimum due process that we could get away with" (qtd. in Lasseter n. pag.). Bush confirmed Guter's suspicion for the choice of Guantánamo because the president wrote in his memoirs that "the Justice Department advised me that prisoners brought there had no right of access to the US criminal justice system" (Bush, *Decision Points* 166). After all, the main reason why the Clinton administration had placed Cuban and Haitian "boat people" in GITMO in the 1990s was to prevent them from claiming political asylum on US soil (Smith 282).

## The Courts' Initial Response

The secretary of Defense, who had approved Haynes's memorandum about "counter-resistance techniques" on 2 December 2002,[2] rescinded his consent for some of such methods a few weeks later, on 15 January 2003, and allowed harsh tactics in the future only "if warranted in an individual

case" and with his specific permission (Rumsfeld 1). Such authorizations were by no means few. Since the first inmates landed at GITMO on 11 January 2002, the detention camp has held 780 prisoners of the "war on terror" ("The Guantánamo Docket" n. pag.). Mistreatment of detainees continued even after Rumsfeld's change of instructions and his public – albeit ambivalent and qualified – statement that "we do plan to, for the most part, treat them in a manner that is reasonably consistent with the Geneva conventions to the extent they are appropriate" (qtd. in Jeffery n. pag.). Indeed, according to national security scholar Karen J. Greenberg in *The Least Worst Place*, abuses were fewer in the first three and a half months of the internment structure's operations than in the following years. The most outrageous case was that of Mohamedou Ould Slahi. A Mauritanian arrested in his home country on 20 November 2001 on allegations of having ties to al-Qaeda, Slahi was moved to GITMO on 2 August 2002. He spent fourteen years in the detention camp, without any formal charge, while enduring physical and psychological coercion, extended periods of solitary confinement, death threats to himself and his relatives, and sexual harassment before he was released in October 2016 (see Slahi).

Yoo argued that the US Constitution allowed some flexibility "in America's national security posture" (x-xi). But his and Philbin's conclusion about habeas corpus in GITMO was tentative and drew upon their own interpretation of Johnson v. Eisentrager among other rulings. They, consequently, warned Haynes that "the issue has not yet been definitely resolved by courts" and, as a result, "there is some possibility that a district court would entertain such an application" (Philbin and Yoo 9). Actually, their stand was soon challenged within the Bush administration itself. Most notably, the legal adviser to the Department of State remarked that "although the writ of habeas corpus historically has not been available to enemy aliens captured and imprisoned outside US territory, […] even those enemy prisoners without a right to habeas corpus historically have had their applications considered by the US federal courts, including the Supreme Court" (Taft 37). This was the course that American jurisprudence followed in the end, though not immediately.

On 30 July 2002, in Odah v. United States, Judge Colleen Kollar-Cotelly of the US District Court for the District of Columbia sided with the Bush administration in dismissing a petition for habeas corpus that the

Center for Constitutional Rights had filed on behalf of Fawzi Al Odah and another eleven Kuwaiti citizens jailed at GITMO. Kollar-Cotelly referred to Johnson v. Eisentrager and followed Philbin's and Yoo's argument in order to conclude that her court lacked jurisdiction because the Cuban government retained "ultimate sovereignty" over the Guantánamo base. The following year, on 11 March 2003, the Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia upheld Kollar-Kotelly's decision and confirmed that foreigners detained abroad, which obviously comprised GITMO, could not claim the protection of the US justice system regardless of their guilt or innocence (Tucker n. pag.).

One week after this second verdict the United States invaded Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein in a further step of Bush's "war on terror." By accepting it at face value the thesis of the Justice Department lawyers that Guantánamo was a place without rules in the Caribbean or at least a legal limbo, outside the reach of both domestic and international laws, the judges assented to the same unilateralism that Washington was about to display in foreign policy in eight days. The president contended that the fall of the Baghdad regime would pave the way for the democratization of the greater Middle East in a sort of virtuous domino theory (Bush, "President Discusses" n. pag.). Therefore, agreeing with the petitioners' counselors that the US government had violated the American Constitution would have caused serious embarrassment to the country at the time of another forthcoming national emergency when patriots were supposed to rally to Bush and his redefinition of national security "in terms of the promotion of freedom around the world" (Leffler and Legro 3). Specifically, the denial of a writ of habeas corpus in Odah v. United States barred the plaintiffs from the legal means to argue that Washington infringed the very human rights that it intended to restore in Iraq. Acknowledging illegal detentions in Guantánamo would have been tantamount to admitting what Harold Hongju Koh has called "the double standard" of the United States underlying the Bush Doctrine as regards the global spread of civil liberties and the ensuing due process: "one for itself and another for the rest of the world" (1500). Ironically enough, in an address timed to coincide with Cuba's Independence Day, on 20 May 2002, Bush, using a metaphor, contended that Fidel Castro's dictatorial regime did not respect "the rule of law" and had transformed "this beautiful island into a prison" (qtd. in Rosen and Kassab 67), but what the president

failed to mention was that it was Washington itself that had turned GITMO into an actual detention facility.

## Change in the Jurisprudential Tide

Realpolitik in courts was short lived. In late April 2004 media reports began to document that US military personnel had systematically violated detainees' human rights at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, not for intelligence purposes but to gratify their own sadism, which the wardens' mere lack of self-restraint by itself could hardly account for without the stimuli of an institutionalized torture program. In any case, regardless of its specific causes, the evidence for such behavior was ironclad because the perpetrators were unwise enough to have their pictures taken while they were torturing the inmates or even vilifying corpses (see Hersh).

Against this backdrop, on 28 June 2004, in Rasul v. Bush, a case that had consolidated the appeal by Odah with that brought by four British and Australian nationals, the Supreme Court ruled that federal tribunals did hold jurisdiction over GITMO to consider the legality of the inmates' confinement and, therefore, alien detainees were entitled to petition for writs of habeas corpus. As Braden v. 30th Judicial Circuit Court had previously concluded, six justices out of nine agreed that the writ of habeas corpus "does not act upon the prisoner who seeks relief, but upon the person who holds him in what is alleged to be unlawful custody" (Rasul v. Bush 10). Consequently, Guantánamo finally emerged from its legal limbo, was no longer a lawless zone, and became a juridical space.

The Supreme Court subsequently stuck to its guns and rejected attempts at dodging its decision. The Bush administration established Combatant Status Review Tribunals to determine the legal status of the prisoners at GITMO and had Congress pass the Detainee Treatment Act in 2005. Although the measure set standards for interrogation and prohibited cruel, inhuman, and degrading conduct towards individuals in custody of the US government, it also denied prisoners accused of engaging in the "war on terror" the right to challenge the legitimacy of their detention in Guantánamo in federal courts. Yet, in 2006, the Supreme Court held, on

the one hand, that the 2005 legislation was inapplicable to habeas corpus cases filed before the enactment of the provision and, on the other, that the Combatant Status Review Tribunals violated the Geneva Conventions as incorporated in the US Uniform Code of Military Justice (see Hamdan v. Rumsfeld). Likewise, after Congress had supplemented Bush's military order of 13 November 2001 by both explicitly authorizing the president to create military commissions in order to try unlawful alien combatants and even retrospectively depriving GITMO detainees of access to habeas corpus review, in 2008 the Supreme Court reinstated the inmates' right to petition federal tribunals to evaluate the legality of their confinement. It was the Constitution which granted the privilege of habeas corpus – a majority of five justices held – and, thereby, Congress could not repeal that right (see Boumediene v. Bush).

## The Failure to Shut Down Guantánamo

The emergence of GITMO from a legal vacuum could also have resulted in its demise as a place of detention. Bush contended in his autobiography that "closing the prison at Guantánamo in a responsible way" had been "a goal" of his second term (*Decision Points* 179-80). As soon as he was confirmed in 2006, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates reportedly remarked that "the detention facility [...] had become so tainted abroad that legal proceedings at Guantanamo would be viewed as illegitimate" and, therefore, "should be shut down as quickly as possible" (US House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services 36).

The US government eventually transferred 532 out of the 780 inmates in custody under Bush to other countries before the president left the White House. But the awareness that about one in five of these former GITMO detainees who were later released or managed to escape ended up reengaging in terrorism-related activities and another 13.9 percent was suspected of doing so curbed further transfers (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2).

In his successful 2008 campaign for president, Barack Obama referred to Guantánamo as "a sad chapter in American history" and committed

himself to closing it (qtd. in Goldenberg n. pag.). Therefore, two days after entering the White House, he signed an executive order to that effect applicable within one year (Obama 233). The measure, however, was never carried out during his two terms. When Obama left the Oval Office in 2017, although he had managed to relocate 185 inmates during his presidency, 41 prisoners were still detained at GITMO (Rosenberg, "Final Obama Transfer" n. pag.). In May 2009, the Senate refused to appropriate funds for 80 million dollars to shut down the internment camp by an overwhelming bipartisan majority of 90 votes to 6 on the grounds that the Obama administration had not provided a plan detailing where the detainees would be transferred. In fact, under pressure from their constituents, the legislators intended to prevent the government from moving the inmates to facilities in the United States. Indeed, Congress blocked a project to purchase Thompson Correctional Center from the State of Illinois and to use it for GITMO prisoners (Köhler 201-04). After the Republican party secured a majority in both the House and the Senate in the 2010 mid-term elections, the following year Public Law 112-81 barred resorting to taxpayers' money to relocate inmates to US soil and to build facilities to accommodate them (US Congress 1566-67). This stand mirrored the prevailing orientation of public opinion. Indeed, only 35 percent of Americans favored closing Guantánamo in January 2009 (Morales 22). Opponents were 56 percent as late as 2016 (Hensch n. pag.).

Republican opposition to Obama's blueprint was also an indirect means to attack the president himself and to accuse Democratic policies of being soft on terrorism. The strategy of discrediting the Democratic party in the field of national security by exploiting the plan to shut down GITMO gained momentum as the 2016 elections drew closer. For instance, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) called Guantánamo "the perfect place for terrorists" (qtd. in Koren n. pag.). Likewise, Devin Nunes (R-CA), the chairperson of the House Intelligence Committee, stated that Obama's "determination to move some of the world's most dangerous terrorists to U.S. soil is inexplicable and unacceptable" (qtd. in Ryan and Goldman n. pag.). Risks of re-radicalization in case of repatriation and Washington's troubles in persuading its allies to accept the detainees further interfered primarily with the relocation of the Yemeni prisoners, the largest

nationality group of GITMO's inmates during the Obama administration (Finn n. pag.). Other hurdles arose because Washington could not deport its prisoners to their native countries if there were reasons to believe that they would be persecuted or subject to torture there. For instance, in the case of the Uyghurs, who could not be repatriated to the People's Republic of China, the US government had to undertake gruelling negotiations to persuade a few third nations to receive these inmates (Obama 582).

The outcome of legal procedures, too, discouraged additional transfers out of Guantánamo. The experience of the first GITMO prisoner to stand trial before a federal court on US soil provided a case in point. In 2010 Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani was moved to New York City for prosecution. A former bodyguard of Osama bin-Laden and an al-Qaeda operative, Ghailani had participated in the 1998 bombing of the US embassies at Nairobi in Kenya and Dar al-Salaam in Tanzania. Eventually, however, he was found guilty of only one of the 285 charges, including multiple murders, levied against him (McGreal n. pag.). Chances that other judges might dismiss the indictments on the grounds that proofs against the defendants had been obtained by means of torture at Guantánamo encouraged the US government to keep the supposed terrorists at GITMO to lessen the risk of their acquittal before tribunals in the United States if they were prosecuted through the criminal justice system. After all, even the military commissions system turned out to be less punitive than expected. Most notably, Washington was eventually forced to release Slahi, even though after almost fifteen years of internment, because a military prosecutor, Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Couch, refused to press charges against him after learning that the most incriminating evidence had resulted from resort to torture (Bravin n. pag.). As legal scholar Jennifer Daskal observed as early as 2007, "taking someone out from under the rule of law is much easier than returning them back to a legal regime" (29).

That approach did not change in the following years. Donald Trump vowed to keep Guantánamo open and to "load it up with bad dudes" during the 2016 presidential campaign (Ackerman n. pag.). Actually, his administration relocated only one inmate out of GITMO. Ahmed Mohammed al-Darbi, who had pleaded guilty at a 2014 military commission, was moved to Saudi Arabia in 2018 to serve out his sentence

(Pilkington n. pag.). President Joe Biden resumed the transfers in 2021 (Ryan and Gearan n. pag.). Nonetheless, it took about eight months for his administration to authorize the repatriation of the latest detainee to be released, Afghan Assadullah Haaron Gul, who left Guantánamo in late June 2022 although his detention had been ruled illegal by a federal judge in October 2021 (Rosenberg, "US Repatriates Afghan" n. pag.). Moreover, as of 19 July 2022, thirty-six prisoners were still held at GITMO: two had been convicted of terrorist-related crimes and were serving their sentence there; ten were facing charges under the military commissions system; twenty had been designated as transferable even though that status had not resulted in their resettlement; and four were not recommended for relocation somewhere else ("The Guantánamo Docket" n. pag.).

## Conclusion

A legacy of turn-of-the-twentieth-century US imperialism in the wake of the 1898 military conflict against Spain, GITMO started its role in the "war on terror" as a place to detain and interrogate American prisoners that purposely did not exist on the map of Washington's legal system and criminal justice. Yet, far from being a *non-lieu a là* Marc Augé, namely a space of transience and temporality for people, Guantánamo has turned out to be a location where suspects can be compelled to stay for good. In the beginning, inmates were even prohibited from challenging the legitimacy of their indefinite confinement. For some of them, however, their conditions have not changed, although the Supreme Court eventually recognized the captives' access to habeas corpus review. Actually, political maneuvering in Congress and the probable failure to secure the convictions of defendants based on evidence obtained by means of torture have prevented the resettlement of a few prisoners. Against this backdrop, the public discourse has continued to identify GITMO with a liminal legal space where the US government could violate human rights and due process with impunity (see Greiner), though to a lesser extent than in the wake of al-Qaeda's attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and "a stain on America's reputation for years to come" ("No Easy Escape" 30).

Guantánamo has also stood out as the epitome of a state of exception, with reference to criminal justice and international laws, shaping not only the "war on terror" in particular but Washington's approach to national security in general. Moreover, the failure to discontinue confinement operations at the GITMO detention camp has until now resulted from a permanent sense of emergency and insecurity, causing a *de facto* never-ending state of exception where threats, though somehow increasingly undefined, are perceived as always imminent. While the "war on terror" is still pervasive in US society and the American worldview (see Lubin), so too is the ensuing state of exception. In other words, as Agamben has suggested, the high level of the fear-driven behavior that was reached in the wake of al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks has given no sign of being in significant decline.

## Notes

[1] "Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated" (Bush, "Address" n. pag.).

[2] Rumsfeld's signature and the date are handwritten on the memorandum itself (see Haynes II).

## Works Cited

Ackerman, Spencer. "Guantánamo Detention Facility in Limbo despite Trump's Vow to 'Load It Up.'" *The Guardian*. 22 Feb. 2017: n. pag. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/22/guantanamo-bay-trump-expansion-detainees-isis>.

Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005.

Augé, Marc. *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso, 1995.

Boumediene v. Bush 553 US 723. 2008.

Braden v. 30th Judicial Circuit Court 410 US 484. 1973.

Bravin, Jess. "The Conscience of the Colonel." *Wall Street Journal*. 31 Mar. 2007: n. pag. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB117529704337355155>.

Bush, George W. "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the Nation." 20 Sept. 2001: n.

pag. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html>.

Bush, George W. *Decision Points*. New York: Crown, 2010.

Bush, George W. "Detention, Treatment, and Trial of Certain Noncitizens in the War against Terrorism." 13 Nov. 2001: n. pag. <https://www.legislationline.org/documents/id/6054>.

Bush, George W. "President Discusses the Future of Iraq." 26 Feb. 2003: n. pag. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030226-11.html>.

Bybee, Jay S. "Memorandum for Alberto R. Gonzales and William J. Haynes II." 22 Jan. 2002: n. pag. <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/olc/legacy/2009/08/24/memo-laws-taliban-detainees.pdf>.

Carwardine, Richard. *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power*. New York: Knopf, 2006.

Daalder, Ivo H., and James M. Lindsay. *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy.* Washington: Brookings Institution P, 2003.

Daskal, Jennifer. "How to Close Guantánamo." *World Policy Journal* 24 (2007): 29-37.

de Londras, Fiona. *Detention in the "War on Terror": Can Human Rights Fight Back?* New York: Cambridge UP, 2011.

Department of Defense. "News Briefing: Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers." 11 Dec. 2002: n. pag. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/sept11/dod_brief118.asp>.

Eisgruber, Christopher L., and Lawrence G. Sager. "Civil Liberties in the Dragons' Domain: Negotiating the Blurred Boundary between Domestic Law and Foreign Affairs after 9/11." *September 11 in History: A Watershed Moment?* Ed. Mary L. Dudziak. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003. 163-79.

Ex parte Merryman 17 F. Cas. 144. 1861.

Ex parte Milligan 71 US 2. 1866.

Ex parte Quirin 317 US 1. 1942.

Finn, Tom. "Thirteen Years on, Yemeni Prisoners Await Release from Guantánamo." *Middle East Eye*. 16 June 2015: n. pag. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/thirteen-years-yemeni-prisoners-await-release-guantanamo>.

Galbraith, Jean. "The Bush Administration's Response to the International Criminal Court." *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 21 (2003): 683-702.

Goldenberg, Suzanne. "Obama Legal Advisers Draft Plans for Guantánamo." *The Guardian*. 10 Nov. 2008: n. pag. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/nov/10/obama-guantanamo-bay-prison>.

Gonzales, Alberto R. "Memorandum for the President: Decision Re Application of the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War to the Conflict with al-Qaeda and the Taliban."

25 Jan. 2002: n. pag. <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/OathBetrayed/Gonzales%201-25-02.pdf>.

Greenberg, Karen J. *The Least Worst Place: Guantanamo's First 100 Days*. New York: Oxford UP, 2009.

Greiner, Bernd "'Nine Eleven,' Afghanistan, Irak: Das Ende des amerikanischen Jahrhunderts." *Blätter für Deutsche und Internationale Politik* 66 (2021): 43-52.

"The Guantánamo Docket." *New York Times*. 19 July 2022: n. pag. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/guantanamo-bay-detainees.html>.

"Habeas Corpus: Interstate Detainers and *in Personam* Jurisdiction." *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 125 (1976): 215-33.

Hamdan v. Rumsfeld 548 US 557. 2006.

Hansen, Jonathan M. *Guantánamo: An American History.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2011.

Haynes, William J., II. "Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense." 27 Nov. 2002. The National Security Archive, George Washington University: n. pag. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB127/02.12.02.pdf>.

Hensch, Mark. "Poll: Over Half of Americans Oppose Closing GITMO." *The Hill.* 4 Mar. 2016. <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/271817-poll-over-half-oppose-closing-gitmo/>.

Hersh, Seymour M. *Chain of Command*. New York: Penguin, 2004.

Holmes, Stephen. "In Case of Emergency: Misunderstanding Tradeoffs in the War on Terror." *California Law Review* 97 (2009): 301-55.

Hopkins, A.G. *American Empire: A Global History*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2018.

Isikoff Michael, and Stuart Taylor, Jr. "The GITMO Fallout." *Newsweek*. 17 July 2006. 22-25.

Jeffery, Simon. "The Geneva Convention." *The Guardian*. 17 Jan. 2002: n. pag. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jan/17/afghanistan.comment>.

Johnson v. Eisentrager 339 US 763. 1950.

Johnson, Chalmers. *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic*. London: Verso, 2004.

Kaplan, Amy. "Where Is Guantánamo?" *American Quarterly* 57 (2005): 831-58.

Khan, Mahvish Rukhsana. *My Guantánamo Diary: The Detainees and the Stories They Told Me*. New York: Public Affairs, 2008.

Kochan, Andrea A. "The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996: Habeas Corpus Reform?" *Journal of Urban and Contemporary Law* 52 (1997): 399-417.

Koh, Harold Hongju. "On American Exceptionalism." *Stanford Law Review* 55 (2003): 1479-1527.

Köhler, Imre. *Framing the Threat: How Politicians Justify Their Choices*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019.

Koren, Marina. “Obama’s Last Guantánamo Pitch to Congress.” *The Atlantic*. 23 Feb. 2016: n. pag. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/obama-guantanamo-congress/470535/>.

Kramer, Paul A. “Power and Connections: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World.” *American Historical Review* 116 (2011): 1348-91.

Lasseter, Tom. “Day 4: Easing of Laws That Led to Detainee Abuse Hatched in Secret.” *McClatchy*. 18 June 2008: n. pag. <https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/special-reports/article24485059.html>.

Leffler, Melvyn P., and Jeffrey W. Legro. “Introduction.” In *To Lead the World: American Strategy After the Bush Doctrine*. Eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. 1-10.

Linfield, Michael. *Freedom Under Fire: US Civil Liberties in Times of War*. Boston: South P, 1990.

Lubin, Alex. *Never-Ending War on Terror*. Oakland: U of California P, 2021.

Malkasian, Carter. *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*. New York: Oxford UP, 2021.

Mayer, Jane. *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.

McGreal, Chris. “Guantánamo Detainee Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani Cleared of 284 Terror Charges.” *The Guardian*. 18 Nov. 2010: n. pag. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/18/guantanamo-detainee-ahmed-khalfan-ghailani>.

Morales, Lymari. “Americans Send No Clear Mandate on Guantánamo Bay.” *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 2009*. Eds. Alec M. Gallup and Frank Newport. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010. 22-23.

“No Easy Escape.” *The Economist*. 21 Aug. 2021. 30.

Obama, Barack. *A Promised Land*. New York: Crown, 2020.

Odah v. United States 321 F.3d 1134 DC Cir. 2003.

Office of the Director of National Intelligence. “Summary of the Reengagement of Detainees Formerly Held at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.” 2016: n. pag. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Reports%20and%20Pubs/Summary_of_the_Reengagement_of_Detainees_Formerly_Held_at_GITMO_Ma%204_2016.pdf>.

Philbin, Patrick F., and John C. Yoo. “Memorandum for William J. Haynes II Re Possible Habeas Jurisdition over Aliens Held in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.” 28 Dec. 2001. The National Security Archive, George Washington University: n. pag. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/torturingdemocracy/documents/20011228.pdf>.

Pilkington, Ed. “Guantánamo Prisoner Released in Surprise Move by Trump Administration.” *The Guardian*. 3 May 2018: n. pag. <https://www.theguardian.

com/us-news/2018/may/02/guantanamo-prison-ahmed-al-darbi-release-trump-administration>.

Rasul v. Bush 542 US 466. 2004.

Rosen, Jonathan D., and Hanna S. Kassab. *US-Cuban Relations: Charting a New Path*. Lanham: Lexington, 2016.

Rosenberg, Carol. "Final Obama Transfer Leaves 41 Prisoners at Guantánamo Bay." *Miami Herald*. 19 Jan. 2017: n. pag. <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/guantanamo/article127537514.html>.

Rosenberg, Carol. "US Repatriates Afghan Whose Guantánamo Detention Was Unlawful." *New York Times*. 24 June 2022: n. pag. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/24/us/politics/guantanamo-afghan-prisoner-released.html>.

Rumsfeld, Donald. "Memorandum for Commander USSOUTHCOM." 15 Jan. 2003. The National Security Archive, George Washington University: n. pag. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB127/03.01.15.pdf>.

Ryan, Missy, and Anne Gearan. "Biden Administration Repatriates Guantánamo Bay Inmate to Morocco." *Washington Post*. 19 July 2021: n. pag. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/guantanamo-biden-abdul-latif-nasir/2021/07/19/3f523f2e-e885-11eb-84a2-d93bc0b50294_story.html>.

Ryan, Missy, and Adam Goldman. "Obama Asks Lawmakers to Lift Obstacles to Closing Prison at Guantánamo Bay." *Washington Post*. 23 Feb. 2016: n. pag. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/white-house-unveils-plan-for-closing-military-prison-at-guantanamo-bay/2016/02/23/3860f408-da35-11e5-81ae-7491b9b9e7df_story.html>.

Schenck v. United States, 249 US 47. 1919.

Schrader, Esther. "POWs Will Go to Base in Cuba." *Los Angeles Times*. 28 Dec. 2002: n. pag. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-dec-28-mn-18408-story.html>.

Secretary of Defense. "News Briefing." 11 Jan. 2002: n. pag. <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/jan2002/briefings.html>.

Seelye, Katharine Q. "A Nation Challenged: The Detention Camp." *New York Times*. 28 Dec. 2001: n. pag. <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/28/us/nation-challenged-detention-camp-us-hold-taliban-detainees-least-worst-place.html>.

Slahi, Mohamedou Ould. *The Mauritanian*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2017.

Smith, Jean Eward. *Bush*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016.

Stahr, Walter. *Seward: Lincoln's Indispensable Man*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012.

Taft, William H., IV. "Memorandum to John C. Yoo." 11 Jan. 2002. The National Security Archive, George Washington University: n. pag. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/torturingdemocracy/documents/20020111.pdf>.

Tucker, Neeley. "Detainees Are Denied Access to US Courts." *Washington Post.* 12 Mar.

2002: n. pag. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2003/03/12/detainees-are-denied-access-to-us-courts/a9af63f5-f630-4a36-a298-15ce02f6a848/>.

US Congress. "Public Law 112-81." *United States Statutes at Large*. Washington: GPO, 2011. vol. 125, 1298-862.

US House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, 110th Congress, 1st Session. *Military Commissions Act and the Continued Use of Guantánamo Bay as a Detention Center.* Washington: GPO, 2008.

US House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, 110th Congress, 2nd Session. *City on the Hill or Prison on the Bay? The Mistakes of Guantánamo and the Decline of America's Image.* Washington: GPO, 2008.

Vine, David. *Base Nation: How US Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World.* New York: Holt, 2015.

Willett, P. Sabin. "Prelude: Who's at Guantánamo Anyway?" *The Guantánamo Lawyers: Inside a Prison Outside the Law*. Eds. Mark P. Denbeaux and Jonathan Hafetz. New York: New York UP, 2009. 7-12.

Yoo, John C. *The Powers of War and Peace: The Constitution and Foreign Affairs after 9/11*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005.

Alessandra Calanchi

# Out of Exception, Into Emergency: Fast-forward to Earth Zero

*"Faith" is a fine invention*
*For Gentlemen who see!*
*But Microscopes are prudent*
*In an Emergency!*
(Emily Dickinson, #202)

## Introduction

States of emergency have marked American literature ever since the colonial era. What changes in time is the kind of exit strategy from emergency – if any. While Anne Bradstreet confides in God after the burning of her house, Emily Dickinson, caught between faith and a microscope, will choose the latter. Every age has its emergencies – wars, drought, flooding, massacres – and literature has always been at the forefront, sometimes to report, sometimes to denounce, at other times simply to tell, its tones ranging from tragedy (Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Roth's *American Pastoral*) to irony (Ginsberg's *Bomb*) to dystopia (Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*).

I have chosen to write about a period that goes from the end of the nineteenth century to the first decade of the twentieth. This period was marked by exceptional technological progress as well as by a strong crisis of national identity. In 1890 the federal census announced the end of the Frontier, and three years later Frederick Jackson Turner read his famous paper entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" at the meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, during the World Columbian Exposition. A phase of history had come to an end,

and new frontiers were to be imagined if Americans wanted to pursue their "manifest" destiny. The terrible droughts which hit California, Texas, and Kansas in 1895 added to a sense of displacement within the country boundaries.

Over the centuries, the myth of exceptionalism has led the United States to describe themselves as a "city upon a hill" or a "beacon of liberty" or a "bastion of freedom" (Friedman 22) – in short, as a nation entitled to play a unique role on the world stage and capable of preserving values perceived as worthy of universal admiration. All this leads to the "perception that the United States applies one standard to the world and another to itself" (Koh 1487). It is beyond doubt that, while the American exception was being created, the idea that something might go wrong with it was spreading as well.

My research focuses on a bizarre corpus of novels which appeared on the literary scene at the *fin de siècle*, only to be soon forgotten. These novels belonged to different genres, ranging from utopia to scientific romance, and were addressed to a multifarious readership which might be interested in technology but also in parapsychology, in spiritual life after death but also in the new media of the time – the wireless and the telegraph. They were written by men as well as by women and had a common location: planet Mars. Also, they had a common denominator: they were counter-narrations of American exceptionalism and projected the US into outer space purposely in order to expose its limits and faults. Also, they had nothing to do with those "[n]arratives projecting human expansion into space [which] have been present since at least the late nineteenth century" (Rahder 161). They had nothing to do with colonialism and invasions. In their pages, science was not used – as happens in many SF novels – "as a tool to promote superiority" or "to sustain the view of […] 'white' supremacy'" (Patterson 33). And in our time they are almost unknown even to the scholars who work in the field of Martian imaginary, with a couple of exceptions (see Markley; Crossley). Also, the ethically superior and more "civilized" aliens (Martians) in the novels under examination do not just criticize the human civilization as a whole, but on the contrary they openly refer to the USA.

Since President Kennedy's "Moon Speech" we have grown used to the idea of an outer space frontier, an idea that was worked on through the years of the Cold War and has recently gained plausibility thanks to Elon

Musk's and Robert Zubrin's (respectively the chief engineer at SpaceX and the creator of the Mars Society) passionate campaigns, but at the end of the nineteenth century such an idea was purely fantastic. Yet it spread like a contagious disease, to the extent that the expression "Mars mania" swept through the United States (Crossley ix). Thanks to a new generation of telescopes Mars seemed nearer than ever, and the famous mistake in translating Schiaparelli's *canali* into "canals" instead of "channels" led many people – and even scholars – to believe that Mars was inhabited and therefore "civilized." The debate on inhabited worlds had already successfully migrated from Europe to America and from science to popular fiction (see Edgar Allan Poe's "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall" and *Eureka*).

What is particularly interesting in this literary corpus is that all the books have a common aim: namely, to react to the emergency/ies afflicting planet Earth and in particular the United States. They do not just describe utopian societies where the souls of dead people will move to, or where injustices will cease to exist – that is only a part of the story. At a deeper level, what these authors really do – whether through a medium, or through a scientist – is to propose a solution to a condition of emergency that is threatening the US and possibly the whole planet. They are not interested in exceptionalism, but in how to face emergency – an emergency which is structural and systemic, since it refers both to the nefarious exploitation of resources and to social and gender inequalities. In these novels, Martians (who are called by many different names) are intelligent, highly civilized people, who wish to help humans to progress on sustainable grounds.

Among the several novels belonging to this corpus,[1] I have chosen the following three as the most representative: *The Man from Mars* by Thomas Blot alias William Simpson (1891), *Unveiling a Parallel: A Romance by Two Women of the West* by Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant (1893), and *Journeys to the Planet Mars* by Sarah Weiss (1903). To these I will add an essay by astronomer Percival Lowell, entitled *Mars as the Abode of Life* (1908), since it shares the same concerns as the novels; here it is the author himself who invokes a radical change before it is too late, lest Americans (and maybe all humans) are obliged to look for another planet on which to take refuge. If a small number of very rich people will ever be able to fly to Mars it will be thanks to Elon Musk, but if we had heeded Lowell's

warnings we would probably not have to struggle against the very real emergencies of today.

## Men from Mars?

In *The Man from Mars* a Martian visits a terrestrial with the aim of informing him that the Earth will be destroyed if we do not quickly change our ethical and ecological attitudes. It is interesting to observe that the third edition (published in San Francisco in 1900 with the real name of the author) had this subtitle: *His Morals, Politics, and Religion. Revised and Enlarged by an Extended Preface and a Chapter on Woman Suffrage*. The preface (which occupies as many as 64 pages) speaks more about God, the Trinity, and Satan than about planet Mars; and yet, it offers such striking sentences as the following one, which refers to the dawn of Christianity but could be as easily linked to our contemporary age: "an age where three-fourths of mankind were outcasts, uncared, neglected, and abused by a cruel oligarchy" (Simpson 56).

The introduction opens with a male narrator informing the reader about the setting of the novel: "My habitation is upon a plateau on a mountain in California," which he later describes as a "weird place" (65). The fact that he has built a cabin with his own hands and the description that follows remind us instantly of *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau: "This charming spot has its voices, as restless as the lights and shadows which play about within. Each miniature waterfall has its liquid note; while during certain hours there comes from every quarter of the foliage above a confused melody of birds" (68).

Later on, we learn that the narrator has a telescope: "The heavenly body which most engages my attention is, excepted our satellite, the nearest one to us, our neighboring planet Mars. I believe that body to be inhabited by beings in many respects like those of the earth" (75). Things go on quite normally, until, one night, something strange happens:

> I looked out into the night. [...] A gentle breeze was stirring out of the West [...] Looking again, [...] I descried the figure of a man, not far from my window; and, strange to say, I was neither alarmed nor startled at his presence.

> His face, of which I saw but little more than its profile, was turned upward looking at the moon, and its expression was unmistakably one of admiration and wonder. His long, and apparently well-cared-for, hair and beard, reflected a golden sheen under the light above. His arms were folded, and his shape and attitude impressed me as being majestic. (82-83)

The second chapter opens with the stranger stepping inside: he is a polite man who addresses the narrator with these words: "My brother, […] you have a beautiful world. That moon of yours is magnificent" (85). Not realizing that the man comes from outer space, the narrator asks him: "Do you think Mars inhabited?" and the answer he gets is: "I am a good proof that it is […] I am here by a process as yet unknown to you, and which may be best described in your language as reflection. I am here by reflection. That is to say, my natural body is at my home, on the planet, which you call Mars. […] I know your thoughts" (85-87).

The Martian continues to list the fields in which Mars is superior to Earth (a more advanced civilization, greater knowledge in chemistry, a respectful attitude to animals, a vegetable diet, no wars, a common religion, etc.). As far as Earth is concerned, the Martian comments: "You have only measured us as a planet. We have measured you as a people. […] In your present state, you appear to us as a world of discord, confusion, and strife" (87-97). A significant part is devoted to politics: capitalism is defined as "misgovernment," and gender inequalities are called "relics of barbarism" (217, 219). In particular, the visitor expresses disdain about sexual discrimination: "Your estimate of the mental capacity of women is singularly erroneous […] with the enfranchisement of women the humanities of life would enter more largely into your politics […] your legislation in the hands of men alone has accomplished but little alleviating the distresses of humanity" (216). Not only that: thanks to suffrage women will be able to guarantee more welfare, more morality, more cooperation, as well as less corruption, less distress, and less speculation. The Martian also underlines the fact that "With us maternity is not allowed to absorb the whole of a woman's life" (227). The American listener is, as one can imagine, overwhelmed by all this and is finally left alone to reflect on the visitor's words about human (and American) "breathless pursuit of wealth, beyond all reasonable limit" (272). What seemed normality to him

starts becoming disquieting and ominous, a real emergency to face for his generation and those that follow.

## Parallels Revealed

In 1893, two women from Iowa, Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant, published the first American novel completely set on planet Mars. The authors called it a romance, but it is both a scientific romance and a powerful proto-feminist utopia. *Unveiling a Parallel: A Romance by Two Women of the West* (1893) tells the story of an American young man who travels to the Red Planet, where he is gradually forced to abandon his biased and stereotyped views about gender and society:

> The parallel which Jones and Merchant unveil is a double one: at the same time as they develop the similarities between America in the nineteenth century and the civilizations on Mars visited by their aeronautically-inclined young male narrator, they also argue for the basic similarities between male and female natures which would become apparent once women attained the rights and privileges traditionally enjoyed by men alone. (Hollinger 233)

In my opinion, it is true that the parallel of the title refers to a comparison between Mars and the Earth (or better, the United States), and yet the whole narration evokes a wider dualism (between men and women, rich and poor, old and young, nature and "civilization") which lies at the base of the Western construction of culture and politics. Here the protagonist is unaware of the crisis, if not actual emergency, taking place in his own world. He is the perfect representative of those people who believe in white male supremacy but find it difficult to defend their beliefs against all odds. On the contrary, Martians – men and women – do their best to persuade him of the absurdity of such terrestrial eccentricities as sexual double standard, gender gap, and social appearances.

Religion plays a significant role in the novel. While the final part of the book, which is set in a city far North from where the narrator lands (Lunismar), concentrates on spirituality, the long first part (set in Thursia)

portrays a materialistic society where religion exists and has something in common with the Christian tradition: even the Creation is included, but with an important difference. On Mars, as the story goes, "a pair of creatures, male and female, sprang simultaneously from an enchanted lake […] in the northern part of this continent. They were only animals, but they were beautiful and innocent. God breathed a Soul into them and they were Man and Woman, equals in all things" (Ilgenfritz and Merchant 57-58).

The question of gender is fundamental, but what we find here is a radical deconstruction of the young man's bias: while in *The Man from Mars* the alien is called "Man" (even in the title), here the American traveler remains nameless till the end of the story; moreover, he is invited from the very beginning of the tale to take off his clothes, forget about meat, and learn a new language. It is not only a question of gender, but of identity: the fact that our American protagonist is described as an unnamed creature who arrives from another planet is indicative of the real perspective from which the story is told. As a matter of fact, the narrator first resists the dismantling of his former identity, but later seems pleased about the reconstruction of his new self: "I happened to glance into the mirror, and I did not recognize myself. I had some sense of how a barbarian must feel in his first civilized suit" (17). Yet, his condition of being a stranger is there to stay: Martians "regarded me as I have some-times regarded un-English foreigners in the streets of New York" (31).

In the course of the novel, progressively and methodically, by gently objecting to everything the narrator tells them about his country of origin, the Martians reveal to their guest the dark side(s) of American exceptionalism. The young man is enchanted by the beauties of the planet and by the quality of places, food, and people: "their features were extraordinarily mobile and expressive" (7-8); "I found the fruit exceedingly refreshing" (8); "she was not like any other woman, – any woman I had ever seen before" (32). On the contrary, the inhabitants of Mars are horrified by whatever they learn about Earth – and about the US in particular. The narrator's astonishment on learning that Martian women can be bankers, invest money, and hold positions of power ("Do not your women engage in business?" "Well, not to such an extraordinary degree") provokes a strong reaction – "Is it because they are incapable, or – unreliable?" (42) – which upsets him because he

cannot find a reasonable response to this. The same happens throughout the story as regards sexuality, smoking, drinking, attending clubs, driving, and voting. Every time a parallel is implied, or alluded to, the terrestrial seems to lose ground since his dialectic is inadequate to justify the American status quo in the face of Martian self-evident and true exceptionality. Even as regards suffrage, the narrator cannot conceive of women voting – "the masculine instinct of superiority swelling within me" (49) – but he cannot explain the reasons for such an attitude.

In the final part of the novel, the narrator is led to a perfect society which has eliminated all inequalities. The poor do not exist: simply, "our people are not all equally rich" (215). Moreover, they believe in arts, sciences, education, honesty, and dignity. Machines do most jobs, but that just means that people have more time to enjoy leisure. Capitalism is completely unknown, and society is led by such principles as "mutual pleasure, mutual sympathy, mutual helpfulness" (216). And since life is considered sacred, "the body is held in honor, and his needs are respected" (218). Towards the end of the novel, as the protagonist is overwhelmed by the greatness of Martian society, his superior attitude turns to a feeble justification – "we are a young people" (238). Though God and religion play an increasing importance in the course of the novel, what strikes us today is the awareness, on the part of the female authors, of the need for a radical turn in political, social, and economic perspectives. They understood as early as 1893 that the world was changing, and even though they could not speak of the Anthropocene or Capitalocene or globalization, they were aware that the many unresolved problems concerning environment, economy, and class/gender/race discrimination would soon erupt.

## Psychic Journeys

A different approach is to be found in two other books from the same period, *Journeys to the Planet Mars*: *Our Mission to Ento* (1903) and *Decimon Huydas: A Romance of Mars* (1906). They are both authored by Sara Weiss and are social utopias of a particular kind, since they owe much to the supernatural: the journeys of the first title are, in fact, made with the help of a woman who is

called a Medium. What they portray are the desires and fears of American citizens in a period of uncertainty, poised between religion and science, spiritism and rationality, male patriarchy and female emancipation.

The idea we find at the core of both volumes is that technological progress will increase the possibility of communicating with Mars (here called Ento) through wireless magnetism and the development of physics: thanks to these, the relationships between humans and Martians will grow exponentially. Not only that: in *Journeys* the Red Planet is described as a place where "[r]ight living engenders health" (Weiss 324), so that humans can partake in this superiority. If, in the US, the social hygiene movement was engaged in improving health through moral control, scientists on Mars use microscopes to study and fight against viruses:

> In the adjoining class room other students are engaged in Microscopic examination of Crytogamic growths. For a short time we will observe them. We perceive that the specimens are of various species found in moist localities, or in ponds or other sluggish waters. That their sporules, wafted by winds or through the agency of aquatic fowls, are borne from one locality to another. That some are known to be inimical to health, even to life, but that science has found means to oppose and render ineffectual their virulence. (212)

Next to biology, chemistry also plays a fundamental role: "Equilibrium of chemical affinities means health; the reverse means disease" (221). True, the journeys here described are of a paranormal nature, but it is the scientific thought that is highlighted throughout the novel. Martians insist on "scientific inquiry" (v), "investigation/s" (v and passim), and "knowledge" (passim). The protagonist (Carl De L'Ester, an amateur astronomer) and the female medium who accompanies him in his travels are joined by a Band of elected spirits which includes Alexander von Humboldt, Louis Agassiz and, later on, Charles Darwin and Edward Bulwer Lytton. It makes no difference whether they are living or dead, since the boundaries between life and death are of no importance in the novel. What really matters is the message these illustrious people convey: "humans are as links of an unbreakable chain […] on Ento you will find the same humans […] as you find on any planet […] the universe is indeed a unit" (5, 40, 57).

Throughout the course of the novel the author insists on the superiority of Martian culture: "the Entoans, as a whole, are more highly civilized than are the peoples of our planet" (45). To give an example, they do not believe in superstition: "at this time among Earth's peoples [...] multitudes are held in the bonds of ecclesiastical legends and dogmas which ever obscure the truth, and superstition ever is where truth is not" (46). Also, "[i]n the arts, their attainments are productive of most excellent results. As much may be said of the sciences" (47).

I find chapter five the most intriguing part of the book, since there we meet Giordano Bruno, the famous heretic philosopher and astronomer who was condemned to the stake by the Inquisition and burned. It is interesting that the author chooses this champion of independent thought and disobedience to dogmas not because she wants to speak of the past, but in order to warn Americans about the risks they run if they do not defend and protect their highest value, that is freedom of speech:

> Madame, will you bear from me a message to the peoples of your native land? Yes? Then I thank you.
>
> Children of Earth's most favored land, children of America, I, Giordino [sic] Bruno, once a citizen of sun-kissed Italy, greet you.
>
> Rejoice unceasingly that freedom of thought and speech are yours. Guard jealously this priceless blessing which through centuries of bloodshed, torturing flames and agony unspeakable has become your heritage. Glorious indeed are your United States of America, blest beyond expression in being as a "City of refuge" to the oppressed of other nations. [...] Let your unalterable declaration be: Liberty of conscience, liberty of speech for all; license for no one.
>
> Cherish in your heart of hearts a love of justice, of forbearance, of toleration, of that charity which neither thinketh nor doeth evil, but permit no faction or Religion to interfere with your liberty of righteous action.
>
> Insidiously, aristocratic ideas are striving to cross the threshold of your Temple of Equality.
>
> Guard well its doorways.
>
> (87-89)

The image of the United States as a welcoming country for migrants is threatened by "aristocratic ideas" which are not made explicit in the novel,

but that can easily be referred to the politics of the time. Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century the US was becoming the most powerful nation in the world. Financial capitalism was also at its peak, thanks to the constant acquisition of labor from Europe and the establishment of monopolies. From the 1890s on, socialist ideas and worker protests spread, but there were also the first signs of a change in migratory policies: in a nation of immigrants, new immigrants began to be less welcome. After decades of hospitality, in 1882 we find the Chinese Exclusion Law and the first Immigration Act which restricts the access to Europeans excluding criminals, the sick, convicts, "lunatics", "those likely to become a public charge" (LPC, a label mostly used for women traveling alone), and in general "any person unable to take care of him or herself"; in 1891 the second Immigration Act increased controls and lengthened the list of excludible immigrants. In 1894 the Immigration Restriction League, taking inspiration from social Darwinism and eugenics, requested tests for the so-called "nonassimilating and undeserving," and in 1903 the third Immigration Act identified anarchists "as targets for exclusion."[2] The vision of America as a land of opportunity – of plenty, of milk and honey, of liberty – which fostered generations of "self-made men" was fading away. Exception was giving way to emergency.

## Abodes of Life

In those same years, an astronomer with an obsession for the Red Planet wrote three books, the last of which bears an interesting title: *Mars as the Abode of Life* (1908). It is a title that could make Elon Musk or Robert Zubrin envious. On his seventieth birthday, in April 2022, Zubrin was presented by key members of the Mars Society with a Mars base model named after him, and Musk has recently reiterated his goal to transport one million people to Mars by 2050 (Dvorsky).

The question is: is it possible that, as early as 1908, somebody was already dreaming – or better, projecting – a manned journey to planet Mars? And that that "somebody" was an astronomer, not a writer of fiction? Lowell – who was also a wealthy adventurer – had left his city,

Boston, and built an observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona, in 1894. He started watching the planet with the help of some assistants, drew maps, and rightly pictured Mars – unlike other astronomers of his time – as a "cooling, dying, drying planet, with declining atmospheric pressure and declining supplies of water. So far, so good – this general picture is still upheld today" (Hartmann 16). In the aforementioned book he went even further, wondering: "If simple life-forms had appeared on ancient Earth and evolved, why not on Mars?" (16-17). The theory was highly intriguing, but the idea that Mars could be inhabited turned out to be wrong. Telescopes and probes (starting from Mariner 4, 1964) would reveal that Mars was a desert, and that no canals nor vegetation nor people existed. And yet, in "his refusal to distinguish astronomical observation from sociological explanation, [...] he prefigured the hybridization of the human world and the earth-system that characterizes the Anthropocene" (Morton 131).

Today, after so many years, the debate concerning life on Mars continues. Mars is being watched, examined, analyzed, measured, listened to by rovers which send us daily news and pictures to the Earth. While some researchers are simply moved by a desire for knowledge, other scientists and investors are interested not so much in alien life but in the possibility for the human race to move to another planet, to *terraform* it, and have a second chance after the announced catastrophe of plan(et) A (= the Earth). As the conditions on planet Earth get worse and worse, colonial revivalism has been increasing: as Robert Markley suggests, "Mars has served as a screen on which we have projected our hopes for the future and our fears of ecological devastation on Earth" (2). Many questions arise: "Can humankind colonize the planet and transform its forbidding landscape into a habitable biosphere?" (Markley 5); and also: will alien life – if any – be respected? Shall we show more respect for the environment than what we have reserved for Earth?

Lowell had a truly pessimistic vision of men:

> The true history of man has consisted not in his squabbles with his kind, but in his steady conquest of all earth's animals except himself. He has enslaved all that he could; he is busy in exterminating the rest. From this he has gone on to turn the very forces of nature to his own ends. This task is recent and is yet

> in its infancy, but it is destined to great things. As brain develops, it must take possession of its world. Subjugation carries its telltale in its train; for it alters the face of its habitat to its own ends. Already man has begun to leave his mark on this his globe [sic] in deforestation, in canalization, in communication. So far his towns and his tillage are more partial than complete. But the time is coming when the earth will bear his imprint, and his alone. What he chooses, will survive; what he pleases, will lapse, and the landscape itself become the carved object of his handiwork. (108-10)

The astronomer was describing exactly what we now call the Anthropocene. He was a visionary scientist, and his words sound prophetic today. As we read in chapter four of his book *Mars and the Future of the Earth*, "[s]tudy of Mars proves that planet to occupy earthwise in some sort the post of prophet" (111). In other words, Lowell was saying that the Earth would decline in a similar way to that in which the Red Planet probably did. However, he was not listened to, nor believed.

In a review of the book published in *Nature* on April 22, 1909, we read this comment that makes us shiver today:

> The one great aim and object of the whole of the intelligent minds on Mars is concentrated on making the utmost use of the slowly diminishing water supply, and, as Prof. Lowell finally remarks, "the drying up of the planet is certain to proceed until its surface can support no life at all."
>
> Our earth, fortunately, is not in such an advanced stage of its own life-history that like measures are necessary, but undoubtedly the time will come when all nations will have to work together to one common end, namely, to survive at all.
>
> ("The Habitability of Mars", 212)

We can smile at the reference to intelligent Martians, but the smile will freeze when we realize how similar the current condition of Earth is to the one depicted by Lowell a little more than a century ago. He had already understood where our "civilization" would take us, and, in fact, that time has come.

## Conclusion

It is weird indeed. Today, our exit strategies from catastrophe include Mars colonization. The very planet that should have taught us to adopt a different attitude towards nature and to perform more sustainable politics is now alluring us with the tempting promises of a new frontier. Assuming that there might have been life on Mars in the past, some scientists and investors think that it would be possible for men to escape from Earth and take refuge on Mars in the future. Zubrin, in his "The Significance of the Martian Frontier," complains of a "loss of vigor" of American society at all levels of life, and Morton observes an "increasing decadence of the earth" (*Mapping Mars* 260). As Zubrin writes, "Once the production infrastructure is in place, populating Mars will not be a problem – under current medical conditions an immigration rate of 100 people per year would produce population growth on Mars in the 21st century comparable to that which occurred in Colonial America in the 17th." What interests us here is not the dubious plausibility of his words, but the ideas from which they originate. Even more than Colonial America, I recognize the legacy of Manifest Destiny, American exceptionalism, and the Republican myth of endless growth and imperial expansion at the core of this project, with the old frontier of the West replaced by the New Frontier of outer space. Colonial America is at the core of this project and it seems to me that we have moved no further. Social utopias, proto-feminist issues, and even Lowell's worrying prophecies seem to have been canceled and forgotten, so that today, after decades of postcolonial studies, authentic decolonization still seems to be a mirage.

If the most notable events of modern history – such as Pearl Harbor, the end of the Cold War, 9/11 and, recently, pandemics – have cyclically urged for what Donald Pease called "a reshaping of the exceptionalist paradigm" (20), the same is true with reference to current space projects, where the US still holds (the US is generally treated as a unity) a hegemonic position while competing with private corporations – now called NewSpace industries:

> The race to the Moon was an offshoot of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States […] The race to Mars is different. It's not being run between one country and another, but between the public sector and

> the private sector. Instead of a symbolic confrontation between communism and capitalism, it's a real, head-to-head battle between taxpayer funding and private investment. (May 144)

Some years ago, Charles A. Kupchan cleverly proposed an upgrade he called "Exceptionalism 3.0," with the US keeping their dual role as "the global policemen" and "the arbiter of great-power peace" (146-47) – but of course he could not foresee what would happen from 2019 to 2022 in terms of pandemics, wars, social upheavals, and environmental crises. Emergencies are now dictating the political agenda more and more often, and an exit strategy is what we really need. Some visionary scientists think that humanity could be reassessed as an interplanetary species, while critical theorists do not approve of the idea of space as a site for human societies, either because they see it as "merely the next step in neoliberal capitalism's search for new profits and markets" or simply because they lack a cosmological vision (Valentine 1045). And, of course, exceptionalism 3.0 also includes the current drive for a renewed expansion, for a conquest of the space frontier, for new forms of colonialism.

According to David Valentine, the human species does depend on space settlements: in a section of his article entitled "Outer Space as Exception" (1049) he responds to those who speak of the devastating effects of neoliberalism by proposing a totally different narrative of the future which is not just based on "fantasies of capitalist expansion and extraction" but – following Harvey and Jameson – on a revival of utopian thinking as a "key mode for a progressive and socialist politics" (1052). The debate is lively and far from over; and while "the search for Earth 2.0" continues, Outer Space is perhaps offering not so much a way out as the fascinating possibility of a new, eco-centric vision capable of overcoming both current emergencies and human exceptionalism (Rahder 158). In this view, which is influenced by a more-than-human ethics, American exceptionalism turns to human exceptionalism: "As human exceptionalism becomes less and less possible to justify bioscientifically, this twist of extraterrestriality reunites humans with Nature while dividing them once again as special" (165). I doubt that this idea of a cosmic purpose in life might save Earth from becoming a sort of Earth Zero.

## Notes

[1] *The Man from Mars* by Thomas Blot alias William Simpson (1891), *Messages from Mars, By the Aid of the Telescope Plant* by Robert D. Braine (1892), *Unveiling a Parallel: A Romance by Two Women of the West* by Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant (1893), *A Cityless and Countryless World* by Henry Olerich (1893), *Daybreak: The Story of an Old World* by James Cowan (1896), *Edison's Conquest of Mars* by Garrett P. Serviss (1898), *The Man from Mars* by William Simpson (1900), *To Mars with Tesla; or, the Mystery of the Hidden World* by J. Weldon Cobb (1901), *The Certainty of a Future Life in Mars. Being the Posthumous Papers of Bradford Torrey Todd* by Louis Pope Gratacap (1903), *Journeys to the Planet Mars* by Sarah Weiss (1903), *Lieut. Gullivar Jones: His Vacation* by Edwin Lester Linden Arnold (1905), *Decimon Huydas: A Romance of Mars* by Sarah Weiss (1906), *The Lunarian Professor and His Remarkable Revelations Concerning the Earth, the Moon and Mars* by James B. Alexander (1909), *The Man from Mars, Or Service for Service's Sake* by Henry Wallace Dowding (1910), *Through Space to Mars, or The Longer Journey on Record* by Roy Rockwood (1910), *Ralph 124C 41+ A Romance of the Year 2660* by Hugo Gernsback (1911), *To Mars via the Moon. An Astronomical Story* by Mark Wicks (1911).

[2] <https://immigrationhistory.org/timeline/>; <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/1882-immigration-act/>.

## Works Cited

Bradstreet, Anne. "Verses upon the Burning of our House, July 10th, 1666." *The Columbia Anthology of American Poetry*. Ed. Jay Parini. New York: Columbia UP, 1995.

Crossley, Robert. *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2011.

Dickinson, Emily. "Faith" (poem 202). *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. R. W. Franklin. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999

Dvorsky, George. "Elon Musk's Plan to Send a Million Colonists to Mars by 2050 is Pure Delusion: There's More to Settling the Red Planet Than Just Packing a Whole Lotta People Into Plus-sized Rockets." *Gizmodo*. 3 March 2022: n. pag. <https://gizmodo.com/elon-musk-mars-colony-delusion-1848839584>.

Friedman, Uri. "Anthropology of an Idea: American Exceptionalism." *Foreign Policy* 194 (2012): 22-23.

"The Habitability of Mars." *Nature* 2060 (22 Apr. 1909): 212.

Hartmann, William K. *A Traveler's Guide to Mars: The Mysterious Landscapes of the Red Planet*. New York: Workman Publishing, 2003.

Harvey, David. *Spaces of Hope*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000.

Hollinger, Veronica. "Utopia, Science, Postmodernism, and Feminism: A Trilogy of Significant Works." *Science Fiction Studies* 21 (1994): 232-37.

Ilgenfritz Jones, Alice and Ella Merchant. *Unveiling a Parallel: A Romance by Two Women of the West*. Boston: Arena Publishing Company, 1893.

Jameson, Frederic. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. New York: Verso, 2005.

Koh, Harold Hongju. "On American Exceptionalism." *Stanford Law Review* 55 (2003): 1479-527.

Kupchan, Charles A. "The Clash of Exceptionalisms: A New Fight Over an Old Idea." *Foreign Affairs* 97 (2018): 139-48.

Lowell, Percival. *Mars as the Abode of Life*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1908.

Markley, Robert. *Dying Planet: Mars in Science and the Imagination*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2005.

May, Andrew. *Destination Mars: The Story of Our Quest to Conquer the Red Planet*. London: North Road, 2017.

Morton, Oliver. *Mapping Mars: Science, Imagination, and the Birth of a World*. London and New York: Fourth Estate, 2002.

—. *The Planet Remade: How Geoengineering Could Change the World*. London: Granta Publications, 2015.

Patterson, Chloe. "Context Matters: Science, Politics and the Lingering Effects of Colonialism." *AQ: Australian Quarterly* 93 (2022): 31-39.

Pease, Donald. "Re-Thinking American Studies after US Exceptionalism." *American Literary History* 21 (2009): 19-27.

Rahder, Micha. "Home and Away: The Politics of Life after Earth." *Environment and Society* 10 (2019): 158-77.

Simpson, William (pseud. of Thomas Blot). *The Man from Mars*: *His Morals, Politics, and Religion*. *Revised and Enlarged by an Extended Preface and a Chapter on Woman Suffrage*. San Francisco: E. D. Beattie, 1900.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), reprinted as *The Frontier in American History*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1920.

Valentine, David. "Exit Strategy: Profit, Cosmology, and the Future of Humans in Space." *Anthropological Quarterly* 85 (2012): 1045-67.

Weiss, Sara. *Journey to the Planet Mars*, *or: Being a Record of Visits Made to Ento (Mars)*. New York: Bradford Press, 1903.

Zubrin, Robert. "The Significance of the Martian Frontier." *Ad Astra.* Sept.-Oct. 1994: n. pag. <https://space.nss.org/the-significance-of-the-martian-frontier-by-robert-zubrin/#:~:text=The%20frontier%20drove%20the%20development,can%20persist%20without%20such%20people>.

Salvatore Proietti

# The Provisional Utopia and the State of Exception: On *Ceremony* and *The Stand*[1]

*No sword, no gun, no warlike drum […]*
*For we know too well, these are keys to hell*
*And we march with empty hands.*
(John Brunner, "The Easter Marchers")

This essay arises from some affinities in the plot and in the ending of two late-1970s US novels, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978). In *Ceremony*, a sign that the healing process may have been successful for Tayo, the protagonist, is his refusal to assault a fellow veteran and friend, just as PTSD-stricken as he is, even though the latter is about to commit murder:

> It had been a close call. The witchery had almost ended the story according to its plan; Tayo had almost jammed the screwdriver into Emo's skull the way the witchery had wanted, savoring the yielding bone and membrane as the steel ruptured the brain. Their deadly ritual for the autumn solstice would have been completed by him. He would have been another victim, a drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud; and the Army doctors would say that the indications had been there all along […]. At home the people would blame liquor, the Army, and the war, but the blame on the whites would never match the vehemence the people would keep in their own bellies, reserving the greatest bitterness and blame for themselves, for one of them they could not save. (253)

Tayo's and his community's healing will be predicated on the rejection of violence, even when confronting a direct threat. After the mythical and metaphorical "witchery" that was troubling the Pueblos has been defeated,

a meaningful life can be envisaged, although no one can say for how long. The final line of the novel's conclusive poem/chant is, "It is dead for now" (261).

Two thirds of the way into King's post-apocalyptic *The Stand*, we are presented with a town-meeting of the Boulder Free Zone, a group of plague survivors from all corners of the country who have gathered in Colorado and are trying to oppose another group apparently bent on completing the world's destruction. Facing the emergence of acts of violence, and aware that the forces of evil and war have infiltrated the Free Zone, they opt for establishing a judiciary system. Only the rule of law can bring about meaningful community-building, as two of the characters argue:

> We've got a melting-pot society, a real hodge-podge, and there are going to be all kinds of conflicts and abrasions. I don't think any of us want a frontier society here in Boulder." (507)

> *But law enforcement without a court system isn't justice*. It's just vigilantism, rule by the fist. [...] it behooves us to make safety and constitutionality synonymous as quickly as we can. We need to think about a courts system. (508)

Here as well, after thwarting the forces of nuclear and supernatural evil, survivors can begin the work of reconstruction, without guarantees about the possible reappearance of "the devil in men's brain," whether it be ecodisaster or war. Still, a "season of rest" is awaiting the characters and the planet (817).

What I would like to do is follow some implications of this rhetorical pairing in both novels. On the one hand, the rejection of counter-violence is *the* premise for the act of rebuilding; on the other hand, the rebuilding itself is not taken as definitive, but rather as a hope for a better chance should they be confronted once again with a similar challenge.

Both novels stage precisely a refusal to address critical situations and sites of emergency through extraordinary measures that would, once and for all, disrupt both personal selfhood and collective bonds. No matter how provisionally and tentatively, some degree of unexpected innovation in coping strategies is needed. At a time in which US society and culture were exploring utopian longings, in different formal frameworks, these

novels are strongly engaging with the metaphors of the mythical and the supernatural in ways that challenge commonplace assumptions about these metaphors as forms of regretful yearning for a lost Gemeinschaft. It is in an alliance between the metaphysical and the historical that the promise of utopia may lie.

## Exceptions?

As I write in Italy in 2022, uses of the notion of the state of exception are becoming increasingly problematic, and perhaps it is time we asked ourselves whether Giorgio Agamben is really to be considered the best advocate of his own notion as stated in his book *State of Exception*. This is why the focus of this essay will be less on discussing Agamben's work than on the novels under consideration.

In recent times in Italy, state-of-exception rhetoric has been voiced by climate-change deniers and later by anti-vaxxers, Agamben himself engaging in a sympathetic dialogue with the latter, granting them a visibility on the Left that is unknown elsewhere. In statements that appeared in the blogosphere, his current view foregrounds what may have appeared implicit in his book, that is, far more than a simple blurring of the distinction between the rule of law and the state of exception. Rather, it would seem that the rule of law is a suspension – ultimately fictitious and delusional – of the inherently unchecked work of sovereignty.

Nevertheless, this paper will assume that accepting the notion of the state of exception as a suspension of the rule of law does not entail such a blurring. If we are troubled by breaches in the *état de droit*, even systemic ones, our (self-)interrogation need not necessarily be followed by the conclusion that there is no such thing as democracy, and never can be.

Originally published in 2003, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Patriot Act, Agamben's *State of Exception* was a guide that showed many of his readers the deep roots of what was leading the US government and (his) its allies towards blatant violations of civil liberties and deprivations of citizenship at home and abroad. Its predecessors were *Homo Sacer*'s investigation into collective rituals of salvific scapegoating (expanding

on René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*) and *Remnants of Auschwitz*'s heart-wrenching reading of what was at stake in the attempt at erasing the existence itself of Nazi camps (building on the accounts of Primo Levi and other survivors).

Rather than emphasizing the Nazi history of Carl Schmitt, Agamben's overall source of inspiration in *State of Exception*, I would note that his only specific reference to US political philosophy is Clinton Rossiter's 1948 *Constitutional Dictatorship*, a fairly extreme text in Cold War conservative thought, that had just been reprinted in 2002, precisely as a legitimation of post-9/11 legislation. Rossiter was arguing for the *necessity* of willful straining in the texture of the nation's legality, and grounding this necessity in his interpretation of Presidential actions, not only in the World Wars but also in the Civil War and in Roosevelt's New Deal. In other words, Rossiter construed American history as a series of showdowns of the executive's powers, an updated Burkeanism which left no space for politics, especially not for opposition to Southern racial supremacy and anti-welfare interests. Above all, Rossiter was presenting a highly exceptionalist inevitable, unchangingly self-identical view of Americanness.

In *State of Exception*, this "America" becomes a synecdoche for the modern democratic nation-state through some glosses on Derrida's "Force of Law" (ch. 2). Derrida's argument is that the rule of law's coming into existence must acknowledge (and usually denies) that it originally needed to exclude something from its own perimeter (democracy needed to establish a "divide" from the *ancien régime*), that there must have been something irreducible to institutionalized dialogue prior to the beginning of the dialogue itself (13, 24).[2] Agamben's reading (very much informed by Schmitt) is instead that the foundational bootstrapping "force" shows that pure violence (with Nazi rule a limit-case and nothing more) is the truth lurking underneath each and every democratic claim, turning Derrida's aporias into full and terminal invalidation. Through Rossiter's America, Agamben is presenting an inevitable, unchangingly self-identical view of modern history.

There is something circular in an analysis in which "the sovereign," defined as that which can bring about the state of exception, is *in principle* the only figure granted agency. As a result, the state of exception has

become the opposite of an exception. Are there alternatives? Have there been historical alternatives in America (or elsewhere)? To historicize Agamben falls beyond the scope of this essay: a starting point would be the analyses of the discourse of defeat and hopelessness in the mainstream Italian Left, what David Forgacs's 2011 essay "The End of Political Futures?" calls an "anti-utopian retrenchment" that took place especially from the 1970s on, but that could be included within the tradition surveyed in Enzo Traverso's *Left-Wing Melancholia* (ranging from politics and philosophy to film and art). In Italian literary theory, a crucial early mention of Schmitt's rhetoric of "exception" occurs in the 1980s, in Franco Moretti's *Signs Taken for Wonders* (253), in a discussion of the Left's fascination for revelations of crisis and disruption over everything else; this fascination ends up belittling "the weight and memories of the past, the open-ended conflicts of the present, the projects and hopes of the future" (260), and only manages to imagine history as leading to tragic endings (261). This is why the appeal to "the power of mourning" and grief in Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004) reads like both a supplement and a retort to Agamben's work, building on his notions and at the same time envisaging, through affect and empathy, a counter-agency to his fatalistic detachment.

The essay's epigraph comes from a folk song recorded by Pete Seeger in 1961, one of two Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament anthems written in 1958 for the first Aldermaston-London Easter-day march by John Brunner, a young UK writer who in the 1960s would author some landmark works in the dystopian genre. Even more than a plea for nonviolence, his lines (in a verse framing the song) were voicing the need for an oppositional agency capable of avoiding the trap of authority as violence.

In different ways Silko's and King's novels, strongly shaped by post-1960s political awareness (from pacifism to counterculture), are a refusal to accept solutions akin to Schmitt's and Agamben's state of exception, that are shown as inadequate to the task of rebuilding a sense of community in the aftermath of radical crises. Or, in other words, they include utopia within the picture.

## Ends

Among multitudinous definitions, British sociologist Ruth Levitas has described the "method" of utopia as an "imaginary reconstitution of society" ("Imaginary"). Her use of this phrase has obvious reverberations with these novels. In both, the world has metaphorically and/or literally come to its end.

In *Ceremony* the sense of history is conveyed through a continuing mutual echoing between different timeframes, narrated nonsequentially, concerning the individual, the collective, and the mythological levels. In the first pages, we see the protagonist Tayo, of mixed Laguna Pueblo and white origins, move from the endless rain of the Philippine jungle during World War Two (11-12) to the "no more rain" of the "mythical" drought (13) and of the actual drought occurring in New Mexico. Both his sense of self and his community must find a way out of a waste land.

After he comes back from the war, American military authorities try to cure him of his "battle fatigue" in the total institution of the veterans' hospital by medically wiping out his personality. Agamben's "bare life" is indeed the best interpretive tool for a program of annihilation of his selfhood: "visions and memories of the past did not penetrate there, and he had drifted in colors of smoke, where there was no pain, only pale, pale gray of the north wall by his bed. Their medicine drained memory out of his thin arms and replaced it with a twilight cloud between his eyes" (15).

A promise of full citizenship was part of Tayo's and his fellow Native veterans' enrolment. "Anyone can fight for America", the Army recruiter told him and his buddies (64), and he had believed "he was one of them" (62), but now all the old racist prejudices are hitting him hard: America has betrayed the promise (41-42), and all of them opt for the desperate self-cure of alcohol abuse. When Tayo dances with the Mexican woman called Night Swan, who will become his lover, he feels like "a living dead man" (85) – his only feeling is alienation.

In *The Stand*, the very political landscape of nation-wide deindustrialization that opens the novel soon gives way to the worldwide decimation of humanity caused by a plague spawned by military research, a "superflu" everyone has nicknamed "Captain Trips."

As the novel mixes or juxtaposes genres, moving from realism to science fiction and then to metaphysical-religious fantasy, it gathers together a polyphony of viewpoints and a sophisticated encyclopedia of cultural allusions, from literature to rock music, in order to approach and challenge many faces of national self-confidence, from expansionist rhetoric to racial conflicts. King's America is sharply divided, and racism is foregrounded throughout the book. "

Here too, the end of American civilization is a betrayal of its promises: "most of them were crying, crying for what was lost and bitter, the runaway American dream, chrome-wheeled, fuel-injected, and stepping out over the line" (486). In the allusion to the iconic opening of Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run," the American dream has run away for good, jettisoned together with the world. The awareness that there will be no more stepping over the line of ecodisaster will guide the Boulder group and its projects for rebuilding a community.

We are caught between the "pull of […] two opposing dreams" (395), one of them says, and so the Boulder survivors plan a social organization that might provide cohesion and permanence. Numbers are small, and the first thought is the colonial township model. Still, when they discuss the possibility to ""re-create America. Little America" (397), or at least "ratify the *spirit* of the old society" (398), this group of lower-class survivors (the loftiest member is probably a sociology professor with some Frankfurt-school influence) acknowledges that the two opposing dreams come from the minds of two characters who embody very different versions of the national history. On the one hand, Mother Abagail comes from a desolate part of Southern Nebraska, which nevertheless "was *America*, lying here like a huge discarded tin can with a few forgotten peas rolling around in the bottom" (272), a very old woman (309) whose proud biography recapitulates a century of history of African Americans, from the early decades of segregation through the Depression, telling what may amount to a neo-slave narrative; her biography begins after the Civil War, in a self-presentation that at least on two occasion echoes Sojourner Truth (319, 338), the story of a singer and farmer, whose family farm ("No small trick for a black man," 343) is gradually eroded by the Depression, and she remains with the very small plot of land she has been living on for decades:

"I have always dreamed, and sometimes my dreams have come true" (337). In line with the horror genre, her dreams have a supernatural content, and now mostly concern the need to organize against a man called Randall Flagg, whose elusive identity plays manipulatively with race ("In New York [...] his claim that he was a black man had never been disputed, although his skin was very light"; 121), the latest incarnation of a long series of evil presences, endlessly seeking for violence-mongering chances (including the KKK; 119), who instead has been rallying in Las Vegas a group of misfits with the purpose of completing the work of destruction by getting hold of atomic weapons.

## Bomb

Just as the Pueblo legend and rituals presented in *Ceremony*'s "poetry" interludes provide mythical interpretations to the events in everyday history – with witches, deities, and supernatural beings bestowing usable and sharable wisdom to the community – Tayo is aware that his experience is something the community has never met, from the massacres he has witnessed to the Bomb. The alienation is not only individual but collective, and the community's old medicine man Ku'oosh can no longer help people cope:

> In the old way of warfare, you couldn't kill another human being in battle without knowing it, without seeing the result [...]. But the old man would not have believed white warfare—killing across great distances without knowing who or how many had died. It was all too alien to comprehends, the mortars and big guns [...], the old man would not have believed anything so monstrous. Ku'oosh would have looked at the dismembered corpses and the heat-flash outlines, where human beings had evaporated, and the old man whould have said something close and terrible had killed those people. Not even oldtime witches killed like that. (36-37)

All through, we have the lure of mindless violence, to the point of imagining a search for redress by raping white women (55).

Later on, during one of the veterans' drunken wanderings across New

Mexico, Tayo realizes he is not far from the spot of the Trinity Site nuclear experiments at White Sands, and from Los Alamos:

> he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid. From the jungles of his dreaming he recognized why the Japanese voices had merged with Laguna voices […]; the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting. From then on, human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter. (246).

In *Ceremony*, the death brought about by war and violence cannot be limited to single individuals or groups, all times and places joined together in the nuclear doom (from *homo sacer* to *humanitas sacra*?).[3]

In *The Stand*, the ideology of the Las Vegas gang of destruction also builds on a shared humanity, but without any feeling of concern or empathy. Final destruction is a necessary act of cleansing in the speech imagined by one of Flagg's fifth columnists in the Boulder community:

> *Ladies and gentlemen,* […] *I am here to tell you that, in the words of the old song, the fundamental things apply as time go by. Like Darwin.* […] *America is dead, dead as a doornail, dead as Jacob Marley and Buddy Holly and the Big Bopper and Henry S Truman, but the principles first propounded by Mr. Darwin are still very much alive. While you are meditating on the beauties of constitutional rule, spare a little time to meditate on Randall Flagg* […]*. I doubt very much if he has any time to spare for such fripperies as public meetings and ratifications and discussions* […] *in the best liberal mode. Instead he has been concentrating on the basics, on his Darwin, preparing to wipe the great Formica counter of the universe with your dead bodies* […]*, he may be searching eagerly for someone with a pilot's credentials so he can start overflights of Boulder in the best Francis Gary Powers tradition. While we debate the burning question of who will be on the Street Cleaning Committee, he has probably already seen to the creation of the Gun Cleaning Committee, not to mention mortars, missile sites, and possibly even germ warfare centers.* (540-41; italics in the original)

Here, King may have had in mind the burgeoning tradition of right-wing survivalist fiction which, in science fiction, would produce works such as Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's *Lucifer's Hammer* (1977) and Martin Caidin's *Exit Earth* (1987), using scenarios of global apocalypse to fantasize about the inevitable end of democracy.

Definitiveness and inevitability appear to be among the main components of the lure of witchery and warlike dreams – sovereignty fulfilling its mandate, free of mourning.

## Textualities

In different ways, it is in their approaches to textuality that the novels challenge discourses of ineluctability and conclusiveness. In *Ceremony*, the relation between the orality of the Native "tradition" and the written dimension of "contemporary" Euro-American culture is neither opposition nor supercession. At least some, if not all, of the poetry sections are clearly new; above all, as Alessandro Portelli ("Unfinished") argues, the oral culture's strength lies in its ability to turn the impalpable vulnerability of the voice, always apparently bound to disappear, into an ever-changing presence capable of affecting the apparently unchangeable force of domination and oppression.[4]

For the pre-war Tayo, everything was made up of "stories," capable of overcoming "barriers" (19). These are the stories told and recited by the traditional medicine man Ku'oosh, who tries to help him after his release from the hospital: "He spoke softly, using the old dialect full of sentences that were involuted with explanations of their own origins, as if nothing the old man said were his own but all had been said before and he was only there to repeat it" (34).

Ku'oosh is aware that "this world is fragile," as he tells Tayo. Just like death in Tayo's epiphany, in his world no life can exist in a vacuum, not even in myth, always dialogically and ecocritically connected to all other lives, nonhuman lives included:

> The word he chose to express "fragile" was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process […]. It took a long time to explain the fragility and

> intricacy because no word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way. This was the responsibility that went with being human [...], the story behind each word must be told so there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said; and this demanded great patience and love. (35-36)

Eventually, in Gallup, NM, Tayo meets Old Betonie, an innovative, synchretic medicine man, who has hoarded books and newspapers, almanacs and phone books, Coke cans and other apparently useless gadgets, "[k]eeping track of things" (121) and the modern world:

> The people nowadays have an idea about the ceremonies. They think the ceremonies must be performed exactly as they always been done [...]. But long ago when the people were given these ceremonies, the changing began, if only [...] in the different voices from generation to generation, singing the chants. You see, in many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing.
>
> [...] after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong.
>
> [...] things which don't shift and grow are dead things. [...] Otherwise we won't make it. We won't survive. That's what the witchery is counting on: that we will cling to the ceremonies the way they were, and then their power will triumph, and the people will be no more. (126)

Betonie does not reject Ku'oosh's sense of responsibility and love; what he rejects is the commonplace expectation of the ceremony as mindless repetition. In his innovative approach, he grasps for strength and agency *within*, not against, historical change. Even though (as Tayo says) the war is the white folks' war, old Betonie stresses a *shared* responsibility. Once again, the relentless monologue of Agamben's sovereign is supplemented – perhaps even stopped – by the counter-voice of Butler's mourners:

> "That is the trickery of the witchcraft [...]. They want us to believe all evil resides with white people. Then we will look no further to see what is really happening. They want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be

> ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction. But white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates; and I tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place." (132)

Once recited and assimilated within the existing corpus of myths, all stories, including the witches' stories, are impossible to "call back." Later on, Tayo has an insight: "The destroyers had tricked the white people as completely as they had fooled the Indians" (204). This is why he, as representative of his community and (through the Bomb's witchery) all humanity, will not be fooled into further violence and will not embrace the state of exception.

The notion of textual instability applies in the most literal way to *The Stand*, beyond its cross-genre form and its own *roman-fleuve* length, itself a hint at inconclusiveness. After all, an important part of its acclaim lies in the accumulation of versions of a text that keeps changing over time. In this essay I refer to the first version, the one that made it famous. But there is as well a 1990 "complete and uncut" edition, that updated cultural allusions and reworked numerous scenes and characters. More alterations are to be found in the 1994 TV series, in the 1998-2002 comics adaptation, and most recently in a 2020 TV version (notably featuring Whoopi Goldberg as Mother Abagail), to all of which King collaborated in different authorial and supervisory capacities. Throughout, the reworking never ceases – and one sign is that the Wikipedia entry "List of *The Stand* Characters" often mixes storylines, falling for the "retconning" fallacy, privileging most recent versions and interpreting all the novel's events in the light of those rewrites.

Textual boundaries are blurred in the citationist reveling as well, a musical and literary repertory underlying almost every passage, an encyclopedia that sometimes complicates interpretation, starting with the book's title (cf. Proietti "*The Stand*", which also mentions some of the existing, and fairly scant, scholarship). Unless, of course, someone belongs to the party of destruction: the character who invoked Darwin as a legitimation of unchecked force reads books differently from everyone else. Rather than sources of inspiration in dialogue with countless other texts, he treats all his readings (from popular fiction to classics such as

Milton, Melville, Hawthorne, and Thomas Wolfe) as doctrine and purely utilitarian tools: "The bricks of language. [...] Worlds. Magic. Life and immortality. *Power*" (660-61).

## The Provisional Utopia

Power (and the search for power, and the exercise of power) building on irrevocable stability vs. powerlessness (and the quest for agency against all odds) turning precariousness into hopeful open-endedness: across philosophies and literary genres, these are the poles of the tension that allows utopia into the picture.

If war and violence are not to be taken as the only solution, some other conclusion must be envisaged. As Tom Moylan writes, the utopian genre made a comeback in connection with the utopianism of the Sixties' movements, both of them rejecting all dogmatism and embracing, as an earlier book by Levitas summarizes, Ernst Bloch's famous formula of utopia as the "not yet," assuming "the material world is essentially unfinished, the future is indeterminate," present and future "in a constant state of process" in which "there are always many possible futures," none of which constitutes a "necessary development from potentiality to actuality" (Levitas, *Concept* 87). In its new version, utopia is the opposite of inevitability, always open to further change, for Fredric Jameson a form of desire that, according to Darko Suvin, presents not unimprovable perfection but a "more perfect world" than our own (*Metamorphoses* 49) – a world that "operates deictically" (37), an ever-shifting "horizon" rather than a clear-cut and accomplished site ("Locus").

In *Ceremony*, Tayo had something to build on: at the beginning of the novel, he remembers "the first time" he watched an enemy and saw "the man's skin was not much different from his own," this realization repeating itself before "corpses again and again" (7), until at some point he refused to execute Japanese prisoners, even after a direct order – hardly a moment of *ius in bello*. Tayo's notion of humanity as worth mourning for had all the time been opposing the idea of the state of exception within him.

The proof that old Betonie's "revised" ceremony has been successful is

the fact that Tayo, as I mentioned above, does not take part in yet another series of violent, murderous acts, and refuses to murder his old friend Emo even though the latter is breaking any social obligation. As he can start disseminating and integrating his own story within the reconstituted community, the final lines are poetry again, about "the whirling darkness" that "has come on itself. It keeps the witchery for itself". The final chant, repeated four times, is: "It is dead for now" (261).

In *The Stand*, plot complications lead to a climactic "holy fire," the "mushroom cloud" of an atom bomb, which only kills the Las Vegas group, after which the survivors can go home (760-69). This may of course be taken as a cop-out, with radiations and the supernatural fast disappearing from the picture. Or, on the other hand, it might also be said to play a meta-narrative role. The first sign of hope is the birth of a baby whose new abilities allow him to be free of the plague.

The community is now facing uncontrollable development, with the arrival of newcomers. With a larger population, the rebirth of weapons technology and eventually the apocalypse could someday become an option once again. The world will be "safe for a while" (807), although they all know that Flagg and what he stands for can still make a comeback.

In the final dialogue between the newborn baby's parents, the only option is "to postpone" dangerous decisions as long as possible (816). For a generation or two, the situation will not run the risk of becoming critical again, and the community's reconstruction is inseparable from the ecosphere's healing: "*Time enough for poor old mother earth to recycle itself a little. A season of rest*" (817; italics in the original). The allusion to the utopian genre is direct: the subtitle of William Morris's 1890s classic *News of Nowhere* was "an epoch of rest." The possible utopia of this ending won't be in the name of static certainty, nor will it be a return to the past. Improvement is now an obligation, but the season of rest will be a second opportunity: "Please… please learn the lesson. Let this empty world be your copybook," says the mother to her child. In the final lines, the father asks her "Do you think… do you think people ever learn anything?", and she keeps repeating "I don't know" (817).

Both novels include a *pars construens*, in which survivors (to) of literal and cultural world-shattering catastrophes try to imagine their future as *novum*. In contrast to scenarios of extraordinary measures that breach

rules of law and human dignity, these survivors envisage a reconstruction presented as inseparable from the ecosphere's healing, and above all as provisional – its self-doubt the evidence of a lasting awareness and grounds for utopian hope.

## Notes

[1] An early version of this essay was presented in 2019 at the Utopian Studies Society conference, in Prato, Italy. I wish to thank Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan for the conversations.

[2] For an overall attempt to map the many discursive aporias in the early republic, cf. Proietti *Storie* (27 ff.).

[3] In this sense, I refer to Giorgio Mariani's notion of native American "post-tribal epic" (on Silko, cf. 81 ff.).

[4] For a general discussion of the implications in the interplay between oral and written discourses in US culture, I refer to Portelli's *The Text and the Voice*.

## Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. 1995. Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998.

—. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. 1998. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone, 1999.

—. *State of Exception*. 2003. Trans. Kevin Attell. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005.

Brunner, John. "The Easter Marchers." Lyrics. In Pete Seeger, *Gazette: Vol. 2*. Folkways Records, 1961.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.

Derrida, Jacques. "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'." *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. Eds. Drucilla Cornell et al. New York: Routledge, 1992. 3-67.

Forgacs, David. "The End of Political Futures?" *California Italian Studies* 2 (2011): n. pag. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/36z684dv>.

Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London: Verso, 2005.

King, Stephen. *The Stand*. 1978. New York: Signet, 1980.

Levitas, Ruth. *The Concept of Utopia*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1990.

—. “The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society: Utopia as Method.” *Utopia Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming*. Eds. Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini. Oxford: Lang, 2007. 47-68.

Mariani, Giorgio. *Post-tribal Epics: The Native American Novel between Tradition and Modernity.* Lewiston: Mellen, 1996.

Moretti, Franco. *Signs Taken for Wonders*. London: Verso, 1988.

Moylan, Tom. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. London: Methuen, 1986.

Portelli, Alessandro. *The Text and the Voice: Writing, Speaking, and Democracy in American Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.

—. “Unfinished Creations: Between Emerson and Leslie Marmon Silko.” *Emerson at 200*. Eds. Giorgio Mariani et al. Rome: Aracne, 2004. 286-94.

Proietti, Salvatore. *Storie di fondazione: Letteratura e nazione negli Stati Uniti post-rivoluzionari*. Rome: Bulzoni, 2002.

—. “*The Stand*, o delle ambiguità: Un’enciclopedia del fantastico americano.” *If* 23 (2019): 78-91.

Rossiter, Clinton. *Constitutional Dictatorship*. 1948. New Brunswick: Transaction, 2002.

Silko, Leslie M. *Ceremony*. 1977. New York: Penguin, 1986.

Suvin, Darko. “Locus, Horizon, and Orientation: The Concept of Possible Worlds as Key to Utopian Studies.” 1989. *Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction and Political Epistemology*. Oxford: Lang, 2010. 111-36.

—. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.

Traverso, Enzo. *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*. New York: Columbia UP, 2017.

*RSA Journal 33/2022*

Ali Dehdarirad

# "The Other Side of the Ditch":[1] (De)Constructing Environmental Crisis in William Vollmann's *Imperial* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Although in different ways, William Vollmann's nonfiction book *Imperial* (2009) and Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006) engage with current environmental and societal problems. Against the backdrop of their shared, though dissimilar, conceptualization of climate issues, in this paper I aim to investigate how these books depict the US landscape as an on-going site of emergency through an ecocritical approach. As we shall see, these works indicate the fragility of human beings and the anxiety of living in an uncertain world in the aftermath of environmental crisis. While, in these texts, Vollmann and McCarthy use different styles of writing and genres to present the urgent state of environmental problems, they both use the trope of (im)migration as an essential narrative technique that mushrooms into various thematic concerns. In this respect, both books show the consequences of (im)migration, as a result of climate problems.

## Ecocriticism and Literary Studies

In 1996 Cheryll Glotfelty observed that in our postmodern world methodological and theoretical approaches to literary criticism are in a state of rapid change (see Glotfelty xv). While around the turn of the century this sounded evident enough, Glotfelty's point was to show how little attention, if any, was given to that which we understand as ecocritical and environmental approaches to literary studies. Although no definitive description of environmental criticism in relation to literary studies can be

delineated, recent ecocritical scholarship has tried to offer new approaches to literature by including theoretical dimensions left out from previous works.[2] As Lawrence Buell has pointed out, later criticism challenged the "organicist models of conceiving both environment and environmentalism" (*Environmental Criticism* 22). Indeed, scholars in literature-and-environment studies have gone on to theorize about social issues such as urban and environmental justice, ideas of gender and race as ecological concepts, as well as agency for animals and plants in relation to climatic problems.[3] This interpretation of ecocriticism in literary studies started to take account of both "anthropocentric as well as biocentric concerns" (33).

In this respect, one might further think of a new stage in ecocriticism in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on our natural and built environments. This final phase aligns with more recent issues such as a global understanding of ecocritical practice punctuated by the need to address urgent matters, beyond Anglo-American prominence, like global warming and climate calamities.[4]

## Vollmann, McCarthy, and the Imagination of Crisis

*Imperial* depicts Southern California as a dystopian wasteland as well as a haven of possibilities through a multitude of genres and writing styles. The arbitrary border of Imperial County with Mexico delineates the violent imposition of human will on the natural territory for economic and political purposes. Interestingly, Vollmann has reportedly called *Imperial* his *Moby-Dick* (see Anderson). Putting this into perspective, within the framework of the immigration situation at the US-Mexican border, one can think of the way that American capitalist greed has been relentless in imposing lines on the land, like Melville's Ahab who relentlessly pursues the whale.

To use Vollmann's words, "Imperial is a map of the way to wealth; the map has sun-bleached back to blankness. Leave an opened newspaper outside for a month and step on it; the way it crumbles, that's Imperial" (591). At the same time, Imperial represents a "dream" (39) for Mexican immigrants who try to find refuge in brutal farmwork on the American

side. Nevertheless, after the diminishing of the region's economic prosperity, due to the impossibility of large-scale irrigation, to the Mexican laborers America is no longer "the dream in which they overwhelmed themselves" (39). Indeed, Vollmann's Imperial County shows immigration as a continuing issue of concern on both sides of the border.

Using a similar migration trope, *The Road* offers a (post)apocalyptic vision of the world where natural resources have been exhausted. The unfolding of the unknown catastrophe has led McCarthy's main characters, a man and his son, to migrate across the US. The terrain they are crossing is "[b]arren, silent, godless" (2) and the surrounding landscape offers nothing but a myriad of "limbless trunks of trees" (4). As in *Imperial*, migration seems to promise a better condition of life where the protagonists move southward toward a sea through the harsh winter in the hope of finding milder weather. Nevertheless, the gray sea at the end of the journey suggests "the shores of a world unheard of" (131) where even "the names of things one believed to be true" (52) fall into oblivion.[5]

In this respect, it is interesting how Vollmann has used some of the themes and concerns in McCarthy's oeuvre. One of the main issues that usually pop up in McCarthy's fiction is the representation of a culture of migration, usually beset by violence, which is a significant theme in Vollmann's works as well. One can think of McCarthy's famous "Border Trilogy" of novels (*All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*) as well as *No Country for Old Men*. These are all texts which have the Mexican American border as their setting and depict the material and cultural movement over those boundaries. Considering the burgeoning literary production of the prolific Vollmann, suffice it to mention that he begins his multi-part novel *Seven Dreams* in Scandinavia and follows violent confrontations across the North Atlantic to Iceland, Greenland, Newfoundland, Labrador, and throughout the expanse of Canada. Furthermore, on several occasions, he has expressed his praise for McCarthy. In an interview he said that "my favorite American writer at the moment is Cormac McCarthy. I think he's wonderful" (Boratav 130). Elsewhere, he considered McCarthy "pretty spectacular" (McIntyre 45), insofar as he is one of the contemporary writers who bring new energy to the novel.

When analyzing it more closely, one can notice that the ending of *The*

*Road* reflects what is described in the beginning, that is, skepticism toward the possibility of survival. In the initial scene, as the man is observing the road, the narrator tells us that it was "empty. Below in the little valley the still gray serpentine of a river. Motionless and precise. Along the shore a burden of dead reeds" (3). The river is described as a motionless snake that is also precise. Being motionless suggests lack of vitality which heightens the feeling of despair in this barren land. Nevertheless, when used of a snake, motionlessness indicates the moment before the snake strikes with deadly precision which contributes to highlight the danger in the landscape by which the characters are surrounded. Furthermore, the image of the "still gray" river with "dead reeds" on its shore is an anticipation of "the gray beach with the slow combers rolling dull and leaden" (131) at the end of the journey.

By providing such descriptions of the American landscape, these books delve into the uneasiness of living in an uncertain world and depict the human cost of climate disaster. Concentrating on how they interact with one another, concerning themes related to the issue of (im)migration, I am going to show how, at the very least, these works draw popular attention to the seriousness of environmental problems in our world.

## The Representation of Disaster in *The Road*

Since the beginning of the new millennium, there has been a burgeoning of critical interest in (post)apocalyptic fiction as a number of prominent literary figures have employed this form in their novels.[6] But what exactly is (post)apocalyptic fiction? Generally, in this genre human civilization has been destroyed by a cataclysmic event and the characters have to deal with the disastrous consequences. Some of the widely recognized conventions of the genre are: "ragged bands of survivors; demolished urban environments surrounded by depleted countryside; [...] desperate scavenging; poignant yearning for a lost civilization, [...] and extreme violence" (Hicks 6). While the nature of the cataclysm varies, environmental disaster is one the most common themes that sets in motion the apocalyptic event.[7] Indeed, the apocalypse genre has always been "debated among ecocritics" (Heise 122).

Apocalypse, in its original Greek meaning of "revelation," should offer some solution or salvation. For instance, Ursula Heise has observed that "environmental apocalypses include an ideal socioecological countermodel – often a pastoral one – that discourses about risk typically lack," namely "a utopian element" (141). In this subgenre the emphasis is on the distinction between a good old past and a degraded present. Nevertheless, as Heise has suggested, the pastoral element indicates that while the past is lost, there is still the hope of an achievable future. In other words, the representation of the past serves to contemplate the present and find a solution for the future.

Not only does *The Road* block from us any understanding of the past, except from the feverish dreams of the man, but it offers no promise of any fathomable future. What is dominant in the book is a sense of loss highlighted by the sheer impossibility of actually knowing things: "Rich dreams now which he was loathe to wake from. Things no longer known in the world" (77). Even though the narrator relates that for once "[h]is dreams brightened. The vanished world returned" (113), we are never given a hint of future hope throughout the text, except perhaps in the last scene where the boy joins a new family. Such a disaster heralds the high price in terms of human catastrophe due to the demise of the natural world.

*The Road* invites the reader to make sense of the characters' journey and go through their experience. In doing so, one of the main concerns of the novel is the representation of the (natural) environment in the aftermath of the catastrophic event. As George Monbiot has commented, *The Road* is "the most important environmental book ever written" (n. pag.) insofar as it provides an object lesson concerning environmental crises. Although the novel does not directly address climate issues, one can identify many scenes that depict the destruction of the natural world. Indeed, Andrew O'Hagan's laudatory statement, on the back cover of the British edition of the book, famously described the novel as "the first great masterpiece of the globally warmed generation" (n. pag.).[8]

Right from the outset we are confronted with a world in utter chaos. As the man and his son move southward, they come to realize that it is a world in which "Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered" (4). The narrator depicts the road as follows:

> On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. [...] Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadow-lands stark and gray and a raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned. (4)

The novel opens with such a postapocalyptic vision of the US, where the protagonists find themselves in a "[d]esolate country" (9). The present is shown to be so fragile that there is an oneiric quality to it. Although the man believes that the only dreams for a man in danger should be "dreams of peril" (9), he does dream about the world before the apocalypse: "He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue" (9). Embedded in such vivid depictions of normality in the past is the idea of the destruction of the natural environment. In the present atmosphere of constant fear, one of the dreams that haunts the man is the disappearance of the natural world which he probably took solace in.

Indeed, when the protagonists finally reach the coast, what they encounter is completely different from what they had hoped for. As they sit on the beach, they observe the horizon covered with a "wall of smog," enveloping the expanse of the "bleak sea" (131). The sea not only disappoints the man, who tells his son "I'm sorry it's not blue" (131), but also indicates the gravity of the environmental disaster. In fact, the description of the ash-covered, gray sea underscores both the characters' disillusionment and the depth of the ecological catastrophe: "Along the shore of the cove below them windrows of small bones in the wrack. Further down the saltbleached ribcages of what may have been cattle. [...] The wind blew and dry seedpods scampered down the sands" (131). Nevertheless, in such an appalling condition, the place where they find some momentary relief is nature itself, no matter how degraded. At the sight of the unpromising sea, they take their blankets and sit "wrapped in them in the wind-shade of a great driftwood log" (131).

## The Socio-Political Nature of the Apocalypse

In the wake of the cataclysmic event, the man is aware of the impossibility of retrieving the old world before the onset of the disaster – a vision that is sometimes hinted at through the man's dreams. From the outset, he thinks that "if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory" (9). When in extremis, the horror of the present becomes so dominating that nothing is any "longer known in the world" (77). This leads to a situation of displacement where the characters cannot identify any safe place to settle down. When the quest of a better condition of life ends with the disheartening reality of the gray sea, the man and the boy keep moving until the father dies and the son comes across a family of "good guys" (173), who would hopefully, and ironically, take care of him on the road where his father lost his life.

At some point in the narrative, the man stops recounting stories of the past to the boy as he realizes that they have no meaning for his son. The more devastating realization comes when he understands that "to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed" (90). The novel suggests that in the face of environmental devastation, which results in human displacement and alienation, the only solution seems to be migration. Ironically, what ensues might well be further social dislocation and confusion. McCarthy's representation of the postapocalyptic world resonates with a host of environmental concerns in the present day. At the same time, the destruction of the natural world punctuates the inevitable aftermath – the crisis of only being able to subsist in the world as it now is and, more crucially, what it means to be human in such degraded conditions. In fact, in several scenes the boy begs his father to help the people they come across throughout the journey, but each time the man answers negatively, arguing: "My job is to take care of you" (44). In such episodes, McCarthy is reflecting on the loss of humanity as a result of the climatic catastrophe.

While the man's thoughts contemplate the (im)possibility of envisioning a better future, this would still be based on a world before the outbreak of the disaster, which itself was never good: "How does the never

to be differ from what never was?" (18). Considering the larger picture, this idea has something to do with the way that politicians in the US have always referred to the past as a utopian model based on which the future would be ideally made. The man's thoughts in McCarthy's novel question that imaginary "city upon a hill" as an illusion of a perfect society. Indeed, what he and his son have to live with is neither the past nor the future, but the horrifying reality of the present handed down to them by the decision makers of the past. The man reflects: "There is no past" (31) and "There is no later. This is later" (31). Indeed, the tenor of the novel is for the most part neither hopeful nor speculative. As Rune Graulund has argued, *The Road* depicts "a desert that never ends nor begins, a landscape as devoid of difference as it is of life" (61).

Such observations in the narrative might speak to the larger framework of socio-political governance and the way that governments shape our societies. Although political suggestions in the text are mostly opaque, there are a few episodes that suggest skepticism toward the working of governments. When the boy wonders why his father refers to the black lines on the map as "the state roads," the man answers: "Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states"; while the man doesn't know what exactly happened to "the states" (24), the images of the suffering, the dead, and the murdered along the road make him wonder what they had done to deserve this fate. He thinks that "in the history of the world it might even be that there was more punishment than crime" (18). Here, the word "punishment" brings to mind the idea of governance and McCarthy's narrator mocks that notion by depicting the demolition of the world and its population in the aftermath of an apocalypse, which might represent the ill working of the governing system. On that score, a related scene is the description of "an army in tennis shoes, tramping" (53), which appears in the man's nightmarish vision. As the only vigorous organization in the novel, this army shows various elements of domination and abuse: "slaves in harness" dragging wagons "piled with goods of war," a dozen of women, "some of them pregnant," and a group of "catamites illclothed against the cold" (53).

## Welcome to Imperial: The Immigrants' Plight from Bad to Worse

"WELCOME TO CALIFORNIA" (417, 435, 491), together with a number of other welcomes to different places, keeps being repeated throughout Vollmann's encyclopedic book of one thousand and one genres. It is a fragmented collection of interviews, ethnography, memoirs, literary pastiches, environmental writing, and short stories, shedding light on Imperial's social, geographical, and political history. One might define *Imperial* as a maximalist attempt to depict the reality of the eponymous region while recognizing the impossibility of capturing its multivalent social and political complexities. As such, in this section, I intend to address certain parts of the book which help spell out my argument, especially as regards the issue of immigration.

In one review, James Green observed that *Imperial* "might be best described as a bunch of books and a raft of notes, arranged in a way only the author could explain" (n. pag.). However, as Vollmann himself mentions in the book,

> Imperial widens itself almost into boundlessness, and so does my task. [...] Imperial is palm trees, tract houses, and the full moon. Imperial is the pale green lethal stars of chollas, [...] Imperial is a landscape like wrinkled mammoth-flesh; [...] Imperial is mica; Imperial is gypsum: [...] How many books might Imperial contain? – An infinite number, of course. (256)

If Vollmann's book reflected the reality of Imperial, it should have a fragmented and multifaceted structure. Indicating the difficulty of describing this region, Vollmann believes that such an organization of the book means "in part to appropriate" and "in part to reimagine" (255) that place. In other words, he attempts to reproduce Imperial in such a way that it would correspond "in some fashion, probably metonymically, to the reality" (255) of that geographical area.

One of the manifestations of such a rendition are the instances in which the author uses the above-mentioned welcome sentences. In most cases, these welcomes are either preceded or followed by some negative, complex description of the places they refer to. Among such depictions are those of the immigrant field workers. In fact, one of the main concerns of the book

is immigration. In this respect, the difficulty of understanding the socio-political complexities of the region heralds the impossibility of thoroughly knowing and rendering the troubles of the immigrants. Thus, one might surmise that the length of the book, with its exhaustive descriptions of the various topics, is used as a narrative technique to emphasize the struggle of knowing the problems of the immigrant workers.

*Imperial* addresses the annual exodus of Mexicans to the US along roughly eighty miles of a patchily drawn international border. Interestingly, the book starts with the narrator's account of Imperial's dividing line at the US-Mexico border, describing the Mexican "seekers of illegal self-improvement" (29) in America and the Border Patrol's effort to prevent them. Like in *The Road* the solution seems to be moving elsewhere. However, if in McCarthy's novel migration leads to no clear solution in the end, in Vollmann's book the path to America is fraught with racism, violence, and disappointment. For those who make it to the US, the new life is mostly one of ill-paid and grueling agricultural labor – a reality that is a far cry from what the immigrants had imagined before coming to America.

In this regard, *Imperial* represents what Mike Davis called an "Apocalypse theme park" (8) where on a daily basis the immigrant workers experience the wrath of a relentless nature and an exploitative economic system. The situation is worsened by the environmental conditions in Southern California, not least due to the annually rising temperature which makes large-scale industrial irrigation impossible. Vollmann relates that in the course of Imperial's history big agricultural companies have benefited from these circumstances by taking over small farmers as they have always had access to more technological facilities. Mexican immigrants and Native Americans have been the victims of such overreaching environmental and economic conditions: "It is bemusing, and ultimately chilling, to watch how American Imperial uses up one race after another for her ends" (507).

A salient section in the book which depicts the everyday "apocalyptic temper" (Davis 353) of the human disaster over the course of years in Imperial is "Steinbeck, Most American of Us All" (257). Here, Vollmann is interested in exploring John Steinbeck's thematic representations of how human beings receive one another. He is keen on understanding

Steinbeck's concerns regarding human receptivity toward the other and the multilayered conflicts it entails, as well as Steinbeck's ultimate goal of getting the readers to empathize with the problems of the characters. Indeed, a common theme in the works of both Vollmann and Steinbeck is the suffering of the immigrant laborers. Most famously, in *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck tried to show the troubles of the migrants to California and the corruption of the agricultural system which exploited human beings for economic profit.

In his essay "American Writing Today," Vollmann expresses his concern about some of the same fundamental issues that most often pop up in his oeuvre: the inefficacy of the government and the growing "apathy and misinformation" among the governed concerning important issues such as the "terrifying increase in random violence and racism of all colors [...] From homelessness to schools where nothing is taught, from impending environmental disaster to continued environmental assault" (355). The essay's final page criticizes contemporary American literature, positing that "we are producing mainly insular works" (358) by a group of writers who are, unwillingly or not, detached from the reality of "the Other."

Although the problems of the immigrant workers are an important theme in Vollmann's work, in *Imperial* he refuses to fictionalize their plight because no words, other than theirs, can render their problems: "I would never consider changing a word of their stories. They are real and they have taught me many things that are true as I peer into the mystery called Mexico" (262). One of these dreadful accounts is brought to our attention through the story of Maria, "a coarsely beautiful schoolteacher" (250) who "scrubs out other people's toilets" in the US. After expressing his desire to enter her mind and write about her, Vollmann admits that it would be impossible to do justice to her by fictionalizing her story: "So how could I learn enough about Maria's life to express the respect I have for her endurance, and the compassion I feel for her intellect which wastes itself on drudgery?" (250). If Maria chose to immigrate, whose fault is her present reality? "A foreign power which took half his country" (250)? Ironically, or not, Vollmann says that it is not his government's fault, or his own, or hers. While he knows that there is something unfair about her situation, he cannot express it as she could: "The truth is that I do not understand

enough about border people to describe them [...] which means that I remain too ill acquainted with them to fictionalize them" (250-51).

## The Environmental Cost of Socio-Political and Economic Negligence

*Imperial* shows that the concentration of wealth and business speculations within the capitalist economic system generally bring about disastrous consequences, such as widespread poverty, for the majority of Imperial's population. As I briefly hinted at, Vollmann tries to capture the complexity and fragmentary nature of Imperial by resorting to a number of discursive approaches. He includes various points of view to represent the region insofar as any single attempt to universally depict that area cannot do justice to its intricacy. Among other things, he draws on the ethnography of the region, its economic history, political economy, and environmental background.

One section of the book in which he represents the ecological problems of Imperial is chapter three. Through the first-person narrative exploration of the Rio Nuevo, we move from Mexico toward the northern part of the border in the Salton Sea. On the Mexican side the river, known as "shit water," is the channel through which desperate Mexicans play "their ghastly ace-in-the-hole" (48) to get to the US. As the reader follows the narrator's account along the New River, they come to notice the environmental havoc wreaked upon these waters in the wake of industrial agricultural undertakings with no regard for ecological issues.

At the same time, another face of this economically motivated disaster are the beaches of the Salton Sea as a popular vacation destination which however shocks Southern Californians when they witness "[f]ish carcasses in rows and rows, more sickening stenches, the underfoot-crunch of white cheek-plates like seashells – oh, rows and banks of whiteness, banks of vertebrae; feathers and vertebrae twitching in the water" (109). Nonetheless, even though the sea is revolting at times, its greater beauty still stuns the visitors: "This purity is particularly undeniable as expressed in the shimmer on the Salton Sea, which is sometimes dark blue, sometimes infinitely white" (109). This is to suggest that while the sea does show signs

of environmental disaster, the only policies put into action are ironically those that advocate tourism and money making without any regard for ecological concerns. The proof of such negligence, among many others in Vollmann's book, is a pamphlet by the Coachella Valley Historical Society: "the Salton Sea, it informed me, was *one of the best and liveliest fishing areas on the West Coast. Stories of a polluted Salton Sea are greatly exaggerated…. The real problem is too much salt*" (110; italics in the original).

In another section of the book about San Diego County's tap water supplies, Vollmann reports that the county is about 90 percent dependent on imported water. Although this is going to be a problem in the future with an increasing population, San Diego is growing while the coastal area is rapidly shrinking. Vollmann draws upon a detailed study on the disappearing coastal line between Los Angeles and San Diego, which warns against the environmental hazards of unrestrained urban sprawl: "*Urbanization of this strip is now well underway and clearly will result in an incoherent pattern of undifferentiated and environmentally disastrous sprawl unless some logical control is exerted*" (1079; italics in the original). However, what seems to be the primary concern is economic profiteering as Ashley Economic Services, Inc. concludes that all the housing developments and commercial centers generate an overall net surplus of cash revenues over expenses for the governing cities and counties. But what about the future of water supplies in San Diego and the vanishing coastal strip? As Vollmann comments, "Who cares…?" (1080). Such irresponsible actions regarding the environment in Southern California are sources of an "apocalyptic threat" (Davis 71) which, as Wesley Marx warned, "not only amplifies natural hazards but reactivates dormant hazards and creates hazards where none existed" (qtd. in Davis 8).

## From *The Road* to *Imperial*

In Vollmann's book the root cause of immigration are economic problems, insofar as socio-political governance, on both sides of the border, drives Mexican laborers to immigrate. In such a complex web of international affairs, the immigrant workers are nothing but a catalyst in the destruction

of the natural environment while paradoxically they themselves are being usurped. In McCarthy's novel, the plight of the characters leads to a similar consequence: with migration as the sole means of survival, the quest of the main characters brings them to the death of the man and the uncertain future of the boy.

In this regard, an important trope in both books is that of borders. In *The Road* the lack of any official organization has led to the absence of stable borders and regions. In *Imperial*, however, the Border Patrol avails itself of every possible tool to strengthen the border. Citing his local newspaper, Vollmann reports that the goal of installing a US Navy noise-detection apparatus in the All-American Canal is "*to create a system that can alert authorities when someone is in trouble*" (italics in the original); nonetheless, he undermines the truth of this claim ironically: "Who am I to doubt the Navy's altruism?" (29). In other words, the implication is that the Navy's main purpose is to stop the immigrants at all costs rather than caring about humanitarian concerns.

If the All-American Canal becomes a devouring monster for the Mexican immigrants, the worst part of their journey is when they realize that life in the US is not what they had expected. Oddly enough, this happens because the immigrants usually have no idea of where their destination would be, as in the case of those who try to go to Canada: "they don't know, but somebody told them it's a real nice country where you don't get hassled" (31). To these desperate individuals, the primary motivation of immigration is to escape the difficult reality of their present lives.

One can find a similar dynamic in McCarthy's novel with the man and the boy as refugees from a world that no longer exists. Nevertheless, as they migrate to provide for their basic human needs, their immediate goal is to escape from the threats to their lives, rather than reaching a utopian destination. This is shown through the unfolding of the plot as well as the characters' skepticism toward the ultimate goal of getting to the supposedly blue sea: "How long will it take us to get there? he said. Two weeks. Three. Is it blue? The sea? I don't know. It used to be" (110).

Albeit in different ways, these works indicate the urgency of emigrants to escape from their actual situation and the difficulty of finding relief elsewhere. Both Vollmann and McCarthy tap into the anxiety of living

in an unsettling world where humans are alienated. In this respect, the problem of not being able to identify with the place one is surrounded by is emphasized by the representation of environmental problems. While in *The Road* the ecological disaster is depicted through the trope of migration, and its underlying causes remain opaque, in *Imperial* the representation of the environmental problems goes hand in hand with the sufferings of the immigrants.

Vollmann's choice of using an assemblage of genres helps him render the crisis of the Mexican field workers from a variety of viewpoints without having to invent characters and fictional stories. In McCarthy's novel, however, the (post)apocalyptic genre serves for the most part to unfold the crisis of the characters. Nevertheless, unlike *Imperial*, *The Road* leaves open the possibility of interpretation in the end, though in an interview with Oprah Winfrey McCarthy expressed the message of the novel as: "Life is pretty damn good, even when it looks bad. We should be grateful."[9] As the man would say to his son, the good guys "keep trying. They don't give up" (80). However one interprets the matter, these two works address the enormity of the human crisis in this age of environmental devastation and try to appeal to our good sense to take immediate action.

## Notes

1 Vollmann, *Imperial* 2.

2 Early ecocritics emphasized the importance of nature writing in a celebratory fashion. In this phase, the primary goal of ecocriticism was to contribute to the struggle of preserving what Aldo Leopold called "the biotic community" (174) where "the hierarchical separations between human beings and other elements of the natural world" (Elder 172) would break down. To mention but a few significant works, one can think of Karl Kroeber's 1994 *Ecological Literary Criticism* and Lawrence Buell's 1995 *The Environmental Imagination*.

3 On environmental justice, see Adamson et al., *The Environmental Justice Reader*. On concerns about globality, apocalypse, and political and theoretical issues in ecocriticism, see Garrard, *Ecocriticism*.

4 Among others, we can think of Greg Garrard's edited collection *Climate Change Scepticism* where, within a transnational framework, the contributors try to explain critical (literary) inadequacy in dealing with the impact of anti-environmentalist rhetoric.

5 That the main characters have no names implies that, in the postmodern condition,

names are no longer capable of bearing any (stable) meaning. As we learn in *The Road*, "The sacred idiom" (52) is "shorn of its referents" and "reality."

[6] One can think of Cormac McCarthy, Colson Whitehead, Paolo Bacigalupi, Margaret Atwood, and David Mitchell.

[7] In Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* the desire for a better life of unlimited consumerism leads to environmental destruction. Or in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* the protagonist usually describes the collapse of global civilization by using terms that indicate environmental disaster such as "the ruin" (7), "the great calamity" (54), and "the flood" (65).

[8] The 2010 Picador edition of *The Road* carries this endorsement.

[9] "The Oprah Winfrey Show," 5 June 2007.

## Works Cited

Adamson, Joni, et al. *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy*. Tucson: Arizona UP, 2002.

Anderson, Sam. "Moby-Dick in the Desert." *New York*. 23 July 2009: n. pag. <https://nymag.com/arts/books/reviews/58062/>.

Boratav, David. "L'américain Tranquille (The Quiet American)." *Conversations with William T. Vollmann*. Ed. Daniel Lukes. UP of Mississippi, 2020. 115-34.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995.

—. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2009.

Davis, Mike. *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998.

Elder, John. *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature*. Urbana: Illinois UP, 1985.

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Garrard, Greg, et al. *Climate Change Scepticism: A transnational Ecocritical Analysis*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020.

Glotfelty, Cheryll. "Introduction." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: UGA Press, 1996. xv-xxxvii.

Graulund, Rune. "Fulcrums and Borderlands: A Desert Reading of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Orbis Litterarum* 65. (2010): 57-78.

Green, James. "In the Borderland: Review of *Imperial*, by William T. Vollmann." *Boston Globe*. August 9, 2009.

Heise, Ursula K. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008.

Hicks, Heather J. *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Modernity Beyond Salvage*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Kroeber, Karl. *Ecological Literary Criticism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.

Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*. New York: Oxford UP, 1949.

Marx, Wesley. *Acts of God, Acts of Man*. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1977.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Vintage Books, 2006.

—. *All the Pretty Horses*. New York: Vintage, 1992

—. *The Crossing*. New York: Vintage, 1994.

—. *Cities of the Plain*. New York: Knopf, 1998.

—. *No Country for Old Men*. New York: Vintage, 2005.

McIntyre, Tom. "Vollmann's Vision." *Conversations with William T. Vollmann*. Ed. Daniel Lukes. UP of Mississippi, 2020. 33-48.

Monbiot, George. "The Road Well Travelled." *The Guardian*. 25 May 2022: n. pag. <http://www.monbiot.com/2007/10/30/the-road-well-travelled/>.

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Viking, 1939.

Vollmann, William T. "American Writing Today: A Diagnosis of the Disease." *Conjunctions* 15 (1990): 355-58.

—. *Imperial*. New York: Viking, 2009.

Cinzia Schiavini

# Constructing and Contesting the State(s) of Exception: Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* and the American Transnational Novel

## 9/11 Novels and the State of Exception

In the United States, the contemporary debate about the "states of exception" has been long related to the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. From Giorgio Agamben's seminal studies (*Homo Sacer I,* 1995; and *State of Exception: Homo Sacer II,* 2003) to Jason Ralph's *America's War on Terror. The State of the 9/11 Exception from Bush to Obama* (2013), there have been numerous philosophers, historians, and sociologists who have investigated the relation between exception and sovereignty in the twenty-first century, and the elements of continuity and discontinuity with the previous decades. From its origins, located by Agamben in the French Revolution, its use in and after WWI and its role in the formation of dictatorships and totalitarian regimes in European countries, the state of exception can be located in the interstice between law and politics; as regards the American context and the US Constitution, it calls into question the dialectic between the powers of the president and those of Congress, that turns mainly into a conflict over sovereign decision in an emergency situation, like (and especially) a state of war. As Agamben notes, since "the sovereign power of the president is essentially grounded in the emergency linked to a state of war, over the course of the twentieth century the metaphor of war becomes an integral part of the presidential political vocabulary whenever decisions considered to be of vital importance are being imposed" (Agamben 21).[1] It is precisely this "emergency," or exception, in its suspension of the Rule, that, according to Slavoj Žižek, has been the most cohesive element for national communities (64).

The "exceptional response" that 9/11 provoked, the limitation of individual freedoms, and exclusionary policies within the country with the USA Patriot Act as well as the military consequences abroad, have been the object of a plethora of literature in the following decades, which mostly depicted 9/11 as a turning point in world history, a personal and collective trauma that left individuals and writers, especially in the months that followed the attacks, overwhelmed by images but with no language to voice their disorientation and anguish.

As for fiction, to the "loss for words" DeLillo complained of in his "In the Ruins of the Future" in November 2001 so many writers responded by the middle of the decade that a new sub-genre was born – "9/11 fiction," that is, literature in which 9/11 events are the setting and the theme of the narrative. As Birgit Dawes pointed out in her exhaustive *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novel*, in the first ten years after the attacks more than 230 novels about 9/11 were written, 162 of which by US novelists (6).

Most of these novels, mimetically re-enacting the events, eschewed social and political discourses in favour of a retreat into domesticity: the trauma and the process of healing were depicted as a personal, individual struggle that consigned society and politics to the background. In seeking refuge from the bewilderment of 9/11, the characters in these novels looked for comfort in traditional structures like the family or small communities – a trend that can be seen, for example, in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007). However, some novels questioned the hegemonic culture's ideological boundaries and political and social repercussions. These works, as critic Richard Gray commented,

> resist the challenge of silence by deploying forms of speech that are genuinely crossbred and transitional, subverting the oppositional language of mainstream commentary – Us and Them, West and East, Christian and Muslim. And they respond to the heterogeneous character of the United States and its necessary positioning in a transnational context by what I would call deterritorializing America. […] All of them, in short, try to reimagine disaster by presenting us with an America situated between cultures. (17)

In addition to dismantling the binary oppositions constructed by hegemonic discourse and underlying the pluralism of the American experience, some novels also contested the ideological foundations of the state of exception by shifting their focus beyond the boundaries of the nation-state in an attempt to "imagine how US citizenship looks and feels, both for Americans and for others" (Rothberg 158). According to Michael Rothberg, to resist the "authority of closure" 9/11 novels should also include those works written by transnational authors, capable, as Caren Irr noted in her pivotal text on what she termed the "geopolitical novel," to "situate the United States on a variegated international map rather than universalizing its time-space" (185). Opposing isolationist myths and promoting forms of global identification, these novels investigate and question the state's hegemonic imaginaries sustaining affiliations with the transnational. Their transnationality however does not negate, but articulate the mutation in state power of the United States and the hybridities generated by its cultural deterritorialization.

Among the transnational novels that questioned the many facets of the construction and legitimacy of the state of exception related to 9 /11 events, Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008) is probably the one that stimulated the majority of critical responses due to its complexity and self-reflexivity. Constructed as a series of flashbacks from the narrative present of 2006 in London, when the narrator is informed of his friend Chuck's death, the story is told from the perspective of the Dutch-born equities analyst Hans van der Broek, who follows his wife Rachel, an English lawyer, to New York in 1998. The plan is "to drop in on NY for a year or three" (O'Neill 1) and then go back to London. Although they are successful and wealthy, and a son, Jake, is born, their emotional estrangement is already under way. Hans's life crumbles with, and after, 9/11, 2001: forced to leave their Tribeca loft and move to the Chelsea Hotel, a long-term stay midtown residence, Rachel decides to return to England with their young son a couple of months later, leaving Hans behind. Alone in the city, Hans's search for companionship leads him to his favorite sport, cricket, and towards the Staten Island Cricket Club, where in the summer of 2002 he meets Chuck Ramkissoon, an Indo-Trinidanian immigrant, entrepreneur, and (it will be discovered) small-time gangster who dreams of building the

nation's first multicultural cricket park in Brooklyn. Chuck is not satisfied with supporting cricket; he wants it to become an American national sport – like baseball and football. In Chuck's dream, his cricket arena would also turn into a global, televisual "cricket business" seen by millions of people, attracting teams from all over the world. Hans's time and friendship with Chuck reach an abrupt end when Hans has to confront Chuck's hidden agenda and the consequences of his illicit dealings. The narrator's return to England and his reconciliation with Rachel separate him spatially and emotionally from Chuck, who disappears shortly after Hans's departure. After two years, his body is found, handcuffed, in the Gowanus Canal, Brooklyn.

In *Netherland*, 9/11 and the (United) State(s) of Exception are explored retrospectively using two different transnational lenses: Hans, the narrator and member of the global financial *elite*; and Chuck, a postcolonial subject and American citizen. Both contribute, as Ilka Saal noted, "to decenter the habitual first-person perspective of US unilateralism" (335). "Decentering" is a crucial term to understand how *Netherland* tries to counteract the narrative of the state of exception, whose legitimacy is questioned and contested primarily with a shift of focus on margins and marginalities – geographically, with selves and stories shaped in transnational landscapes; thematically, with 9/11 debated in a global perspective and space; structurally, through a system of flashbacks and flashforwards that erase 9/11 centrality and thus the linearity of the hegemonic narrative; as well as culturally – questioning the borders of the American "Exceptionality," and investigating the fault lines of the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of dreams and identities.

## The Nation and/as the Family: Space, Time, and Optics

*Netherland* undermines the state of exception's premises and claims first by questioning the idea of the "state" as a fixed, enclosed space and the "exception" that 9/11 events require, and then by transforming the 9/11 national narrative into a 9/11 "transnational counternarrative" (Bimbisar 5) along international routes and webs that dismantle the state of exception's

geographical and temporal frames. As Sarah Wasserman notes, "the novel's optics deterritorialize the attacks and ask readers to linger in a complex narrative of sustained departure" (251)

O'Neill's strategy to reframe 9/11 through a transnational web that relies on both the expansion of the horizontal (geographical) and vertical (temporal) textual map can be already inferred by the duration of Hans's narrative: rather than engaging closely with 9/11 and its immediate aftermath, the narrative expands its focus to cover approximately eight years of the narrator's life, from his relocation to New York in 1998 and his return to England five years later, to the discovery of Chuck's death that gives rise to the narrative, in 2006. Encompassing such a broad temporal spectrum, with a complex frame of flashbacks and flashforwards that take the narrator and the reader back and forth across the Atlantic, O'Neill undermines the centrality of the event, as well as the "linear narrative of the nation" (Gray 70) and the boundaries it generated.

Regarding space, reframing is evident in the title, which directly addresses the ambiguities of the idea of the "nation." What, where, is this "Netherland"? The term can have different meanings, some contingent on Hans's life (and times) and some symbolic. By negating the specificity of place, the title invites the reader to look at what lies underneath geographical and political definitions. As for the protagonist, "Netherland" can refer both to his origins, The Hague and, more generally, Holland; and the present, New York after 9/11. The closest linguistic reference is obviously to the Netherlands, where Hans and the author grew up; a connection re-enforced by the novel's rootedness in Hans's memories of his motherland. At the same time, O'Neill points out how Hans's past in the Netherlands and his present in New York are intimately related:

> On one level, Netherland can be taken as a synonym for New York, since "New Netherland" is the historical name for this part of the world. It's also a reference to the Dutch "eye," which was the first colonial eye to survey this part of America. At least in my mind, it's also a way to think of Ground Zero after the attacks, that heartbreaking void. And, yes, it can be associated with the mental state of Hans and some other characters – including the character named New York City. (qtd. in Reilly 9)

New York after 9/11 turns into a "netherland," a submerged world where Hans is "noticeably lost" (O'Neill 93), stuck into an emotional and geographical "paralysis" (22). The metaphor of this existential, suspended state is Hans's accommodation in New York – not the Tribeca loft he refuses to move back to, but the Chelsea hotel, where he feels "hospitalized" (39), and whose residents "by their furtiveness and ornamental diversity reminded me of the population of the aquarium I'd kept as a child, a murky tank in which cheap fish hesitated in weeds and an artificial starfish made a firmament of the gravel" (41). The emblem of this disconnected universe is Hans's only acquaintance in the building: Mehmet Taspinar, or The Angel, a young man of Turkish origins who walks around with a pair of tattered white wings and a tiara on his head, and who moved to New York because it was "the one place in the world where he could be himself, at least, until recently" (44) – that is, until 9/11, and until his mother flew in from Turkey to take him back home.

"Home" is another pivotal element in the narrative reframing of 9/11: while relying in part on domestic tropes, the novel calls into question the idea of domesticity itself. Although O'Neill apparently interrogates the notion of home and intimacy by looking away from 9/11, that event and his ensuing family crisis are parallel and concurrent, the latter becoming a metaphor of the former. Exacerbated by 9/11 events, Hans and Rachel's domestic crisis parallels their American transference, with New York as the site of their emotional estrangement, which occurred well before 9/11: Hans recalls "the two New York years in which she withheld from me all the kisses on the mouth, withheld these quietly and steadily and without complaint, averting her eyes whenever mine sought them out in emotion" (168). Even at the apex of their professional success, Hans confesses he was "not smug" about it because smugness "requires a certain reflectiveness, which requires perspective, which requires distance; and we, or certainly I, didn't look upon out circumstances from the observatory offered by a disposition to the more spatial emotions – those feelings, of regret, or gratitude or relief, say, that make reference to situations removed from one's own" (121-22).

Perspective, distance, and context are what the couple lacks in their American years – something that worsens with and after 9/11. In the

immediate aftermath of the attacks, Hans and Rachel try (unsuccessfully) to find a meaning and a way together to make sense of 9/11 by comparing it with other dramatic events in world history: "We were trying to understand, that is, whether we were in a pre-apocalyptic situation, like the European Jews in the thirties or the last citizens of Pompeii, or whether our situation was merely near-apocalyptic, like that of the Cold War inhabitants of New York, London, Washington and, for that matter, Moscow" (29). Hans even calls his father-in-law for advice in case of a nuclear attack in order to link 9/11 to something known and in continuity with the past. As Arin Keeble suggests, Hans and Rachel's sense of uncertainty is located in historical thinking (165) – which requires distance and perspective.

This emotional detachment and the PTSD suffered after the attacks lead Rachel to long for and attain a trans-Atlantic separation, with the family crisis increasingly permeated with strong political overtones after her departure. Once apart, their perspectives on 9/11 and the state of exception diverge even further, with Rachel as the "corporate litigator" (O'Neill 126) and the voice of European dissent, attacking American foreign policy. At the same time, Hans, unable to contribute to the discussion, tries to find an emotional connection because, as he admits, he "had not succeeded in arriving at a position. I lacked necessary powers of perception and certainty and, above all, foresight. The future retained the impenetrable character I had always attributed to it. […] In short, I was a political-ethical idiot" (131-32). Hans's bewilderment and muteness when confronting Rachel's fiercely politicized outbursts testify to a problem of perspective that refracts the US vision – and leads Hans to involuntarily replicate the American media standpoint (Gonzales 209-10).

It is the construction of this hegemonic perspective that leads Rachel to decide not to go back to the United States, "at least not before the end of the Bush administration or any successor administration similarly intent on a military and economic domination of the world" (O'Neill 125). Rachel is afraid that their son Jake could "grow up with an American perspective" (126), exposed as he would be, as she tells Hans,

> to an upbringing in an "ideologically diseased" country, as she put it, a "mentally ill, sick, unreal" country whose masses and leaders suffered from extraordinary and self-righteous delusions about the United States, the world,

> and indeed, thanks to the influence of the fanatical evangelical Christian movement, the universe, delusions that had the effect of exempting the United States from the very rules of civilized and lawful and rational behavior it so mercilessly sought to enforce to others. (125-26)

Since the family crisis and 9/11 run parallel in the text, with Hans and Rachel's arguing on the phone about the state of exception and its narrative, Rachel starts also questioning the couple's narrative: "She stated that she now questioned everything, including, as she put it, the narrative of our marriage. 'The whole story,' she said. The story of her and me, for better and for worse, till death did us part, the story of our union to the exclusion of all others – the story" (36). "Union" and "exclusion" are both the terms at the core of the institutions of marriage and of the State, especially when it is a state of exception. Since Rachel and Hans's attempts to frame and understand their marital crisis, as well as 9/11, are told retrospectively, once the fracture has been sutured and the two are reunited, the marriage crisis is presented as a suspension of ordinary lives – an "exception" to the routine, that mirrors the suspended state generated by 9/11.

Like 9/11, according to Rachel the family crisis is something that "you can't geographize" (34), that transcends emotional, geographical, and political borders; and since their crisis is marked by transatlantic distance, constructing it in parallel with 9/11 makes the latter a transnational question as well, that can be discussed only within the space of that void, and recollected by Hans only when he is back in London. Rachel's rationality and "European" perspective vs. Hans's emotional and "American" disorientation are the characters' responses both to their marriage crisis and to the 9/11 aftermath: if, as far as marriage goes, reconciliation will take place, it will benefit from mutual understanding, but not of ideological convergence, as the gathering at Matt's, one of Rachel's friends, illustrates. When Matt suggests that September 11 was "not such a big deal […] when you think of everything that's happened since" (240), the arithmetic of deaths clashes with Hans's feelings – enraged not because geographic proximity would make him a survivor or eyewitness (something he realizes he is not, tucked away as he was in Midtown), but by the erasure of emotions nobody should be entitled to. This time he is supported by Rachel, who

leaves the party with him and shares the memory of the sirens and the fear that once separated, and now re-unites, them.

Rather than depicting the family as a refuge against the horror (to be protected within and by national boundaries) *Netherland* succeeds in showing how the two are mutually related and dependent, and how sutures of emotional and ideological wounds can be effective not in retreat, but in the opening of spaces, even distances, where confrontation can take place.

## History, Memory, and Myth: American Dreams, Exceptionalism, and Exception(s)

The transnational openings and decentering of 9/11 in *Netherland* take place not only on a spatial level, but in the historical dimension as well; in other words, the constitutive elements that shaped both European and American culture and ideologies, their mutual relations and dependencies, including those that contributed to American exceptionalism before, and the state of exception later.

As his family troubles have shown, Hans's paralysis and attempt to overcome the crisis are related to his difficulty in gaining "a perspective" – a perspective dependent both on his entrenchment in the American geographical and cultural milieu after the attacks but also on his (and the United States) relation to the past, history, and memory. As already mentioned, after the attacks Hans tries, unsuccessfully, to frame them into a historical pattern of continuity. However, his transnational identity is significant in historical transnational relations. His cosmopolitanism places him on the route of imperial history, from The Hague to London, and finally to New York. One cannot help but notice how these countries are constitutive of the debate on "Empire": while The Hague and London represent the Dutch and the English empires, New York is the center of a new financial empire – an empire whose control is constructed on the basis of differential mobility, or in other words by restraining the mobility of specific groups and accelerating that of its elite, in order to secure a form of stability generated by the accumulation of capital (see Virilio), a fact to which Hans's transatlantic life testifies.

The first name of New York, New Amsterdam, emphasizes the continuity of Hans's transnational path, and links him even more closely to the colonial framework and the ruling transnational class. Hans's Dutch roots entrench him in the American soil, according to Chuck, who sees Hans as "a member of the first tribe of New York, excepting of course the Red Indians" (O'Neill 75). Despite the fact that Hans's Dutch origins reflect the origins of the country and make Hans "the most recent iteration of the original American presence in this part of the world" (Bacon 2) and the legitimate claimer of the New World, in a financial rather than in a political way, Hans wants "to discharge the obligation of remembrance that fixed itself to one in this anomalous place, which offered so little shade from the incomprehensible rays of the past" (O'Neill 204), as he makes clear when Chuck takes him to an old Dutch cemetery. Rather than claiming the New World as his, Hans's only affiliation with his Dutch past is the parallel he suggests with Rip Van Winkle: on a train near Tarrytown, in a valley that "slipped back into timelessness" (76), he falls asleep, and his memory goes back to his student days between Leiden and The Hague – just as Rip Van Winkle's sleep had brought him back to Dutch colonial times. This parallel uniting the two Atlantic shores is reinforced when Hans, in one of his last visits to his mother, wears his teenage clothes and, "dressed, then, like Rip Van Winkle" (115), walks around his old neighborhood. Just as Rip's twenty-year sleep during the War of Independence testifies to the difficulty of American culture to face its first national trauma, in the same way Hans's escape into cricket affords him a temporary respite from loneliness and a sense of personal and historical disintegration – a trauma that turns from national to transnational, but that, like Rip's, combines a troubled relation to origins and institutions (be it the state or the family) with deep anxieties over the future.

Hans's narrative is "a spasm of memory" (Cochoy and Gaudin 2); the narrator seems unwilling to bear the burden of the past, both private and historical, the first linking him to Holland and the second to the United States. Hans's difficulty to cope with the burden of history and the bewilderment it generates is reflected in his struggle to find linearity in the narrative of his own life, filled with transatlantic *déjà-vus*, patterns, and people (especially women) that keep reappearing in different places:

the memories of his mother go back to The Hague during his childhood and his sporadic visits to her during his adulthood, but also to her only visit to New York when Jake was born. Then the memory of Rachel's transatlantic drive, from London to New York and back which allowed her to live both in an American (and further on back in time a European) past and an English present; and even the memory of a woman he shared a taxi with years back while in London ends up constituting a trans-Atlantic connection when he later had a one-night stand with her in New York. Whether, as Karolina Golimowska notes, these coexistences contribute to giving coherence to Hans's personal life cartography, they also make his temporal and spatial universe fragmented and indistinct, difficult to be reordered in a linear narrative (166).

New York and the Netherlands frequently overlap in Hans's life, as both are scenarios of familial estrangement and losses. The sense of alienation that progressively distances him from Rachel parallels the sense of estrangement his cosmopolitan life leads Hans to feel for his mother, both during her visit to New York and his last visit to her in Holland, as if she "has been placed in the furnace of memory even when alive" (O'Neill 116). The void Hans feels after the premature loss of his father in a car accident in his home country when he was two and of his mother's lonely death a few months after her visit to New York are paralleled by the temporary loss of his new family after his wife leaves him behind in New York. This fragmentation process is aptly represented by Hans's inability to put in some kind of order the many Kodak images he has taken of his son during his weekends in London – images he will commission Chuck's girlfriend to reorder because he feels he needs a story (172).

The story he cannot find in his present is out of focus in his past, too – Hans is estranged even from his past selves: "I find it hard to muster oneness with those former selves whose accidents and endeavors have shaped who I am now […] my natural sense is that all are faded, by the by, discontinued" (63). Plagued by "the burden of remembering" (111), Hans's memories can find a way, and a form, only when the narrator is back in Europe, away from "the tradition of oblivion in force in this city [New York]" (204) and from the erasure of the past (or better, its careful management) that reminds Hans of the maintenance of a cricket field:

> I find it hard to rid myself of the feeling that life carries a taint of the aftermath. This last-mentioned word, somebody told me, refers literally to a second mowing of grass in the same season. You might say, if you are the type prone to general observations, that New York City insists on memory's repetitive mower – on the sort of purposeful post-mortem that has the effect, so one is told and forlornly hopes, of cutting the grassy past to manageable proportions. For it keeps growing back, of course. (2)

Rather than generating a sense of closure, as the state of exception usually exacts (for example by reinforcing the politics of exclusion and limiting the permeability of political borders), 9/11 constitutes in the text a path towards extraterritoriality, both in the geographical and temporal frame, but also in terms of diversity. Besides the transatlantic openings generated by the family crisis and those generated by history and memory, in the "working out of a non-unilateral, decentered account of trauma that situates and transforms the national self within complex global relations to others" (Saal 349), *Netherland* opens up to the concept of Otherness also within the US national boundaries, a concept heavily marginalized in 9/11 fiction. Here the Other is represented by the world of cricket and working-class third-world immigrants, very far removed from the privileged cosmopolitan clique Hans represents, a commonality that encompasses the traditional social structures of the family and nation. Despite Hans's previous sporadic incursions into ethnic communities, thanks to his friend Vinay, a food critic, it is cricket and Chuck that allow him to experience the cosmopolitanism of the ethnic communities, especially those in the outer boroughs. Hans substitutes the geographical centrality of Manhattan with ethnic and social marginalities, most of which are the product of post-colonialism.

If Hans's bond with the United States is the legacy of history, Chuck's legitimacy as an American is affirmed by political and, even more important, by cultural affiliation: proud of his "enthusiastic and successful studies" (O'Neill 97) that allowed him to obtain American citizenship, Chuck is in love with his adoptive country. Even 9/11 leaves his American Dream unaltered, to the point that, recollecting those days, he recalls the time he spent as a volunteer rehoming the pets in Brooklyn as "a wonderful

experience" (100), a "state of elation" that "the catastrophe had instilled in many" (101), Hans notices – as if 9/11 had also provided an appropriate occasion for self-invention.

If, rather paradoxically, in the attempt to give meaning to the scattered fragments of his recent past, the narrator feels that a story is what he needs (172), according to Chuck "[t]here is always a story" (175). Hans's difficulty in keeping together the fragments of his life is in stark contrast with Chuck's ability to carve out his own: "He told his own story constantly. […] His legend was transparently derived from the local one of rags and riches" (175), from his difficult childhood in Trinidad, through his American odyssey, to the anticipation of his cremation in Brooklyn. Chuck's motto, "Think fantastic" (104), and his capacity for self-invention and dreaming big are underlined in the epigraph of the novel, Walt Whitman's poem "I Dream'd in a Dream," and in the many references and parallels with F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), with intertextual links that "reinforce *Netherland*'s preoccupation with the American Dream, its evanescence, and its underlying violence" (Saal 335).

O'Neill shifts the center *vs*. periphery dynamics at work in Fitzgerald's text from national to global and explores the new routes of that dream and its viability. Questioning the "viability" of the American Dream is a constant after 9/11, as O'Neill underlines: "The Gatsbyesque narrative of the corrupting of the American dream is premised on the existence of an autonomous, intact America. But there are forces – including 9/11 and the globalization of the economy – that have destroyed that premise and ended a hugely significant literary and cultural era in American life. I think the challenge for writers is to explore that and recognize it" (qtd. in Bacon n. pag.). In *Netherland*, O'Neill explores the post-national reverberation of the American Dream – mainly what happens in the dialectics between the "center" and the peripheries, that is, the historical and global interdependencies in the aftermath of 9/11. One element of continuity between Chuck's American Dream and his post-colonial past is violence. In his life, violence links his harrowing childhood in Trinidad, where he faces death several times and is almost killed by marijuana dealers, to his racketeering dealings in New York, which he hoped would allow him to build his cricket arena. The violence in Chuck's life, however, has in the

background foundational dynamics that have shaped the history of both countries, Trinidad and the United States, whose colonial past Chuck believes Hans should be proud of because it gives the latter the right to claim that country as "his." If violence is the element that links the colonial and the American past, "the past is never past," as Katherine Snyder notes, comparing *Netherland* and *The Great Gatsby* (466). Violence and death are also ever-present in Hans's and Chuck's New York: their walks and rides, besides Chuck's racketing campaigns, take place mainly in cemeteries, revealing something that in the United States is usually hidden from view, as Hans is quick to mention. Here the national and the transnational are again superimposed: violence is what Hans remembers being televised in those days, with American military intervention in the Middle East and the images of "dark Baghdad glittered with American bombs" (O'Neill 161); at the same time violent deaths are presented as every-day events in New York, as "the peculiar seasonal matter of bodies surfacing in the waters of New York" (160) testifies. And, the last that will come to the surface will be Chuck's. According to Snyder, Hans's story "depends upon, even requires, Chuck's death" (473): indeed, it is only with the death of the American Dream that events can find their order and their place in history.

## "A Crash Course in Democracy": Cricket and the US, in the Aftermath of 9/11

In addition to the permeability of the national borders established by the transnational setting and the cosmopolitan and immigrant stories and tropes, *Netherland* addresses the short-circuits of the US state of exception through the content of Chuck's dream itself, as dreamt in twenty-first century deterritorialized America: a dream that shows how national allegories, extended to a transnational scale, can turn into the newest face of American Exceptionalism, that, like a phoenix, arises from its own, 9/11 ashes.

Cricket is a complex signifier in *Netherland*, which clarifies the deeply vexed relation to nationality in the aftermath of 9/11. As O'Neill stated in an interview, "I think if you're writing about cricket you're writing about power… because cricket is such a loaded sport… And in this country [the

US] it's a sport of the powerless" (qtd. in Gray 71). Cricket is also an important signifier in American culture and post-national studies: the most famous book on cricket ever written is *Beyond a Boundary* (1963) by the Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James, one of the main contributors to the concept of "post-national" (see Gair): merging autobiography, anthropology and history, cricket is for James both an instrument for the affirmation of the culture of the British Empire and a key element in the formation of post-colonial, national cultures.

Cricket has been in fact a legacy of British colonial history and has long been an instrument for colonial rule and imperial discipline. As Chuck reminds Hans, echoing James, British missionaries used cricket to end hostilities among the inhabitants of Trobriand Island in Papua (O'Neill 279). Cricket is part of American history, too; however, although played in colonial times and the first decades of the Republic, it can hardly be considered an American sport since it quickly went out of fashion, as it became increasingly associated with the elite.

In *Netherland,* cricket becomes the paradigm of the colonial and post-colonial encounter: first, literally, since it is where Hans and Chuck's encounter takes place. Although the sport has apparently returned to its egalitarian origins, it nevertheless reflects immigrants' discrimination within the United States, and especially after 9/11 it has become one of the marks of stigmatization. As Hans notes the first time he joins the team, cricket players, mainly Indians and members of other minorities from the former colonies of the British Empire, have to wait for the end of other sports matches (like softball, played by middle-aged white men) before being allowed to play. As Chuck comments: "You want a taste of how it feels to be a black man in this country? Put on the white clothes of a cricketer. Put on the white to feel black" (18). As Westall notes, cricket reveals the spatialization of the city along socio-economic racialized lines, that does not represent American hybridity, but an "uneven and territorializing coexistence in which immigrant spaces are 'Other'" (290).

In Hans and Chuck's lives, cricket is the visible manifestation of their relation to power. For Hans, whose association with old and new forms of the Empire is repeatedly highlighted in the novel, cricket is the legacy left

to him by his dead father. The vicarious role of the latter is in part taken up by the other members of the cricket club his father belonged to. As he admits, "I am from The Hague, where Dutch bourgeois snobbishness and Dutch cricket are, not unrelatedly, most concentrated" (O'Neill 53). From there onward, cricket continues to be a sign of Hans's social and economic power: when he moves to London, he joins the South Bank Cricket Club, where

> on marvelously shorn Surrey village greens […] we battled gently for victory and drank warm beer on the steps of ancient wooden pavilions. Once, after a shaky start to the season, I booked a private net at Lord's. An elderly coach with the countenance of a butler fed balls into a bowling machine and declared, "Good shot, sir," each time my bat connected with one of the long hops and half-volley the machine amiably spat out. (57)

As for Chuck, whose past is marked by the scars of colonialism, cricket is what he dreamed of when he was a child – a sport his father forbade him to play and that he could only watch from afar. As the visible manifestation of familial oppression and social exclusion, cricket becomes for Chuck the main object of desire and his ability to exercise power: rather than a player, Chuck wants to be the one who makes it happen and "to do what it takes to make this happen" (280) in the United States. What originated in an individual injustice is transformed by Chuck into a dream of success, with a cricket arena "for the greatest cricket teams in the world. Twelve exhibition matches every summer, watched by eight thousand spectators at fifty dollars a pop" (103) and all the income from collateral facilities, TV rights, internet viewership of millions of people.

This dream, however, has also deep ethical and political overtones. Chuck repeatedly insists on cricket's educational potential:

> "we have an expression in the English language," he said, as silence began to establish itself amongst the players. "The expression is 'not cricket.' When we disapprove of something we say 'it's not cricket.' We do not say 'it's not baseball.' Or 'It's not football.' We say 'it's not cricket.' This is a tribute to the game we play, and it's a tribute to us. […] Now, games are important. They

> test us. They teach us comradeship. They're fun. But cricket, more than any other sport, is, I want to say [...] a lesson in civility. We all know this." (16-17)

A legacy of imperialism, a tool to export civilization used by the empires, cricket can become, according to Chuck, the instrument of social and political transformation, "a crash course in democracy" (279) and a cure for a national body, plagued by inequalities, that has just experienced a post-imperial tragic backlash. Cricket would help Americans to "see the world," to find "something in common with Hindus and Muslims" (280): cricket, and its post-national potential theorized by James, would be the antidote to closures created by the state of exception.

As Saal notes, Chuck's desire to sanitize cricket of its imperial origins is more than a reversal of power relations since it "aims to implement a form of intercultural and transnational relations firmly anchored in principles of mutual respect and hospitality" (342). Played by an international community, in an arena called "Bald Eagle field" (O'Neill 108) cricket is "a metaphor for a more egalitarian and cooperative society in times of national bereavement" (Mansutti 118); a version of intercultural understanding, this sport would become the way to defuse conflicts, as it was in Trobriand Islands. In Chuck's vision, cricket would overturn the unprecedented anxieties over the domestic space that have followed the 9/11 attacks: what is foreign would be the vehicle for ethical improvement.

It would be tempting to say that, through the cricket metaphor, *Netherland* is suggesting that, rather than exporting democracy, the United States should import it. This however is not Chuck's idea: he does not consider cricket as something foreign. According to him, cricket is "NOT AN IMMIGRANT SPORT" (O'Neill 133), as one of his emails to the dozen "dear friends" titles, since it has been played in New York since the 1770s. Even Benjamin Franklin played cricket, Chuck underlines; Henry Chadwick, the father of baseball, played it: "It is a bona fide American pastime, and it should be regarded as such. All those who have attempted to 'introduce' cricket to the American public have failed to understand this. Cricket is already in the American DNA" (134). If cricket's scope is transformative and ameliorative for American society, its potential is already embedded in the American cultural milieu: as Chuck says, "my own feeling is that the US is not complete, the US has not fulfilled its destiny,

it's not fully civilized until it has embraced the game of cricket" (279). The Americanness of Chuck's dream can be detected both in the model of the American Jeremiad, recognizable in Chuck's speech, "simultaneously lamenting a declension and celebrating a national," as Bercovitch wrote (qtd. in Saal 336), and the emphasis on the origins of the sport.

Paradoxically, it is the fact that Chuck's faith is not in the dream, but in its Americanness, that limits him. His need to ground it in that specific national context, in its geography (the stadium) and its culture, is ultimately the reason for his failure; "You don't have to come to America to participate in the 'American Dream'" (qtd. in Reilly 13), O'Neill commented in an interview, echoing Faruk Patel, the millionaire Chuck wants to involve in the construction of the cricket stadium. It is Patel, who confesses to Hans, during their meeting in London after Chuck's death, that he did not believe Chuck's project could work: "There's a limit to what Americans understand. The limit is cricket. [...] My idea was different. My idea was, you don't need America. Why would you? You have the TV, internet markets in India, in England. These days that's plenty. America? Not relevant. You put the stadium there and you're done. Finito la musica" (O'Neill 334). Chuck's faith in America's potential and inclusivity is misplaced both for his dream and himself: not only will he not be able to build the stadium but he will be killed, his body sent back to Trinidad, and his cricket pitch will die with him, as Hans sees on Google Maps when he is back in London.

If Chuck's vision re-incorporates a "post-national" dream in a national frame that revives once again American Exceptionalism, Hans's path follows an opposing direction. If in his childhood cricket was deeply rooted in the sense of nationality and was the sign of a genealogical continuity, his transnational life gives cricket a new function: it connects him to the places he has lived in and, once in New York, allows him to bring back transnational memories and connections (Golimowska 167). Cricket becomes for Hans the space where he can recreate a provisional sense of belonging, a "re-spatialization of belonging," in the definition given by Alison Blunt (qtd. in Zamorano Llena 19), a multi-local identity based on emotional attachment to places. In order to belong, however, changes may be required. In this case, Hans must adapt to the American way of batting.

Whereas in Netherland or in London the ground is flat and well mowed, and the ball is hit in the traditional way, in the United States the "bushy" and irregular terrain of the fields requires players to learn to hit the ball in the air:

> There was nothing, in principle, to stop me from changing my game, from taking up the cow-shots and lofted bashes in which many of my teammates specialized. But it was, I felt, different for them. They had grown up playing the game in floodlit Lahore car parks or in rough clearings in some West Indian countryside. They could, and did, modify their batting without spiritual upheaval. I could not. More accurately, I would not change – which was uncharacteristic of me. Coming to America [...] I'd eagerly taken to new customs and mannerisms at the expense of old ones. How little, in the fluidities of my new country, I missed the ancient clotted continent. But self-transformation has its limits; and my limit was reached in the peculiar matter of batting. (O'Neill 63)

Hans's initial clinging to tradition represents, according to Carmen Zamorano Llena, "the difficulties faced by the individual when forced by contextual factors to redefine traditional understandings of collective and individual identity" (17), but also of social status and privilege. And it is only when these difficulties are overcome that he feels "naturalized" (O'Neill 233).

Chuck and Hans's relation to cricket becomes a metaphor for their relation to power and the nation: one of the reasons Chuck likes cricket is that, contrary to baseball, which is "air-based," cricket is a "ground-based sport" (195). It has to do with territorialization, borders, and belonging, three crucial elements in Chuck's dream – to belong to the United States, in life and death. His "dreaming big," the insistence on cricket as part of American history and its regenerative potential, all testify to his clinging to the ideal of "national" and to the hope that differences will be smoothed out within that national space, as he plans to do with his cricket field.

On the contrary, Hans's approach to cricket is empirical as is his relation to the nation. Belonging, for him, is the result of personal affiliation, not of political status. Adapting to the ground and changing his batting technique allow him to reformulate his position as an outsider and, at the same time, as an American, "which makes the 'American way' of playing

cricket a post-national concept" (Golimowska 166) – a post-nationality antithetical to Chuck's: just as the unevenness of the terrain leads Hans to the "aerial turn" in his batting style, so too will aerial and deterritorialized become his relation to the United States, that he will leave behind by flying away.

Used to equating citizenry with "the slightness of its mysteries" that characterizes his home country (O'Neill 117), Hans is not a lover of America. Despite his well-paid job, he does not want "to join the New York dead" (100) as he makes clear when Chuck takes him to visit an old Dutch graveyard. Hans's disregard for formal American citizenship before, and for the US as a whole later, and his challenge to state sovereignty (Bimbisar 7) can be understood, as Simon Van Schalkwyk notes, thinking of "the failures of neoliberalism's promise of cosmopolitan security around the intensification of the American security state" (4).

Hans's affiliation with the US is temporal; New York is retrospectively depicted as something that "interposed itself, once and for all, between me and all other places of origin" (O'Neill 239). Hans's return to England is in the name of continuity, from the "providential country" of The Netherlands, where "there seemed little point in an individual straining excessively for or against the upshots arranged on his behalf, which had been thoughtfully conceived to benefit him from the day he was born to the day he died and hardly required an explanation" (117), to the "premature crystallization of lives" that London offers, "where men and women past the age of forty, in some cases even the age of thirty, may easily be regarded as over the hill and entitled to an essentially retrospective idea of themselves; whereas in New York selfhood's hill always seemed to lie ahead and to promise a glimpse of further, higher peaks: that you might have no climbing boots to hand was beside the point" (236).

The narrator's progressive distance from the US and, more in general, from the concept of nation is explicit in the last image of the United States in the novel, with the virtual visit Hans pays on Google Maps to Chuck's cricket field in ruins and, flowing upward into the atmosphere, "no sign of nations, no sense of the work of man. The USA as such is nowhere to be seen" (335). It is however an emptied world, without inhabitants, that, as Pier Paolo Frassinelli and David Watson note, underlines the ambiguities

of deterritorialization: here, “precarity and cosmopolitanism coexist in a zone of indistinction and folded together they resist disaggregation into antithetical utopian and dystopian modalities” (Frassinelli and Watson 3). The reader does not know what Hans will see, besides his family, after his return to London, as the final scene on the London Eye suggests: “‘Look!’ Jake is saying, pointing wildly. ‘See, Daddy?’ I see, I tell him, looking from him to Rachel and again to him. Then I turn to look for what it is we’re supposed to be seeing” (O’Neill 340). Probably a world with no borders, but the standpoint will not be in the United States.

## Notes

[1] Agamben quotes President Bush’s decision to refer to himself constantly as the “Commander in Chief of the Army” after 9/11, that testifies his attempt to turn the emergency into the rule.

## Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Anker, Elizabeth S. “Allegories of Falling and the 9/11 Novel.” *American Literary History* 23 (2011): 463-82.

Bacon, Katie. “The Great Irish-Dutch-American Novel.” *The Atlantic* March 24 (2008): n. pag. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/05/the-great-irish-dutch american-novel/6788/2/>.

Cochoy, Nathalie, and Olivier Gaudin. “An Interview with Joseph O’Neill.” *Transatlantica* 1 (2013): 1-9 <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6393>.

Dawes, Birgit. *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novel*. Heidelberhg: Universitaetsverlag Winter, 2011.

Frassinelli, Pier Paolo, and David Watson. “Precarious Cosmopolitanism in O’Neill’s *Netherland* and Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow.*” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15 (2013): n. pag. <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2350>.

Gair, Christopher, ed. *Beyond Boundaries: C.L.R. James and Postnational Studies*. London: Pluto Press, 2006.

Golimowska, Karolina. *The Post–9/11 City in Novels. Literary Remappings of New York and London*. New York: McFarland, 2016.

Gray, Richard. *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Irom, Bimbisar. "Towards a Worldly Post-9/11 American Novel: Transnational Disjunctures in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*." *Journal of Transnational American Studies,* 2016: n. pag. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5wf7k062>.

Irr, Caren. *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Columbia UP, 2013.

Keeble, Arin. *The 9/11 Novel: Trauma, Politics and Identity*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2014.

James, C. L. R. *Beyond a Boundary*. London: Hutchinson, 1963.

Mansutti, Pamela. "Ethno-religious Identities and Cosmopolitan Echoes in John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) and Joseph O'Neill's' *Netherland* (2008)." *Altre Modernità* (2011): 105-23.

Ralph, Jason. *America's War on Terror. The State of the 9/11 Exception from Bush to Obama*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013.

Reilly, Charlie. "An Interview with Joseph O'Neill." *Contemporary Literature* 52 (2011): 1-20.

Rothberg, Michael. "A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel. A Response to Richard Gray." *American Literary History* 21 (2009): 152-58.

Saal, Ilka. "Post-National American Dreaming in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*: The Adversity of Hans van den Broek." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 47 (2017): 333-352.

Snyder, Katherine. "Gatsby's Ghost: Post-Traumatic Memory and National Literary Tradition in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland.*" *Contemporary Literature* 54 (2013): 459-490. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43297919>.

Van Schalkwyk, Simon. "Risky Business in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland.*" *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 2020: 1-19.

Virilio, Paul. *Speed and Politics.* Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007.

Wasserman, Sarah L. "Looking Away from 9/11: The Optics of Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*." *Contemporary Literature* 55 (2014): 249-69.

Westall, Claire. "Cricket and the World-system, or Continuity, 'Riskless Risk' and Cyclicality in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland.*" *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 52 (2016): 287-300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2016.1203102>.

Zamorano Llena, Carmen. "Transnational Movements and the Limits of Citizenship: Redefinitions of National Belonging in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*." *Transcultural*

*Identities in Contemporary Literature.* Eds. Irene Gilsenan Nordin, Julie Hansen, and Carmen Zamorano Llena. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013. 3-25.

Zappen, James P. "New York City as Dwelling Place: Reinventing the American Dream in Steven Millhauser's *Martin Dressler,* Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, and Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life.*" *The Journal of American Culture* 39 (2016): 151-64.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Universal Exception.* New York: Continuum Press, 2006.

Angelo Arminio

# An Alternate History of the Warring States: Global War in a State of Exception and Democratic Short-circuit in Matt Gallagher's *Empire City*

Gérard Genette's foyer-like definition of the paratext as a liminal space separating – but also, crucially, connecting – the inside and outside of a text in his seminal book *Seuils* (1987) is a first hint at the French theorist's discussion of the considerable power that the information surrounding a literary work holds over it and its interpretation. Genette calls this space a zone of "transaction," or a "privileged space of pragmatics and strategy" that can (and often does) lead to "a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (2), at least according to the author.

There are many ways in which extra-textual information can guide the reader's interpretation as well as draw their attention to a number of different issues, and in the case of Matt Gallagher's novel *Empire City* (2020) the two epigraphs that frame the narrative – together with its title – allude primarily to institutional power, its influence over people and its relationship with its enforcers. The titular Empire City, an alternate version of New York City that has officialized one of its old nicknames, calls attention to the United States' imperialist practices abroad and to its fictional counterparts, while quotations from Thomas Hobbes and Emma Sky respectively address the issue of governmental power and its exertion. Evidently, Gallagher chooses a passage from Hobbes's *Leviathan* in which the English philosopher enumerates various forms of power and references certain qualities of men that make them loved or feared, because "it is a means to have the assistance and service of many" (58). Gallagher couples it with a line by Sky, who praises the US military but not the rest of the country it represents, to make it clear from the very beginning that the reader should focus on issues such as the construction of popular consent

and a hypothetical disconnection that exists in the United States between the military, civilians, and the government.

This article argues that Gallagher's novel moves between alternate history, dystopia, and superhero fiction to highlight the consequences of an indiscriminate use of executive power in the United States through the imposition of a perpetual *state of exception*, a time in which the law is suspended, and citizens are stripped of their rights in order to preserve the existence of the state. As a consequence of this, a perpetual war in the Mediterranean is fought by the US military without the citizens' approval or interest, resulting in millions of troubled veterans struggling to return to civil society and being shipped to rehabilitation colonies. I argue that his alarming rupture between the government, citizens, and soldiers exposes an authoritarian threat that, unlike in typical alternate histories, is not tied to a foreign menace or ideology. Rather, it originates within the American democratic state, where the alienating absence of truly democratic decisions on military operations results in a sharp divide between civilians and service members, raising questions about the motives of the United States' imperialist practices.

Gallagher's novel is roughly set in the early 2010s in an alternative version of the United States which, finally victorious in Vietnam in 1981, have turned into an authoritarian and bellicose state that at least nominally values military culture and seems to treat veterans with the utmost respect. After Vietnam and the fall of the Soviet Union due to a Russian Revolution, the 1980s are marked by the Palm Sunday attacks on Federal City (possibly a rechristened Washington, DC) orchestrated by terrorist leader Abu Abdallah – the start of the so-called Mediterranean Wars, with widespread military activity from Albania to Iran. The narration opens with a focus on Sebastian Rios, a self-described "PR flack" who works for Homeland Authority after having been a civilian hostage in Tripoli during the Mediterranean Wars, attending his old friend Mia Tucker's engagement party. Subsequently, the second chapter follows Mia – a veteran of the war and one of Sebastian's saviors – finding out about her pregnancy and preparing to go to an event where Jaclyn "Jackie" Collins, her future employer and presidential candidate, is set to give a speech. The third chapter completes the roster of focalizers with the introduction of Jean-Jacques Saint-Preux, a

Haitian American member of the armed forces and one of the Volunteers, a group of super-powered soldiers created because of the detonation of a bomb containing cythrax, a mysterious substance said to have come from "rocks found deep in space" (Gallagher 273). The other two members of the Volunteers are Pete Swenson and Grady Flowers, two soldiers who were also involved in the operation in Tripoli, where Sebastian was held hostage. Together with Jean-Jacques, they went on to serve in various battles in the Mediterranean, eventually becoming so well-known that they become the protagonists of comic books and star in Hollywood movies as themselves. They are among the few survivors of the bomb, along with Sebastian and Mia who, however, are also changed by the explosion: the first can turn invisible, while the second gains the ability to fly. Their powers, however, are kept hidden by the government, and the two are assigned handlers to manage any possible problem arising from their situation.

As is evident from this brief description of the world in which the story takes place, Gallagher's novel constitutes a departure from the use of realism that has characterized much of the fiction that has been published during and about the War on Terror, especially when taking into consideration the literary output of veteran writers who, like Gallagher, have served in Iraq or Afghanistan.[1] It is therefore worth noting that *Empire City* is not, strictly speaking, concerned with the Iraq War, like the author's previous book-length works of fiction, his memoir *Kaboom* (2008) and his first novel *Youngblood* (2016), but instead presents an analogous conflict set in lands that sometimes overlap with those that have been touched by actual wars in the twenty-first century. The unrealistic elements of the story exist on a spectrum that goes from possible to fantastic and includes alternative outcomes to past historical events and superpowers granted by space rocks.

## Speculative Fiction: Past Possibilities and the Authoritarian Threat

In 2004, Margaret Atwood famously introduced a distinction between what she called "science fiction" and "speculative fiction." Atwood envisioned science fiction as those "books with things in them we can't yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we

can't go," while speculative fiction was to be intended as a genre "which employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth" (513). In other words, Atwood differentiated between stories that foreground fantastical elements and those that, though fictional, explore plausible alternate realities. With time, speculative fiction has established itself as a broader category made up of "works presenting modes of being that contrast with their audiences' understanding of ordinary reality" (Gill 73), thereby including both the kinds of fiction that Atwood indicated in 2004, as well as any other story that presents events and processes that deviate from commonly accepted versions of history and physics. Given its characteristics, *Empire City* could certainly be considered part of this wider catalogue, but its peculiarity lies in its multifaceted genealogy and in its sweeping use of many of the speculative fiction tropes that typify the various genres contained in this broad categorization. Indeed, *Empire City* mainly features elements from three genres: alternate history, dystopia, and superhero fiction.

Gallagher's novel is, first and foremost, an example of allohistorical writing, or a text that "depend[s] on a 'what if' proposition" and in which a "key moment or conjunction of events is assumed to turn out differently from the documented record" (Malcolm 171). In her extensive theorization of the alternate history genre, Kathleen Singles has used the term "point of divergence" to identify this particular moment in fiction that depicts a (more or less) substantial departure from a commonly accepted narrative of past events, and, indeed, sees it as the defining feature of alternate history as a genre, calling it the "common denominator and the trait that distinguishes alternate histories from other related genres" (7). Singles uses this as a distinguishing feature of alternate history to differentiate it from other, closely related genres like historical fiction and science fiction. In *Alternate History: Playing with Contingency and Necessity* (2013), she enumerates most of the terms that have been used to define this kind of fictional narratives: "allohistory, alternative history, politique fiction, uchronia, Gegengeschichte, parallel time novel, 'what-if' story, quasi-historical novel, political fantasy, historical might-have-been, 'as if' narrative and counterfeit world, parahistory" (16). For the purpose of this article, I will borrow Singles's approach, who acknowledges the slight

differences in meaning that come with the use of one denomination as opposed to another, but ultimately deems them too weak to warrant the use of distinctive terminology.

The exact point where events in *Empire City* diverge from the "normalized narrative of the past" (Singles 70) is not made explicit in great detail. Readers are made aware that the United States have claimed victory in Vietnam, but no concrete explanation is given to clarify the reason behind this alternative outcome of the war in Indochina, an event that in turn sparks the divergent path that Gallagher explores in his novel. There are hints here and there, like the mentioning of a "former president Rockefeller" (Gallagher 30) that might have succeeded Gerald Ford, or Sebastian sharing his opinions on the "peacemongers" that contributed to the end of the draft: "Made the all-volunteer force possible. Which is how you all won Vietnam" (Gallagher 5). Here Gallagher operates a curious reversal of the usual point of divergence: in most alternate histories the diverging event is understood as a consequence of biographical differences in famous historical figures – what Matthew Schneider-Mayerson sees as an implicit endorsement of the Carlylean idea of history as the biography of great men – or as caused by an alteration of military history (Schneider-Mayerson 73), but most of the time a dystopian outcome in Anglo-American alternate histories is caused by an American defeat, such as a Confederate triumph in the Civil War or a Nazi victory in WW2. By far the most common, the Nazi victory (or the "Nazification" of the United States due to historical figures endorsing Hitler's message) is featured in some of the most prominent alternate histories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004). Whereas in Lewis and Roth's cases the cause of the authoritarian turn is the rise to power of, respectively, Buzz Windrip and Charles Lindbergh, and in Dick's novel it is the assassination of president Roosevelt in 1933 that ultimately condemns the US to foreign rule, in Gallagher's novel it is the American victory in Vietnam that seems to exacerbate some of the most problematic traits of the United States, gradually transforming the "land of the free" into a blatantly imperialist, militaristic, and authoritarian nation.

As is often the case in alternate histories (Duncan 212), the consequences of the diverging event in *Empire City* have strong dystopian tones, even though, of course, as Gregory Claeys explains in "The Origins of Dystopia: Wells, Huxley, Orwell," "whether a given text can be described as a dystopia or utopia will depend on one's perspective of the narrative outcome" (108). I would argue that it is nevertheless safe to assume that a considerable portion of readers would recognize the world of the book as dystopian, as it is shown to be in a state of constant global war, with the United States as the sole global superpower, military operations happening across the Balkans and the Middle East, and nuclear bombs being dropped in the Mediterranean, with "Greek militants still angry about Crete accidentally getting nuked" (Gallagher 146). Like other dystopias, *Empire City* portrays a far-reaching authoritarian state that controls most citizens (Claeys 109), but its organization does not seem to be explicitly tyrannical or even socialist, as is the case in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*. On the contrary, the electoral process closely resembles its real-world counterpart (General Collins's presidential campaign is the backbone of the story) and political life is still dominated by Wall Street fundraising (Gallagher 294).

The third genre whose elements are featured in *Empire City* is, as already mentioned, superhero fiction. Gallagher's decision to include a supernatural element, that is, superpowered individuals, is not only unusual for a veteran writer or for the alternate history genre – it is also uncommon for the medium as a whole and runs the risk of diminishing the novel's literary significance in the eyes of many. As Hatfield et al. argue in *The Superhero Reader* (2013), superhero stories have only recently started to be the subject of academic studies, even though the medium which is almost synonymous with the genre, the comic book (and, crucially, the graphic novel), has already reached a broader public while claiming its place as a serious genre and a fertile space of scholarly inquiry earlier in the last century. Indeed, Hatfield et al. claim that through the years "some of the critics of the superhero genre [were] precisely those who have most enthusiastically embraced the literary graphic novel" (xiv). The decade that separates *The Superhero Reader* and this article has, however, seen an even greater exponential growth of superhero fiction as a popular genre, and

costumed vigilantes are currently ubiquitous in cinemas and on streaming platforms. Consequently, more and more scholars have decided to dedicate book-length studies to the topic, like Chris Gavaler and Nathaniel Goldberg's *Superhero Thought Experiments* (2019), Daniel Stein's *Authorizing Superhero Comics* (2021), and the collection of essays *The Superhero Symbol* (2019), edited by Liam Burke, Ian Gordon, and Angela Ndalianis. In the introduction to their book, Gavaler and Goldberg suggest that, in fact, superhero fiction and philosophical thought experiments have a lot in common, and that superhero narratives can serve as a site of philosophical inquiry: "writers and artists of Marvel and DC can be read as philosophers and their works as comic book philosophy" (2).

Just like alternate history and dystopia – and to a certain extent, all fictional writing – superhero fiction rests on a "what if" proposition and typically creates a connection with the real world that takes the shape of a thought experiment. This means that *all three* of the genres that inform *Empire City* function as devices to engage with philosophical issues in imaginative ways. In the "Utopias and anti-utopias" chapter of the *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (2003), Edward James claims that "the unasked but essential question in most utopian novels – 'what is the meaning of life?' or 'what is the destiny of man?' – is a question raised by almost no one these days apart from theologians and SF writers" (228), pointing out the sometimes-neglected significance of such narratives. Of course, this is not only the case with science fiction – the same could be said of speculative fiction in general, and of alternate history, dystopia, and superhero fiction in particular.

What the three genres seem to have in common – and this is especially relevant for *Empire City* – is that they inevitably foreground the representation of the use and abuse of power, be it political, physical, or both. In the case of dystopia, *Brave New World* and *1984* can very easily be read as cautionary tales that argue against the mindless adoption of socialist ideals and that give readers a glimpse of a not-so-distant future in which totalitarian regimes have inevitably taken over. Narratives belonging to this genre usually portray failed or deeply flawed societies that are in some way the result of either the absence or the overzealous use of power. As far as alternate history is concerned, while some narratives

can uncharacteristically pick points of divergence that are not based on the different outcome of great power struggles, most of them typically present a version of the world in which power has drastically shifted hands, like in *The Man in the High Castle*.

Superhero fiction itself is no stranger to "what if" stories that depict alternate realities *within* a comic book or cinematic multiverse. Famous examples include Marvel's 1977 comic book anthology series *What If* (and the homonymous 2021 animated series), DC's 1985 miniseries *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (which also received a TV adaptation, in 2019), not to mention the introduction of parallel worlds in the Marvel Cinematic Universe in 2021. While these stories *can* address political fantasies – like Mark Millar's *Superman: Red Son*, in which Superman is raised in the Soviet Union instead of the United States – they predominantly address the question of power – and sovereignty – in a different way, namely by highlighting the conflict between vigilante justice administered by superpowered individuals outside of the law and state-sanctioned forms of law enforcement. In other words, superheroes are both an aid and a challenge to state sovereignty – they break the law to ensure that other laws are followed.

## Real and Dystopian Forever Wars: An Altogether American State of Exception

In any case, the three genres represent situations in which the legal rights of certain individuals are suspended in an effort to uphold the rule of law. In *State of Exception* (2005), Giorgio Agamben notes that nations (especially totalitarian states) preserve the integrity of their political system through the creation of a state of emergency, which "allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system" (2). The totalitarian regimes depicted in alternate histories and dystopias – like their real-life counterparts – employ these methods regularly by suspending the rule of law whenever the state is threatened, effectively creating an *Ausnahmezustand*, or state of exception. In *Leviathan*, Thomas

Hobbes famously envisioned an absolute sovereign as the solution for the *bellum omnium contra omnes* that would ensue if humanity were to be left in a state of nature. The monarch imagined by Hobbes is the guarantor of civil safety; his office "consisteth in the end for which he was trusted with the sovereign power, namely the procuration of the safety of the people, to which he is obliged by the law of nature" (222). And yet, in order to guarantee the safety of the subjects, the monarch needs to maintain power, as Michel Foucault notes in *The History of Sexuality* (1976): "if someone dared to rise up against him and transgress his laws, then he could exercise a direct power over the offender's life: as punishment, the latter would be put to death" (135). The powers of the sovereign, however, do not seem to end where the function of the law is exhausted – in case the order is threatened, a state of emergency ensues, and the rule of law can be *lawfully* suspended. In *Die Diktatur* (1921), jurist Carl Schmitt stated that whoever "rules over the state of exception therefore rules over the state, because he decides when this state should emerge and what means are necessary" (14), while characterizing the state of exception as *plenitudo potestatis*, or the "legally unlimited exercise of power" (13) on the part of the sovereign.

Agamben points out the inherent contradiction that the state of exception creates when it is included in the constitution of modern democracies, as it is intended as a legal instrument aimed at the imposition of extra-legal (or illegal) norms. Although it is closely associated with authoritarian states – and with periods of political uncertainty that lead to authoritarian states – Agamben explains how "the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency (though perhaps not declared in the technical sense) has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states, including so-called democratic ones" (*State of Exception* 2). Rather than an explicitly sanctioned state of exception – which nonetheless was the principal instrument used by governments around the world to fight the COVID-19 pandemic – Agamben argues that "in all of the Western democracies, the declaration of the state of exception has gradually been replaced by an unprecedented generalization of the paradigm of security as the normal technique of government" (14).

Agamben's argument is at least partially informed by the events that followed the September 11 attacks in New York. Accordingly, he uses the

Bush administration's reaction as an example of how western democracies govern through the imposition of a constant state of exception justified by a state of emergency: "Bush is attempting to produce a situation in which the emergency becomes the rule, and the very distinction between peace and war (and between foreign and civil war) becomes impossible" (22). Here Agamben shows how the formally undeclared wars in Afghanistan, and later in Iraq, are mirrored in the United States by the adoption of invasive surveillance measures, a widespread phenomenon that finds its justification in the safeguard of the citizens and of democracy itself: "in all of the Western democracies, the declaration of the state of exception has gradually been replaced by an unprecedented generalization of the paradigm of security as the normal technique of government" (14).

The problem, of course, is that democracy itself, together with the rights of individuals, can become the victim of the state of exception. The prisoners of Guantánamo serve as a somber example of this risk, as they are reduced to a status of "bare life": "President Bush's order [...] radically erases any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally unnamable and unclassifiable being," and the Taliban POWs exist completely outside the law (both national and international): "not only do the Taliban captured in Afghanistan not enjoy the status of POWs as defined by the Geneva Convention, they do not even have the status of persons charged with a crime according to American laws" (3). Thus, Agamben is able to draw a parallel between the seemingly democratic government of the United States and the totalitarian state par excellence, the German Nazi regime: the Taliban prisoners – the unwanted that are perceived as threats to the survival of the state – are enclosed in camps just like Jews and other "undesirables" during WW2. Achille Mbembe, on the other hand, has noted that "dominant states" have frequently adopted both a rhetoric of terror – the American wars in the Middle East have usually been referred to by both the administration and the media as a "war on terror" – and the creation of enclosed spaces to separate society from a perceived threat, or a way of "spatializing and discharging that terror by confining its most extreme manifestations to some racially stigmatized third place – the plantation under slavery, the colony, the camp, the compound under

apartheid, the ghetto or, as in the present-day United States, the prison" (34).

The use and abuse of power are central themes in *Empire City*. While the inclusion of a quote from *Leviathan* as one of the epigraphs anticipates this focus, the political environment described in the book is rife with examples of states of exception and challenges to sovereign power. The Palm Sunday terrorist attacks are both the cause and justification of the state of emergency – and are an obvious reference to the September 11 attacks in New York – that enables the imposition of a perpetual state of exception in the United States. Details about the events are scattered throughout the book, and most of the information about them is contained in a sixth-grade history exam that, like other fictional historical documents, serves as a break between chapters (Gallagher 165). The attacks on Federal City are regarded as a political turning point in history: asking where one was during the attacks has become commonplace (as happened with the fall of the Berlin wall or 9/11) and are thought to be the reason for the collapse of the two-party system in the United States (Gallagher 56). The biopolitical power of the government over the life and death of its citizens is made apparent as Sebastian slowly comes to realize that the explosion of the cythrax bomb – the origin of the Volunteers' superpowers – was a government experiment conducted without regard for the life of those involved in it. Of course, the majority of the experiment's subjects were Rangers, a special operations regiment, and the crown jewel of the American armed forces: not only are civilian lives shown to be exp(a)endable for the government – soldiers are even less valuable and are treated as though they were inanimate assets. This tendency to treat soldiers as weapons that can be discarded once they have served their purpose reaches gargantuan proportions in the book: in the first speech that General Collins gives at a Wall Street veteran meeting, she complains that "only three percent of Americans serve in the military" (30) – figures in the real world are closer to 0.5 percent ("US Armed Forces") – while twelve million veterans have served in the Mediterranean Wars alone (Gallagher 148).

The opening reference to Genette's definition of the paratext allows me to highlight the fact that successful readings of alternate histories, by their nature, are dependent on extra-textual information. Singles explains

how "alternate histories create a 'dialogic' relation between history and its alternative version, superimpose them, rather than merging them or canceling each other out" (72), and this happens at various points throughout *Empire City*. However, while many of the events of the book have more or less clearcut counterparts in the real world, they almost always portray what I would call an "intensified" version of them. Rather than creating a universe in which things are radically different, it seems as if the American victory in Vietnam has resulted in an altered but parallel succession of events that read as an intensified version of recent historical events, particularly those connected to the War on Terror – the ongoing Mediterranean Wars, for example, have been fought for thirty years and show no sign of de-escalation.

In *The World Hitler Never Made* (2005), Gavriel Rosenfeld notes that there might be political tendencies associated with certain types of alternate histories: what he calls "fantasies" "tend to be liberal, for by imagining a better alternate past, they see the present as wanting and thus implicitly support changing it"; nightmares, instead, "tend to be conservative, for by portraying the alternate past in negative terms, they ratify the present as the best of all possible worlds and thereby discourage the need for change" (Rosenfeld 11). While *Empire City* does portray a sort of nightmare scenario, it also seems to (heavily) imply that the real world really does need some improvement, and thus the book walks a fine line between representing a dystopian alternative present and a political allegory that highlights actual, urgent issues in the United States. Schneider-Mayerson has argued that the "abuse of power and mobilization of the industrial state for nefarious purposes is the most glaring and perhaps universal feature of the contemporary alternate history novel" (73), and while this is true in the novel, it seems that dystopias or nightmare scenarios in American alternate histories are usually the product of ideologies that are perceived as external or even opposite to an ideal American spirit. The militaristic and invasive regime of *Empire City*, however, is not caused by fascism or communism. Rather it is the product of an intensification of American militarism after the victory in Vietnam and – in a turn of events that reads as scarily similar to the real world – the government's reaction to terrorist attacks that turns into an endless, global, war. The threat of terrorism and

war become the excuse for the imposition of security measures that make governing easier at the expense of democracy itself – in other words, in the book it is the American democratic process itself that slowly plunges citizens in an authoritarian state.

Admittedly, the thought of a nation founded upon the ideas of democracy and freedom being consumed internally by homegrown authoritarianism seems hard to believe at first. In *The New American Exceptionalism* (2009) Donald E. Pease provides a nifty solution to the apparent contradiction by individuating the relationship between the state fantasy of American Exceptionalism and the legitimation of the state's monopoly on legitimate violence (2). Borrowing from Jacqueline Rose, Pease defines a state fantasy as "the dominant structure of desire out of which US citizens imagined their national identity" (1) and argues that in the absence of any logical explanation for its dominance on the individual, the American state necessarily exploits the semantically undetermined idea of "American Exceptionalism" to govern. Pease refers to the "semantic indeterminacy" (9) of the concept to highlight its multiple and often contradictory meanings as well as its malleability. The Cold War here serves as an exemplary period: as the American nation presented itself as the opposite of the Soviet Empire, "American Exceptionalism produced the desire within US citizens to construe US imperialism as a nation-preserving measure" (Pease 20). In this way, Americans lived through an era of repression and the persecution of supposed "communists" while condemning similar practices in the Soviet Union, at the same time failing to recognize the contradictions between American ideals and the occupation of South Korea and West Berlin, instead deriving "enjoyment from these *exceptions* as necessary means to achieve the state's destruction of imperialism as a Russian way of life" (Pease 21; emphasis mine). In other words, the indeterminacy of America's exceptions allows for the Orwellian coexistence of opposing truths – since the invincibility (and exceptionality) of the United States has never been challenged by the Vietnam debacle in works such as *Empire City* and *Watchmen*, the inhabitants of those fictional worlds live in exponentially more authoritarian versions of the US while believing in the same ideals of democracy and individual liberty that have characterized them since the earliest days of the American nation.

Whose Sovereignty? On the Accountability of Soldiers and Superheroes

Soldiers are pictured as both instruments and victims of this sovereign power, and Gallagher, himself a veteran, creates a fictional equivalent of the military-civilian divide that many in the armed forces feel in today's US: there are so many troubled veterans from the Mediterranean Wars that they are sent off to rehabilitation colonies located on islands around the world, which essentially turn into the government's preferred space wherein to deal with the "undesirable" vets, as well as testing labs for both the Department of Defense and the big corporations. Any veteran in these colonies is reduced to a bare existence; they represent, in Agamben's words, *homo sacer*, the condition of bare life whose introduction to the political realm, according to the Italian philosopher, "constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power" (*Homo Sacer* 6), and connects authoritarian and democratic states. As a consequence of this division between the government, soldiers, and the rest of the citizens, veterans have become a considerable portion of the population and have created organizations that challenge the sovereignty of the state.

In the course of the novel the reader meets the Mayday Front, a militia founded by veteran Jonah Gray that wants to re-introduce troubled veterans to society (Gallagher 136), and the Sheepdogs, another militia, founded after the Palm Sunday attacks and made up of "former military and retired police officers, firefighters, and first responders" (Gallagher 215), that is supposedly loyal to the state and later functions as the security service for Jackie Collins's presidential campaign. The general's run for president can then be read as a way to gain back a power – to wage war – that has been in the hands of a political elite for too long – as Liam Noonan says to Mia, at one of the campaign events: "we both shed blood for the homeland. Warfighter to warfighter, Mia: all this? It's a military oligarchy trying to get one of its own elected commander in chief" (248). By showing these divisions the book implicitly criticizes the authoritarian decisions (like the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force) that have brought American "boots on the ground" in the Middle East without the need for congressional approval, bypassing the democratic process. This severed link between the nation's military operations and the will of the

population is shown to be at the root of the deteriorating relationship between civilians and veterans who return home from wars that seemingly nobody approved. In *Empire City*, empty remarks like "thank you for your service" are replaced by more boisterous, and yet even emptier, "America honors the warfighter" and "praise to the victors"; the Mayday Front serves as a possible disruptive force in this situation, as its members are acutely aware of the way they have been used by the government. As one of the members, "Veteran Zero," says during a terrorist attack aimed at the "Empire City elite": "We're not unreasonable. We fought for this country. We love this country. But you forgot about us. Can't do that. Not in the Home of the Brave" (191).

Another possibly disruptive force that can pose a threat to state sovereignty are the Volunteers themselves who, although they are formally part of the armed forces, can and in fact do take matters into their own hands because of their special abilities. As Mervi Miettinen argues in "Representing the State of Exception: Power, Utopia, Visuality and Narrative in Superhero Comics," "with this superpower, the superhero creates a state of exception and takes on the executive power of the law without the legislative power; in other words, he has no legitimacy of authority behind his actions" (271). Like sovereigns who suspend the rule of law in order for the law to be preserved, the superhero is someone "who aims to support the institutions of democratic power while at the same time undermining their legitimacy with his actions" (Miettinen 271) – while working with his cousin in Mayday, Jean-Jacques finds Gray's message alluring, and contemplates the idea of actually joining the rebel organization precisely because it purports to be loyal to the original ideas of American freedom and democracy. As Gray preaches during a sermon: "What is crazy about wanting our homeland to fight fascist encroach, to stay true to the ideals it was founded upon?" (Gallagher 266).

According to Neal Curtis, superhero fiction as a genre underwent considerable changes in the 1980s, especially with the publication of Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* in 1986. After years of being portrayed as mere extensions of American state-approved values, writers started addressing "the implications of the seeming absolute power possessed by some of the

most enhanced heroes or bore witness to the collateral damage ordinarily overlooked, but nevertheless directly caused by our heroes' intervention" (Curtis 210). While superheroes are portrayed as both an instrument of and a challenge to state power in these graphic novels, they also mimic it: like the American government, superheroes usually wield a disproportionate amount of power against those they deem a threat to national or global security. And like the state, they mostly play within the rules of national and international law, but do not shy away from using methods outside of them if required. By foregrounding the undemocratic nature of the government's decisions on military operations, *Empire City* implicitly questions the motives and the righteousness of the War on Terror and exposes the disenfranchisement of its veterans.

In a 2016 essay titled "Citizen Soldier: Moral Risk and the Modern Military," later included in *Uncertain Ground* (2022), Phil Klay deals with the complicated history of the professional army in the United States, from Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and George Washington's distrust of a permanent standing army (70) to the all-volunteer force at the end of the Vietnam War. In the essay Klay addresses the issue of veteran accountability, stating that it is impossible for former soldiers who have chosen to enlist to play innocent, no matter how many representations of American soldiers as pure and just exist in both fiction and nonfiction: none of these representations "can move us past the simple reality that Iraq is destroyed, there is untold suffering overseas, and we as a country have even abandoned most of the translators who risked their lives for us" (84). Civilians, on the other hand, are shielded from responsibility by their lack of involvement in the decision-making process; since operations are authorized with or without the approval of Congress: "even if they voted for the president ordering these strikes, there's seemingly little reason for citizens to feel personally culpable when they go wrong" (Klay 87). The problem, of course, is that soldiers are implicitly serving their country, and, therefore, their citizens, but the citizens have little to do with their actions (heroic or nefarious). This democratic short-circuit is *the* central theme of *Empire City*, and while the novel works to expose the problem, it does not offer easy solutions.

One potential option that seems to emerge from the text is the possibility of giving the military full decisional power over combat operations – a move

that would probably turn the United States into a military dictatorship in which citizens would turn into victims, more than accomplices, of the armed forces. The obvious but complicated answer would be to reinstate – if there ever was one – a truly democratic process in American (foreign) politics, but *Empire City* seems to characterize the endless American war in the Mediterranean as the Derridean understanding of Plato's *pharmakon*, which, according to Achille Mbembe in *Necropolitics* (2018), is both the remedy and poison to the problems of our time. (Perpetual) war is thus not the old Clausewitzian continuation of politics through violence, but the instrument through which the state can maintain "antiterrorist mobilization," which ensures that "the suspension of rights and lifting of the guarantees that protect individuals are presented as the condition of survival of these same rights" (Mbembe 33), and turns into "a war of eradication, indefinite, absolute, that claims the right to cruelty, torture, and indefinite detention" (38). In *Empire City*, war has turned into an end in itself, as well as an economic machine that creates its own markets and replicates itself all over the world, while terror serves as the regulatory mechanism of society. Unfortunately, these remarks apply both to Gallagher's version of the United States and to its real counterpart, and although many of the reviews featured in the opening pages praise it as a radically different but perhaps prophetic novel, *Empire City* provides a heavily fictionalized – but very deliberate – commentary on present-day America's forever wars.

## Notes

[1] As far as non-veteran literature is concerned, some exceptions to this phenomenon can be found in superhero comics (see Frank Miller's *Holy Terror* and the 2002 Captain America story arc *Enemy*), a genre that has certainly influenced Gallagher – he mentions Alan Moore's *Watchmen* in *Empire City*'s Acknowledgments section, while his earlier books (*Kaboom* and *Youngblood*) are titled like superhero comic book series.

## Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. 1995. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998.

—. *State of Exception*. 2003. Trans. Kevin Attell. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005.

Atwood, Margaret. "*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* 'In Context.'" *PMLA* 119 (2004): 513-17.

Claeys, Gregory. "The Origins of Dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell" *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. Eds. Gregory Claeys, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. 107-32.

Duncan, Andy. "Alternate History" *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*. Eds. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. 209-18.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: Vol 1*. 1976. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Gallagher, Matt. *Empire City: A Novel*. New York: Atria Books, 2020.

Gavaler, Chris, and Nathaniel Goldberg. *Superhero Thought Experiments*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2019.

Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. 1987. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

Gill, R. B. "The Uses of Genre and the Classification of Speculative Fiction." *Mosaic* 46 (2013): 71-85.

Hatfield, Charles, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester. *The Superhero Reader*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2013.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

James, Edward. "Utopias and Anti-utopias" *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*. Eds. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. 219-29.

Klay, Phil. *Uncertain Ground*. New York: Penguin Press, 2022.

Malcolm, David. "The Great War Re-Remembered: Allohistory and Allohistorical Fiction" *The Great War in Post-Memory Literature and Film*. Eds. Martin Löschnigg and Marzena Sokolowska-Paryz. Berlin, München, Boston: De Gruyter, 2014. 171-186.

Mbembe, Achille, and Steven Corcoran. *Necropolitics*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2019.

Pease, Donald E. *The New American Exceptionalism*. Minneapolis, London: U of Minnesota P, 2009.

Rosenfeld, Gavriel. *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005.

Schmitt, Carl. *Dictatorship: From the Origin of the Modern Concept of Sovereignty to Proletarian*

*Class Struggle*. 1921. Trans. Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward. Cambridge, Maden: Polity Press, 2014.

Schneider-Mayerson, Matthew. “What Almost Was: The Politics of the Contemporary Alternate History Novel.” *American Studies* 50 (2009): 63-83.

Singles, Kathleen. *Alternate History: Playing with Contingency and Necessity.* Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013.

“US Armed Forces at Home and Abroad.” *United States Census Bureau*. 13 May 2020: n. pag. <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2020/comm/us-armed-forces.html>.

Forum

# Un Forum a puntate
# Frontiera/Frontiere: Conversazioni su confini e migrazioni tra il Mediterraneo e l'Atlantico

Valerio Massimo De Angelis

# Introduzione

In questo secondo contributo al "Forum a puntate" sui confini e sulle migrazioni tra il Mediterraneo e l'Atlantico Paola Zaccaria e Lorena Carbonara partono dalla loro personale esperienza nel progetto *S/murare il Mediterraneo*, nato in sostanza già nel 2009. Zaccaria e Carbonara affrontano le varie politiche di repressione dei movimenti migratori poste in essere dai governi europei e dall'Unione Europea nel suo complesso, e nella loro qualità innanzitutto di americaniste mettono in luce da un lato le analogie tra l'imperialismo americano (a partire dalla tratta degli schiavi e dalla espropriazione delle terre native per arrivare all'attuale "frizione" lungo il confine tra Messico a Stati Uniti) e il sottaciuto neocolonialismo europeo, e dall'altro l'interconnessione diretta prima tra l'espansione delle varie potenze europee nel Mediterraneo e la spinta alla colonizzazione del Nuovo mondo, e poi, viceversa, tra le politiche imperialistiche statunitensi nel *mare nostrum* e l'esplosione dei flussi migratori dal Nord Africa e dal Medio Oriente verso l'Europa (ma anche gli Stati Uniti stessi). È dalla consapevolezza di quanto sia ricca, complessa e contraddittoria questa rete di interazioni, e da una declinazione del tutto originale del *border thinking* inaugurato da Gloria Anzaldúa, che nasce anche la nuova prospettiva di un Mediterraneo al tempo stesso "Nero" e transatlantico, che a sua volta genera un'ulteriore orizzonte, tutto da scoprire – quello TransMediterrAtlantico, grazie al quale si aprono nuove visioni letterarie, artistiche e critiche.

Paola Zaccaria e Lorena Carbonara

# La svolta TransMediterrAtlantica del pensiero critico dei confini del progetto *S/murare il Mediterraneo*

*I don't believe in nationalism; I am citizen of the universe.*
*I think it is good to claim your ethnic identity and racial identity.*
*But it's also the source of all the wars and all the violence,*
*all these borders and walls people erect.*
*I'm tired of borders and I'm tired of walls. [...]*
*People talk about being proud of being American, Mexican, or Indian.*
*We have grown beyond that.*
*We are specks from this cosmic ocean, the soul, or whatever.*
(Gloria Anzaldúa, "Within the Crossroads")

*Delinking* decoloniale ed etnografico dalla semiosi geo-politica delle "Relazioni atlantiche/transatlantiche"

Proveremo a *declinare* in queste pagine pensiero critico, narrative, produzioni artistiche della contemporanea colonialità-modernità intrisa di globalismo, liberismo, neo-colonialismo e sovranismo di quell'Occidente-America che ancora oggi – in questa nuova fase della storia mondiale segnata dal conflitto Russia-Ucraina, che in realtà è solo uno dei capitoli della "guerra mondiale a pezzi" di cui parla da tempo, inascoltato, papa Francesco – propone nei rapporti internazionali un modello di dominio unipolare. Tale modello, richiesto-imposto ai paesi "amici" dal transatlantismo americano a firma NATO, si sta estendendo anche ai paesi baltici con l'aiuto dell'Europa atlantista, non di rado sovranista, ma anche in Turchia e Israele. Esso

presenta l'Occidente egemone come luogo di civiltà, giustizia, libertà, diritti umani, e quindi modello di "democrazia da esportare" in ogni dove, di fatto contrastando sperimentazioni di coesistenza e cooperazione che provengono da una visione multipolare dei rapporti transnazionali.

Quanto delineato in modo stringato non implica che s'intenda fare sconti ai poteri assolutistici, dittatoriali e autocratici di varie aree tra il Mediterraneo e l'Atlantico. *Declinare* è qui inteso nel senso di trasformare, ma si riferisce anche alla funzione di manifestare, mostrare col fine di articolare in modalità d'intreccio culturale, antropologico, gnoseologico, oltre che estetico, quelle intenzioni, interpretazioni, conoscenze impure e bastarde, così come esse si dispiegano in visioni slargate, senza confini, senza baluardi, sbarramenti o appartenenze imposte che immobilizzano gli occhi e la coscienza di chi potrebbe vedere, re-agire, essere "testimone partecipe". Come ci ha svelato già nel 1987, a partire dal personale processo di de-occidentalizzazione e dis-appartenenza, la *mestiza* e *nepantlera* chicana Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa (GEA):

> As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine [...] (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. *Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting, and joining. (*Borderlands* 80-81)

Il processo d'impastamento culturale, razziale e della coscienza-conoscenza (*conocimiento*) di una *mestiza* che rifiuta ogni appartenenza nazionalistica produce una morfogenesi, una creatura nuova, una *new mestiza* che mette in discussione le etichettature egemoniche razziste del sé intrise di colonialità bianca, aprendo in tal modo un ripensamento a 360° su nazionalismi e appartenenze.

Adottando le sue intuizioni e gnoseologie trasformative, le teorie e pratiche del *delinking* decoloniale delle donne di colore presenti già nell'antologia del 1981 a cura di Cherríe Moraga e GEA, *This Bridge Called*

*My Back*, le proposte della fantascienza, la musica techno, il ribellismo culturale *black,* e l'arte grafica afrofuturista spesso ispirata alla deportazione nelle navi negriere dei futuri schiavi con destinazione le Americhe,[1] ci riferiremo a visioni estetico-politiche che si concreano in spazi di passaggio, proposte artistiche attiviste (*art*iviste) che hanno come matrice l'atto di bordeggiamento del politicamente scorretto nei confronti di percorsi dove il divieto di attraversamento è talvolta segnalato fino all'esasperazione. È questo il caso dei muri che tagliano il libero accesso tra Messico e USA, dove la novena del *no-trespassing* viene snocciolata da file di cartelli cui gli attivisti dei movimenti "NO BORDER WALL" rispondono con graffiti e performance inneggianti il libero passaggio, l'incrocio, l'incontro, lo scambio.

Imboccare strade secondarie piuttosto che intraprendere vie maestre implica costeggiare quel che è marginale, talvolta liquido, talvolta magmatico, talaltra desertico, quasi sempre pericoloso. Il cammino dei senza diritti dal Sud America come quello dei camminanti africani per raggiungere l'Europa si origina nella scelta di aderire alle istanze di libertà: la determinazione di non sottostare alle violenze perpetrate sui loro corpi e anime sollecitano gli aspiranti attraversanti al pericoloso viaggio della speranza, siano essi diretti negli USA o siano essi africani e asiatici che aspirano a raggiungere l'Europa attraverso il Mediterraneo. Dall'Africa, i senza diritti e senza lavoro si muovono verso le coste del Mediterraneo o dell'Atlantico per poi proseguire lungo cammini clandestini via mare che sovente li destinano ai respingimenti messi in atto nei paesi d'approdo, ubicati tanto nel Mediterraneo africano, o europeo, o nei territori e nelle isole tra Turchia ed Europa.

I muri materiali, tecnologici e polizieschi innalzati dai difensori della sovranità nazionale per contenere la mobilità degli attraversatori di deserti senza diritti e senza "valore" per le "democrazie" occidentali, ma anche secondo potentati illiberali quali la Libia o la Turchia, o i governi extra-europei trasgressori dei diritti umani come, per fare esempi noti, Israele, che continua a sottrarre terre, libertà e dignità ai palestinesi, determinando una diaspora senza fine di milioni di persone,[2] si accompagnano sovente ad altre forme di contenimento violento che si esplica in campi di carcerazioni e abusi. Sono strategie della biopolitica che discendono dalle metodologie di oppressione e violenza che l'imperialismo coloniale europeo atlantico e

mediterraneo ha imposto per quasi cinque secoli alle popolazioni native americane come a quelle strappate all'Africa per essere deportate nelle due Americhe e nelle isole caraibiche su navi negriere in cui vennero già elaborate strategie di controllo e trattamenti di tortura che ritroveremo nei campi di concentramento novecentesco e nelle carceri create da colonizzatori-torturatori nei paesi del Nord-Africa colonizzato, tipo l'Algeria, negli anni delle lotte di liberazione dal colonialismo.

La vergognosa circolazione di pratiche di violenza disumana sui corpi e sull'anima di esseri umani considerati i reietti della terra e stigmatizzati in quanto neri, o in quanto ebrei, o in quanto resistenti politici che richiedevano la liberazione della propria terra (il riferimento qui è alle lotte del secolo scorso per la liberazione dal colonialismo), attuata dai paesi occidentali colonizzatori e/o nazi-fascisti, ha come modello generatore la sottomissione attraverso ogni mezzo di soggetti e popoli non conformi al modello occidentale ieri, al modello di "democrazia" unipolare oggi. Ciò si compie ancora nel nome della superiorità "democratica" del transatlantismo, dal cui tragitto ieri, e dalle cui pratiche politiche odierne sono non di rado rimossi due fatti: il *Middle Passage* come stigma incancellabile per l'Occidente della vergogna delle pratiche schiavistiche e razziste; il Mediterraneo come co-generatore di colonialismo e schiavismo. E, più tardi, dopo la nascita della nazione degli Stati Uniti d'America, gli archivi pubblici e le narrative ufficiali circa le immigrazioni nel Nuovo Mondo provenienti dal Mediterraneo per lo più hanno sorvolato su come nei respingimenti o accoglienza dei nuovi arrivati molto contasse il colore più o meno scuro della pelle e l'idoneità fisica valutata al momento dello sbarco dai medici dell'ospedale di Ellis Island (v. Giuliani e Lombardi-Diop).

Perché il progetto *S/murare il Mediterraneo/Unwalling the Mediterranean*: Pratiche locali, nazionali e transfrontaliere di artivismo transculturale, per una politica e poetica dell'ospitalità e mobilità[3]

Il neo-logismo "S/murare/Un/walling" fu creato da Paola Zaccaria nel 2009, qualche mese dopo aver dato avvio, insieme a un gruppo di colleghi in(ter)disciplina(ris)ti, dottorandi, tesisti, operatori della migrazione, attivisti

e artivisti, a dei seminari aperti su Mediterraneo e questioni migratorie. L'espressione "S/murare" nacque come risposta all'estrema violenza imposta nel 2002 dalla legge Bossi-Fini alla libera circolazione nel mare che bagna tre continenti e agli attraversanti senza visto, e successivamente dalle politiche sovraniste che imposero, tra l'altro, restrizioni fino ad allora impensabili sul diritto dei singoli cittadini di prestare aiuto alle imbarcazioni in difficoltà, divieti di soccorso proclamati nel nome della protezione della nazione italiana e del continente europeo che comportarono la delocalizzazione, approvata dall'Europa, di strutture denominate centri di permanenza temporanea (CPT). Questi centri funzionavano di fatto come luoghi di carcerazione e restrizione violenta alla mobilità e in breve tempo divennero sempre più affollati di corpi in attesa di collocazione che non di rado venivano e vengono respinti sulle sponde del Mediterraneo africano, in Libia, nei cui porti si raduna l'umanità in cammino verso approdi mediterranei europei. Nel mentre si adottavano radar a raggi infrarossi per identificare e bloccare i barconi che riportano alla mente i cargo di esseri costretti alla mobilità della tratta "nera", quella devastante violenza imposta al cargo di schiavi attraversatori loro malgrado del mare, ci fece balenare l'immagine del *muramento delle acque* del "mare nostrum" Mediterraneo.

Le politiche di respingimento messe in atto dalle "democrazie" europee portò molti attivisti anti-respingimento dei migranti a configurare l'Europa come fortezza, da cui il titolo di uno del primo blog anti-respingimento italiano, *Fortress Europe*, creato nel 2006 dall'allora giovanissimo coraggioso reporter indipendente Gabriele Del Grande, il quale, ritenendo che i numeri elevatissimi dei morti in mare che andava raccogliendo non fosse sufficiente per toccare le coscienze degli europei, e che "nessun essere umano è illegale", anche se non ha il passaporto, si dedicò, insieme ad altr*, alla scrittura narrativa e filmica delle storie di chi attraversa.[4] Ancora oggi, la generazione di Gabriele Del Grande continua a lottare su navi di soccorso in mare o in centri di prima assistenza per i richiedenti asilo, o creando opere artiviste pro-libertà di movimento, o per porre fine alla distinzione tra migranti e rifugiati. Come sottolinea Andrea Segre, regista di *Mare chiuso* e *L'ordine delle cose,* uno degli obiettivi più urgenti "è uscire dall'imbuto della discussione sugli sbarchi. La potenza evocativa di quel

braccio di mare distrae da tutto ciò che c'è prima e dopo, bisogna allargare lo sguardo".[5]

Dal 2016, a seguito degli esodi a causa di guerre interne ed esterne in diversi paesi asiatici controllati dalle superpotenze americane, europee e filo-NATO, alla Turchia, sovvenzionata con fondi europei, fu affidato il compito di contenere gli arrivi dei profughi che intendono recarsi in Grecia, attraverso un sistema di tipo carcerario che forclude il diritto di asilo, ignorando le esigenze umanitarie e di protezione. Tra l'altro, chi riesce a fuggire e attraversare, resta intrappolato nei campi di detenzione delle Isole Egee – la più nota per pratiche efferate di controllo è Lesbo – in attesa di ricevere un responso alla richiesta di asilo. Come rilevano Aila Spathopoulou, Anna Carastathis e Myrto Tsilimpounidi, i soggetti in mobilità sono anche qui classificati o come "migranti economici", o come "rifugiati", e in questo secondo caso sono considerati vulnerabili, privi di *agency*. Questo processo di differenziazione ideologica tra rifugiat* e migrante, aggiungono le studiose, non prende in considerazione le vulnerabilità che l'internamento obbligatorio nei campi produce su entrambe le figure: "the hotspost is, in essence, a deportation mechanism" (Spathopoulou et al. 21) che si esprime tramite violenza fisica e psichica istituzionalizzata – la costrizione dei corpi.

La biopolitica della violenza come potere di controllo sulla vita in senso foucaultiano negli *hot spots* può assumere le tinte della necropolitica esercitata dai potentati neo-coloniali di cui si è occupato Achille Mbembe: la morte e il morire delle popolazioni sottomesse in stati dittatoriali, come pure la condizione dei confinati nei centri migranti, vengono controllati o amplificati tramite la stimolazione del disordine, del caos, dell'insicurezza, che sono consustanziali alle forme biopolitiche di controllo delle frontiere e della mobilità.

Il collettivo internazionale di ricerca attivista *S/murare il Mediterraneo*[6] partiva dalla consapevolezza che gli stati "sovrani" europei erano giunti, pur di bloccare quella che fu chiamata "invasione extracomunitaria", a murare il mare. Ancora oggi siamo in un regime di politica internazionale in cui l'Europa "atlantista" ammette i sovranismi e seleziona, accogliendo o non accogliendo, gli esseri umani a seconda delle sfumature del colore della pelle: i siriani, nei terribili anni del conflitto civile sostenuto dai soliti

potentati internazionali, e non solo occidentali, e oggi gli ucraini sostenuti politicamente e militarmente dalla Nato e dall'Europa "atlantista", hanno avuto meno difficoltà a ricevere lo status di rifugiato rispetto ad africani che fuggivano da guerre intestine molto cruente. Tantomeno alcune frange o governi sovranisti e anti-migrazioni tollerano i propri cittadini che dissentono dai protezionismi del suolo patrio/patriarcale/liberistico/atlantista attraverso misure che cancellano dalla coscienza delle nuove generazioni la *pietas* insita nelle leggi del mare,[7] avendo rimosso l'efferatezza del razzismo, dello sfruttamento e del massacro di decine di milioni di africani compiuto per oltre tre secoli ad opera delle navi negriere – provenienti non solo dagli imperi colonialisti dell'area atlantica, ma anche dai paesi mediterranei – che si dirigevano verso le Americhe, isole ed arcipelaghi caraibici compresi.

L'Europa ancora gravida di colonialità non espulsa sembra non tener conto che le attuali *policies* di blocco dell'accesso in Europa (e, tramite altri mari, di blocco dei meno abbienti all'accesso in paesi occidentali od occidentalizzati come gli USA, il Canada, l'Australia "civilizzati" dalle colonizzazioni e culture eurocentriche) dei discendenti di popolazioni che furono nell'epoca "moderna" sfruttate, razzializzate, violentate, sterminate, rinchiuse in riserve, con centinaia di migliaia di bambini strappati, con la complicità delle chiese cristiane, alle famiglie native col fine di "kill the Indian, save the man", riporta alla coscienza/conoscenza delle nuove generazioni storie di occupazione e rapina di terre altrui. Tutto ciò porta a galla una (necro)geo-corpo-politica della colonizzazione rimossa che disegna anti-atlanti delle narrative transatlantiche dominanti, che non permettono più di oscurare il dato di fatto che le brutalità della conquista del "selvaggio West" ad opera di coloni dell'area atlantica per farne un giardino senza "erbacce", come pure la conquista delle terre del Sud bianco e conservatore, "sporcato" dai corpi neri che procuravano gratuitamente la ricchezza, lì deportati a seguito di una deviazione di rotta denominata dalla storia ufficiale *Middle Passage,* erano *policies* comuni tanto ai colonizzatori dell'area atlantica quanto ai "conquistatori" provenienti dall'area mediterranea.

Quel che il gruppo di "ricercatori-smuratori" interessati agli studi delle colonizzazioni e delle culture "moderne" e di conseguenza agli effetti della colonizzazione nel passato, e dell'odierna colonialità sui nativi, sui discendenti

degli schiavi africani e sugli ispano-americani che discendono dalle ulteriori acquisizioni di territori nel terzo e quarto decennio dell'Ottocento con la conquista di parte del Messico abitato da popolazioni native, da spagnoli e *mestizos*, tutta questa pesantissima storia che ha risonanze sia con gli attuali tentativi d'emigrazione negli USA dal Messico e altri paesi del Sud America, sia con le contemporanee migrazioni dall'Africa e Asia attraverso il Mediterraneo, non può continuare a essere definita storia transatlantica, il che escluderebbe la responsabilità dei paesi colonizzatori e pro-schiavismo del Mediterraneo come Spagna, Portogallo e Francia. Al fine di creare nuove geopolitiche che sembrano, come i corpi in movimento, non trovare accoglienza e ascolto nel disegno occidentale del mondo, e nella consapevolezza di dover tener conto dei nuovi saperi e delle nuove convivenze geopolitiche nate dall'incontro con i nuovi arrivati del XXI secolo che, attraversando deserti e acque, sono approdati su sponde mediterranee africane ed europee, occorre trarre dall'ombra il terzo tassello costitutivo, sebbene sovente taciuto, di questi incroci: il Mediterraneo che all'epoca della modernità/colonialità congiunse l'Europa e le Americhe, e che fu corridoio di propulsione per la lacerante e ulcerosa pulsione alla conquista del Nuovo Mondo.

I componenti del gruppo di ricerca *S/murare il Mediterraneo* hanno come strumentazione di riferimento il pensiero e la poetica di Anzaldúa, le analisi della scuola *colonialidad/modernidad*, la filosofia della coscienza dell'argentina americana Maria Lugones, la passione biomitografica dell'afro-caraibica-americana Audre Lorde, le poetiche di altri autori caraibici, nonché quanto ci sta insegnando la nuova generazione di donne latine. Queste studiose, ricollegandosi alla genealogia delle donne native di Abya Yala e "tejiendo de otro modo" (v. Espinosa Miñoso et. al.) le epistemologie elaborate dalla scuola colonialità/modernità, stanno lavorando a una critica decoloniale dell'universale contribuendo in tal modo al pensiero femminista intersezionale che pone attenzione alle narrazioni e teorie afro-americane, afro-britanniche e afro-caraibiche (cui molti di noi sono stati introdotti da, tra gli altri: Édouard Glissant e le sue geografie arcipelagiche intessute di relazionalità; Paul Gilroy e il suo *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*; gli studi di Stuart Hall sull'identità nera e la diaspora; nonché le teorie e narrative di autori e autrici afro-american* e caraibici fuori da ogni modello

*mainstream*). Partendo da questo, alcuni "smuratori" e "smuratrici" hanno assunto una posizionalità critica meridionale, randagia e composita e hanno intrecciato riflessioni che si nutrono anche delle proprie radici etnografiche e genealogiche "terrone" per enucleare un pensiero mediterraneo della frontiera denominato *Southern Border Critical Thinking* (v. i testi di Cazzato e Zaccaria in bibliografia) che determina una crisi nelle narrazioni della storia coloniale americana come esito degli sbarchi delle navi di pellegrini e di avventurieri o di rappresentanti di poteri imperiali che partivano dai paesi atlantici. Le impronte e le responsabilità colonialistiche della mediterraneità sono inesorabilmente intrecciate all'atlantismo bianco.

Ci siamo anche avvicinati ai nuovi studi di un filone di geografia culturale che da qualche decennio stanno delineando nuove geo-corpo-grafie che mettono in crisi la storia e il di-segno narrato dagli atlanti tradizionali. In particolare, segnaliamo qui il lavoro artistico-scientifico del collettivo *antiAtlas of Borders*[8] che si occupa delle frontiere e delle complessità politiche e pratiche degli attraversamenti e migrazioni, muovendosi tra arte e scienze umane, tra intenzioni scientifiche ed estetiche e usando metodologie affascinanti come la "partecipatory cartography" e la "sensitive cartography". Il metodo e il senso del metodo che viene presentato come una pratica di "decentramento narrativo" in quanto fa interagire la voce del/la ricercatore/trice con quella dei /delle migranti, e la carta geografica viene intesa come arte relazionale e geografica del "tra-due" e del "tramite", viene dal collettivo articolato in modo da

> [r]éfléchir à un renouvellement des méthodes de recherche, à partir d'outils de médiation participatifs s'inscrit dans une perspective à la fois scientifique et politique. Comment co-construire un terrain et des données de recherche avec les individus concernés par les problèmes étudiés, dans la perspective de produire des "discours sur" mais aussi d'"agir avec", de "luttercontre", de "s'engager pour"? L'engagement dans une démarche participative, autour du geste cartographique, est un axe de "triangulation" possible dans l'entre-deux des relations interindividuelles, mais aussi entre art et science. (Mekdjian et al. n. pag.)[9]

Sentendoci allo stesso tempo parte di una coalizione sovranazionale di

resistenza a settorializzazioni ed essenzialismi per combattere le spinte omologatrici della concezione eurocentrica della nascita del Nuovo mondo e per sentirci al fianco di camminanti e attraversatori di ponti, porte, strettoie, mari e deserti, ma anche di orizzonti aperti, di mari che s'incrociano, abbiamo delineato percorsi di geografie antropologiche e poetiche frutto dell'incrocio di acque marine denominate "TransMediterrAtlantiche"; un territorio di flussi geo-corpografici senza confini tra Mediterraneo e Transatlantico in cui rientrano sia la diaspora africana, sia tutte le spedizioni di conquista che partivano dal Mediterraneo. Come più volte sottolineato, molti archivi-ombra incarnati riguardanti la tratta di persone africane sono ancora in attesa di essere svelati all'oggi che ci vede testimoni delle nuove schiavitù che si determinano nel processo di migrazione dall'Africa verso l'Europa: dall'Atlantico al Mediterraneo viaggiano, senza protezioni e documenti, i migranti africani nostri contemporanei (v. i testi di Zaccaria in bibliografia).

Come argomentato da Camilla Hawthorne nel suo recente studio "Geografie del Mediterraneo Nero", "dal 2015 è in costante aumento il numero di studiosi e studiose che si rivolgono al Mediterraneo Nero come quadro analitico per comprendere le specificità storiche e geografiche della Nerezza nella regione mediterranea" (54); attingendo e ampliando le teorizzazioni di Paul Gilroy sull'Atlantico Nero, questo studio interroga "la costruzione, il vissuto e le trasformazioni della Nerezza in una regione caratterizzata in fase alterna come 'crocevia culturale' [...] fonte di pericolosa contaminazione razziale, [...] il più mortifero luogo di attraversamento di confini al mondo" (179). Hawthorne riconosce il suo debito verso le intuizioni delle geografie *Black*, postcoloniali e femministe per sostenere che la regione del *Black Mediterranean* si presenta anche come spazio relazionale "le cui politiche di solidarietà, in molti casi guidate da donne Nere, rivelano un grande potenziale di sfida alla Nazione come costrutto etero-patriarcale e di ordine arborescente, inteso come famiglia razziale. Al di là del loro impatto puramente regionale o metodologicamente nazionalista, tali sviluppi dovrebbero indurci a ripensare le categorie di razza, genere, cittadinanza e Nerezza su scala globale" (180).

### Innesto di poetiche e gnoseologie transculturali, diasporiche e creole entro l'orizzonte teorico, prospettico e poetico TransMediterrAtlantico[10]

La svolta decoloniale applicata agli ambiti delle antiche colonizzazioni e nuove colonialità, delle emigrazioni e delle nuove forme di mobilità ha richiesto ai componenti del collettivo *S/murare* di far caso agli spazi de-nazionalizzati e de-territorializzati nelle opere creative che andiamo a leggere utilizzando la prospettiva critica del *Southern Border Critical Thinking* che ci permette di destrutturare e de-linkare il concetto sovranista, unipolare, divisorio della frontiera.

Nodi focali dei procedimenti critici e della semiosi di *S/murare* sono: mobilità e confini fluidi (*border fluidity*); (de)territorializzazione, (de) nazionalizzazione e posizionalità transfrontaliera; *TransMediterrAtlantic Passage*; focus sull'egemonia occidentale agita ancora attraverso la razzializzazione, il classismo e il sessismo nei riguardi dei soggetti in mobilità per motivi economici e/o politici; colonialità e violenza del potere patriarcale ancora dominante; partecipazione e protagonismo femminista transfrontaliero; flussi migratori, identità e dispatrio; mobilitazione e autodeterminazione; attivismo e artivismo; decolonialità, accoglienza, nonviolenza, nonvittimismo, autodeterminazione e autogestazione; sguardo etnografico rovesciato.

Tornando alle forme di mobilità di cui ci occupiamo – migrazione, diaspora, fuga, esodo, esilio forzato o scelto, status di rifugiato/a, parole tutte che nominano fenomeni antichi che stanno tuttavia oggi disegnando nuove cartografie etnografiche transfrontaliere – a partire da una messa in discussione delle frontiere e quindi delle suddivisioni ed esclusioni etno-politiche, stiamo acquisendo consapevolezza che lo sguardo etnografico rovesciato permette di privilegiare il contatto anziché l'appartenenza e d'intravedere nella mobilità la possibilità di elaborare nuove poetiche e gnoseologie transculturali, diasporiche e creole. Attivando questi processi, si stanno delineando cartografie fratturate che rendono quasi impossibile il ritorno (come finemente raccontato in forma autobiografica a proposito dei discendenti contemporanei dalla diaspora africana dalla scrittrice caraibico-canadese Dionne Brand in *A Map to the Door of No Return* 2001), in cui tuttavia è possibile agire nuove intersezioni che narrano al contempo la rottura di identità nazionalistiche sulla base dell'erezione di frontiere, e

l'eteropia dell'incontro che porta all'innesto, all'incrocio di culture, lingue, visioni.[11]

Questi sommovimenti dovuti allo sbriciolamento simbolico dei muri a opera di movimenti attivisti e artivisti[12] degli ultimi quattro decenni sono in grado di mettere in crisi le cartografie occidentali disegnate dalle politiche colonialistiche di guerra ed estromissioni dei nativi, cartografie che erano lo specchio del concetto di appropriazione/espropriazione, e che in quanto tali tracciavano la linea/il limite, il *limen* (soglia di casa, ma anche sbarramento di proprietà), come pure il *limes* (termine polisemico che indica il bordo, i baluardi, il limite, ma il *limes* può essere anche uno spazio di passaggio, compreso il mare)[13] delle terre espropriate lungo le quali erano e sono ancora oggi erette frontiere-barricate, veri e propri muri di auto-acquisite sovranità sull'altro e sull'altrove.

Come esposto dai curatori del libro collettaneo *S/murare il Mediterraneo: Pensieri critici e artivismo al tempo delle migrazioni* (2016) a proposito del progetto *S/murare*, che ha viaggiato tramite pubblicazioni e incontri in Turchia, Brasile, Sud Africa, Gran Bretagna, Palestina, USA, Spagna, Francia, Malta e Romania, il gruppo concentra la sua ricerca sull'oggi delle migrazioni e si fa attraversare da vortici teorici, culturali e artistici. "Smuratori" e "smuratrici", al di qua del muro, sono alla ricerca di crepe da allargare, spiragli per coloro che sono al di là e che ci guardano, con gli occhi che non molto tempo fa furono dei nostri padri e delle nostre madri.

## Note

1 Situandosi tra antiche mitologie africane e tecno-controcultura contemporanea, queste opere disegnano soggetti di discendenza africana in una dimensione immaginaria futura in cui il concetto di razza viene dismesso, operando così una rottura epistemologica nei confronti dell'umanesimo antropocentrico (v. Attimonelli). Il 30 aprile 2019, all'interno della rassegna dal titolo *Reale, Virtuale e Immaginario* organizzato dal gruppo *S/murare* in collaborazione con il Centro Studi e Ricerche della Apulia Film Commission, si è tenuto un seminario-incontro musicale su afrofuturismo e *Black Science Fiction* con ospite Qadim Haqq, artista visuale della scena musicale di Detroit.

2 Sulla questione dell'esodo dei palestinesi dalle loro terre a seguito della nascita dello stato d'Israele e dell'ancora incessante flusso di rifugiati, oltre sei milioni nel solo Medio Oriente, cfr. Albanese e Takkenberg. Con Francesca Albanese e altri attivisti e studiosi

italiani, palestinesi e israeliani, *S/murare il Mediterraneo* ha organizzato due incontri di approfondimento online a cura di Paola Zaccaria e Lorena Carbonara in aprile e maggio 2021. È stata inoltre creata la piattaforma *S/murare Palestina* (<smuraremediterraneo.wordpress.com/s-murare-palestina/>).

[3] Il testo del progetto è consultabile sul blog <smuraremediterraneo.wordpress.com/about/> e su <www.academia.edu/18939023/Un_Walling_the_Mediterranean_Local_National_and_Trans_Border_Artivist_Practices_for_a_poetics_and_politics_of_hospitalityand_mobility_english>.

[4] Si veda <http://fortresseurope.blogspot.com>.

[5] Si veda <www.repubblica.it/solidarieta/immigrazione/2020/02/04/news/accoglienza_1_8_e_9_febbraio_a_roma_il_forum_sulle_politiche_migratorie-247594601/?ref=search>.

[6] I componenti del gruppo sono attualmente Paola Zaccaria, Luigi Cazzato, Lorena Carbonara, Annarita Taronna, Rosita Maglie, Filippo Silvestri, Armida Salvati, Claudia Attimonelli, Giulia Gallotta, Ylenia de Luca, Laura Centonze, Marilù Mastrogiovanni, Paolo Orrù, Alessandra Rizzo, Mara Mattoscio, Cristina Lombardi-Diop, Gianpaolo Chiriacò, Giuseppe Campesi, Marta Carriello, Claudio Fogu, Serena Guarracino, Vincenzo Susca, Gianpaolo Altamura e Fernando Gonçalves. Ricordiamo qui il contributo preziosissimo alla ricerca dal Sudafrica del compianto amico e collega Pier Paolo Frassinelli.

[7] Per ragioni di sinteticità, citiamo solo alcuni degli ottimi film e documentari prodotti in Italia su questo scossone all'etica del soccorso in mare: Emanuele Crialese, col suo *Terraferma*, 2011, segnò una svolta, come pure *Soltanto il mare*, l'omaggio a Lampedusa del regista di origini etiopi Dagmawi Ymer, co-regia di Fabrizio Barraco e Giulio Cederna, 2011. E ancora: Gianfranco Rosi, *Fuocoammare,* 2016, e i più recenti *Open Arms: La legge del mare,* di Marcel Barren*,* 2021 e *Mare chiuso,* di Andrea Segre e Stefano Liberti, 2021.

[8] Si veda <www.antiatlas.net>.

[9] Si vedano anche Mekdjian e Szary.

[10] Per un approfondimento di questi passaggi v. Zaccaria, "Mobilità".

[11] Un recente studio di Claudio Fogu sugli intrecci culturali che si sono creati nel corso dei secoli nel Mediterraneo grazie alle varie popolazioni in viaggio sposta radicalmente il focus di molti lavori precedenti che fondavano la costruzione di un'identità italiana sul concetto di stato-nazione: gli immaginari e i lasciti tangibili di opere e saperi mediterranei segnati da incontri, attraversamenti, contatti plurimi hanno impedito la solidificazione in senso nazionalistico dell'identità italiana che resta "liquida" e contaminata. Sulla sovversione dei confini territoriali e linguistici, con uno sguardo dal sud del mondo, si è soffermato anche Pier Paolo Frassinelli. Sulle questioni linguistiche legate all'inglese come lingua franca in contesti migratori italiani hanno lavorato Lorena Carbonara e Annarita Taronna.

[12] Su questo hanno lavorato, tra gli altri, Lorena Carbonara e Alessandra Rizzo.

[13] Il fascicolo monografico di *Storia delle Donne* del 2022 avrà come titolo "*Limes*, genitivo *Limitis*."

## Opere Citate

Albanese, Francesca, and Lex Takkenberg, eds. *Palestinian Refugees in International Law*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands:* La Frontera*. The New* Mestiza, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

—. "Within the Crossroads: An Interview with Christine Weiland (1983)". *Interviews/ Entrevistas*. Ed. AnaLouise Keating. New York: Routledge, 2000. 78-127.

—. *Terre di confine:* La Frontera. Trad it. e postfazione Paola Zaccaria. Firenze: Black Coffee, 2022.

Attimonelli, Claudia. "L'Afrofuturismo e la crisi dell'Umanesimo: Prospettive recenti, visioni attuali e linguaggi futuri in Kodwo Eshun, John Akomfrah e nella musica techno". *Echo: Rivista interdisciplinare di comunicazione* 2 (2020): 98-109.

Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001.

Carbonara, Lorena, "Teaching as Narrative: The Use of ELF in the IFL Class in the Migration Setting of Southern Italy". *Lingue e Linguaggi* 38 (2020): 135-54.

—, e Alessandra Rizzo. "Decolonial Thinking and Refugees' Stories: The Queens of Syria Documentary (2014)". *Anglistica AION* 23 (2019): 87-114.

—, e Annarita Taronna. "ELF as a Self-translation Practice: Towards a Pedagogy of Contact in the Italian as a Foreign Language (IFL) Classroom". *Cultus* 10 (2017): 67-91.

Cazzato, Luigi. "An Archaeology of the Verticalist Mediterranean: From Bridges to Walls". *Mediterranean Review* 5 (2012): 17-31.

—. "For A Border-Dialogue in 'Fortress Europe': The Reappropriation of Mediterranean Routes". *IJCCSEC*, 2 (2013): 99-107.

—. "Mediterranean: Coloniality, Migration and Decolonial Practices 'Politics'". *Rivista di Studi Politici* 1 (2016): 1-17.

—, e Filippo Silvestri, a cura di. *S/murare il Mediteraneo: Pensieri critici e artivismo al tempo delle migrazioni*, Lecce: Pensa Multimedia, 2016.

Espinosa Miñoso, Yuderkys et al., a cura di. *Tejiendo de otro modo*: *Feminismo, epistemología y apuestas descoloniales en Abya Yala*. Popayán: Editorial Universidad del Cauca, 2014.

Fogu, Claudio. *The Fishing Net and the Spider Web: Mediterranean Imaginaries and the Making of Italians*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Frassinelli, Pier Paolo. *Sovvertire i confini: Traduzioni e media. Lo sguardo dal Sud del mondo*. Verona: Ombre Corte, 2022.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness.* Verso: London and New York, 1993.

Giuliani, Gaia, e Cristina Lombardi-Diop, a cura di. *Bianco e nero: Storia dell'identità razziale degli italiani*. Milano: Mondadori Education, 2013.

Glissant, Édouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1991.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". *Undoing Place? A Geographical Reader*. Ed. Linda McDowell. London: Routledge, 1997. 222-37.

Hawthorne, Camilla. "Geografie del Mediterraneo Nero". *Geographica Helvetica* 77 (2022): 179-92.

Lorde, Audre. *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name*. New York: Persephone Press, 1982.

Lugones, Maria. "Toward a Decolonial Feminism". *Hypatia* 25 (2011): 742-59.

Mekdjian, Sarah, and Anne Laure A. Szary "Crossing Maps: Spaces of Never-ending Arrival". *HAL-SHS* (2015): n. pag. <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/01445577>.

—, et al. "Figurer les entre-deux migratoires: Pratiques cartographiques expérimentales entre chercheurs, artistes et voyageurs". *Carnets de géographes* 7 (2014): n. pag. <https://www.carnetsdegeographes.org/carnets_terrain/terrain_07_01_Mekdjian.php>.

Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics". *Public Culture* 15 (2003): 11-40.

Moraga, Cherrie, and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back*: *Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Persephone Press, 1981.

Spathopoulou, Aila, Anna Carastathis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi. "'Vulnerable Refugees' and 'Voluntary Deportations': Performing the Hotspot, Embodying Its Violence". *Geopolitics* 2020: 1-27. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14650045.2020.1772237>.

Zaccaria, Paola. "Mediterranean and Transatlantic Artivism: Counter-Acting Neo-Colonialisms in the Public Sphere". *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Studies and Environmental Communication* 1 (2014): 41-51.

—. "The Mediterranean Sea: Open Port or Border Wall?" *New Perspectives in Italian Cultural Studies: Definition, Theory and Accented Practices*. Ed. Graziella Parati. Madison-Teaneck: Farleigh Dickinson UP, 2012: 113-46.

—. "Can Imagination Un/Wall Geo-political and Disciplinary Boundaries? The TransMediterranAtlantic Decolonial Turn". *Anglistica AION* 23 (2019): 23-36.

—. "Introduzione: 'Mobilità', ospitalità, poetiche e traduzioni". *La lingua che ospita: Poetiche, politiche, traduzioni*. Roma: Meltemi, 2017. 9-38.

—. *La lingua che ospita: Poetiche, politiche, traduzioni*. Roma: Meltemi, 2017.

—, e Luigi Cazzato. "Semiosi della colonialità e dinamiche culturali al tempo della mobilità globale". *Echo: Rivista interdisciplinare di comunicazione* 2 (2020): 1-7.

# Articles

Stefano Franceschini

# A "Maze of Stone-shadowed Twilight": The Disorienting Nightmarescape of H. P. Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*

*It is precisely space which, filled with atmospheric air,*
*linking things together and destroying their individual closedness,*
*gives things their temporal value and draws them into the cosmic interplay of phenomena.*
(Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*)

## Introduction

In the very first pages of the treatise *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1926), H. P. Lovecraft defines the weird tale as "something [based on] more than secret murder, bloody bones or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule" (*Collected Essays* 84). What sets a genuine horror narrative apart from not just the unimaginative and "immature pulp charlatan fiction" (177), but also the aesthetically superior works of the Gothic canon, is the presence of a

> certain *atmosphere* of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces [...]; and there must be a *hint*, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain – a malign and particular *suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature* which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (84; emphasis added)

Hence, according to Lovecraft, weird literature must abide by three fundamental criteria: ambiance of pure terror, allusiveness of language,

and annihilation of the principles that structure reality. More abstractly, these three "As" are connected with thematic, rhetorical and philosophical strategies. For instance, "atmosphere" concerns spatiotemporal settings, characters, plot, and subject matter of a story, while "hint[s]" relate to Lovecraft's narratorial technique deployed to present events and "unknown forces" to the reader. The allusiveness is linguistically signaled by a considerable use of hedging[1] and adjectives such as "unknown,", "indescribable," "indefinite." This technique is diegetically articulated through overtly cautious narrators, which take their time to disclose their findings, thoughts and impressions about the otherworldly phenomena encountered during the story's progression. Finally, the "defeat of the laws of Nature" responds to a more profound, authorial intention to trigger an epistemological reframing of the world as we know it. Synonymous with weird fiction, claims Lovecraft, is "literature of cosmic fear" (84), the only one capable of nurturing the "illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which for ever [*sic*] imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces" (176).

But Lovecraft's cosmic attitude reaches well beyond the limits of an ecstatic contemplation of the ever-expanding universe. Referred to by Lovecraft scholars as "cosmicism", this view entails a vigorous reaction to the generally held centrality of mankind in the whole cosmos, whose vastness made the author relegate "the entire history of the human race to an inessential nanosecond in the realm of infinite space and time" (Joshi 371). The writer turns to terrifying inexplicable phenomena, non-Euclidean spatiality and aeon-old temporality because of the pessimistic realization of "man's impermanence and insignificance" (Lovecraft, "Confessions" n. pag.), which simultaneously leads to the author's lack of literary commitment to the short-sightedness of anthropocentrism. What is of interest to Lovecraft, instead, is not so much the occasional employment of motifs and devices typical of conventional supernatural stories, as the coherent interaction between the ordinary and the extraordinary (Harman 24). In a letter accompanying the (re)submission of his possibly most well-known tale, "The Call of Cthulhu" (1926), to the editor of the magazine *Weird Tales*, Lovecraft remarks that "to achieve the essence of

real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that [...] all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind have any existence at all" (*Selected Letters* 150). He then adds that "only the human scenes and characters must have human qualities" (150) suggesting that the surfacing of disturbingly unexplainable agencies must be met at once with terror and incredulity. Increasingly intent on exposing the futility and bewilderment of mankind vis-à-vis the unknown, Lovecraft abandons the preternatural sensationalism of his earlier stories, such as "From Beyond" (1922) or "The Horror at Red Hook" (1926), to produce what I would call "neosupernatural parascientific[2] fiction" – a literary mode defined by the efficacious interplay of (dreadful) unnatural phenomena and science-oriented veracity. The prefix "neo" designates a different kind of supernatural literature, one that is still concerned with barely explicable, bizarre events and creatures, but whose manifestations Lovecraft now attempts to contextualize within a sufficiently accurate scientific framework.

Building on these premises, this study aims to analyze *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), a fictional first-person account of an Antarctic expedition that uncovers the existence of a billion-year-old, technologically advanced alien species. Interrogating the persistent oscillation between linguistic over-description and referential ambiguity in Lovecraft's longest story, while assessing its evident but idiosyncratic indebtedness to E. A. Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1837), I argue that *At the Mountains of Madness* dwells on conceptual, chronological, spatial, as well as textual complexity to establish a connection between form, content and readerly experience. I draw on Graham Harman's weird realism theory and Joseph Frank's seminal notion of literary spatiality to posit that the story's thematic apparatus, labyrinthine discourse, and intertextual dynamics concur to elicit in the readers a growing sense of disorientation.

Written in 1931 but published only five years later due to a rather unfortunate editorial history (Joshi 873-74; Yi Lee 2), *At the Mountains of Madness* tells the story of an exploratory mission to Antarctica that ends in disaster. Structured as a cautionary report against an upcoming similar expedition, the novel follows a group of scientists and technicians led by the geologist William Dyer (the novel's protagonist and first-person narrator),

whose primary goal is the extraction of a few "deep-level specimens of rock and soil" (Lovecraft, *Tales* 481). A series of excavations separately conducted by Lake (a biologist) and Atwood (a physicist) results in the astonishing discovery of a subterranean cave and an incredible amount of fossil formations, on which Lake would later comment that it "will mean to biology what Einstein has meant to mathematics and physics" (497); but a few drilling operations later, Lake's side-project unearths fourteen far more staggering specimens, resembling nothing of the prehistoric organisms then known to man:

> Objects are eight feet long all over. Six-foot five-ridged barrel torso 3.5 feet central diameter, 1 foot end diameters. Dark grey, flexible, and infinitely tough. Seven-foot membraneous wings of same colour, found folded, spread out of furrows between ridges. Wing framework tubular or glandular, of lighter grey, with orifices at wing tips. (499)

However, the unexpected radio silence from Lake's camp following the excavations prompts the narrator to arrange a rescue flight to the biologist's base. What Dyers and the rest of the crew find is beyond description: the makeshift laboratory is devastated, the barrel-shaped fossils are missing, and everyone except one member of the team, Gedney, has been gruesomely killed. Wanting to investigate the mystery of the missing colleague, and the vanished half-plant, half-animal specimens, Dyer and graduate student Danforth decide to fly over the nearby mountain range, where they discover a gigantic maze-like city made up of "colossal, regular and geometrically eurhythmic stone masses" (523). In one of the city's buildings, they chance upon Gedney's corpse, the beheaded bodies of some of the exhumed specimens (the Elder Things), a group of clueless albino penguins, and, finally, a shape-shifting monster – a shoggoth – that furiously chases after the fleeing geologist and his assistant. The novel ends with Dyer detailing the rushed flight back to Lake's camp and Danforth's delusional cry "'Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!'" (586).

As indicative of the general evolution of the narrative as it is, this synopsis does not reflect the rifts between story and discourse levels, the encasement of secondary tales within the main narrative framework, and the

abundance of conceptual digressions – all elements that situate the novel among Lovecraft's most structurally and thematically complex works. But *Mountains* may also be reasonably considered one of the most representative endeavors of Lovecraft's neosupernatural literature, for it combines the author's trademark (para)scientific speculation and supernatural entities, while distancing itself from the more ordinary horror aesthetics of his early fiction. Indeed, Lovecraft's stylistic evolution was so evident that, as Chia Yi Lee writes, "[t]he scientific encyclopaedism therein might have overwhelmed the editor [of *Weird Tales*], and have been taken as too much a diversion from the magazine's primary concern with the supernatural horror" (2). Tales centered on oneiric sceneries, traditional monsters and unrealistically centennial humans progressively give way to narratives such as *Mountains* that are informed by chemistry, biology, physics and non-Euclidean geometry, on which the narrators rely to interpret the multi-faceted unknown. To enact his innovative take on weird literature along with what I previously conceptualized as his threefold aesthetic dictum of atmosphere, referential indirection and epistemological subversion of reality, Lovecraft builds his novel upon intertextuality and spatial-verbal disorientation.

## The Intertext of *At the Mountains of Madness*

Lovecraft's network of intertextual references is extensive throughout his oeuvre: "Herbert West: Re-animator" (1922), a story about a necromantic scientist obsessed with bringing corpses back to life, is reminiscent of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845); "The Horror at Red Hook" and "He" (1926) are Lovecraft's attempts to reimagine the vocabulary and imagery of American urban Gothic; the epigraph to "The Call of Cthulhu" is a passage from Algernon Blackwood's occultist novel *The Centaur* (1911), while "The Colour Out of Space" (1928) hints both at Blackwood's *The Willows* (1907) and Ambrose Bierce's supernatural tale "The Damned Thing" (1893). Lovecraft's embraced anxiety of influence, though, is particularly evident with Poe, something that he made no efforts to conceal in various of his non-

fictional writings. For instance, Poe is the only author to whom Lovecraft dedicates an entire chapter in his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, while in a letter to his colleague and correspondent J. Vernon Shea, Lovecraft indicates one specific story, "The Outsider" (1926), that bears unambiguous traces of Poe's dark imagery: "It represents my literal though unconscious imitation of Poe at its very height" (Johnson 13). Despite Lovecraft's honest claim, "The Outsider," albeit indisputably indebted to Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842),[3] is certainly second, in terms of imitation, to *Mountains*, arguably Lovecraft's not only most intertextual work, but his most explicit homage to Poe. Set in Antarctica, founded on the discovery of a subterranean cave and a long-abandoned Cyclopean city occasionally explored by strange penguins, with a character hearing and shouting the chilling words "Tekeli-li," *At the Mountains of Madness* is heavily based on Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Designed similarly to its literary successor, *Pym* is also structured as a travelogue, features a narrator who is very reluctant to reveal to the public his bizarre, near-fatal adventures, and relies on an exotic spatial setting.

To make sure his "too obvious source" (*Tales* 586) of inspiration would be identified, Lovecraft cites Poe's work twice: first, when the narrator expresses his fascination for the text in connection with his graduate assistant Danforth's own penchant for weird literature in the first chapter of the novel: "Danforth was a great reader of bizarre material, and had talked a good deal of Poe. I was interested myself because of the Antarctic scene of Poe's only long story – the disturbing and enigmatical *Arthur Gordon Pym*" (486). The second mention of *Arthur Gordon Pym* occurs in the penultimate chapter, at the moment in which Dyer realizes that the sound he and Danforth had just heard is nothing but the mysterious "Tekeli-li" cry referenced by Poe in his novel:

> Of course common reading is what prepared us both to make the interpretation, though Danforth has hinted at queer notions about unsuspected and forbidden sources to which Poe may have had access when writing his *Arthur Gordon Pym* a century ago. It will be remembered that in that fantastic tale there is a word of unknown but terrible and prodigious significance connected with the Antarctic and screamed eternally by the gigantic, spectrally snowy birds of that malign region's core. "*Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!*" (577)

Curiously enough, when Dyer comments on Danforth being "a great reader of bizarre material," he is referencing the young assistant's correct assumption[4] that the Antarctic volcano Mount Erebos was the inspiration for Poe's poem "Ulalume" (1847), of which part of the second stanza is quoted in Lovecraft's novel: "' – the lavas that restlessly roll / Their sulphurous currents down Yaanek / In the ultimate climes of the pole – / That groan as they roll down Mount Yaanek / In the realms of the boreal pole'" (485).

This seemingly isolated quote is in fact the first occurrence of Lovecraft's pragmatic deployment of intertextuality: "Ulalume" is here mentioned not merely to set the stage or provide an adequate ambiance for the novel, but to tap into the same geopoetic context (in this case, Antarctica) that informs Poe's ballad. The emphasis placed on the novel's setting contributes, in turn, to lend overall credence to his fictional apparatus, an aesthetic desideratum of the utmost importance to Lovecraft, as he points out in the essay "Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction" (1934): "we should work as if we were staging a hoax and trying to get our extravagant lie accepted as literal truth" (*Collected Essays* 179). And "staging a hoax," I contend, is the major function of the Poesque intertext underlying *Mountains*, since *Pym* is known to be Poe's "attempt to convince the public that his imaginary voyage was a record of fact" (Cecil 232), as can be read in the novel's preface:

> Among those gentlemen in Virginia who expressed the greatest interest in my statement, more particularly in regard to that portion of it which related to the Antarctic Ocean, was Mr. Poe, lately editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, a monthly magazine, published by Mr. Thomas W. White, in the city of Richmond. He strongly advised me, among others, to prepare at once a full account of what I had seen and undergone, and trust to the shrewdness and common sense of the public. (Poe, *Poetry and Tales* 1007)

Having a story accepted as a collection of actual albeit extravagant facts is the goal that orientates Lovecraft's reliance on hesitant and inherently sceptic narrators, and is consistent with his ambitious project: to offer to the public a somewhat scientifically sound and emotionally accurate representation of epistemologically adverse (neo)supernatural but profoundly material horrors.

Several other points of contact may be noted between *Pym* and *Mountains*: Antarctica is a major place of interest in both novels, constituting the central setting in Lovecraft's text; both make extensive use of very specific cartographic coordinates to compensate for the remoteness and the then relatively uncharted Antarctic continent; and, although differently in degree, both narratives draw on absurd, baffling phenomena as an alternative explanation to the mysteries of an otherwise ordinary reality. The preternatural aspect of both novels is indeed grounded within a framework of scientific accuracy that frequently results in informational overload. In Lovecraft's novel, the vocabulary in Lake's updates on the freshly disinterred fossils is strikingly meticulous – "a vein of Comanchian limestone full of minute fossil cephalopods, corals, echini, and spirifera, and with occasional suggestions of siliceous sponges and marine vertebrate bones – the latter probably of teliosts, sharks, and ganoids" (Lovecraft, *Tales* 495) – and seems to echo the accurate, though less technical, digressions on the life and habits of seabirds in the fourteenth chapter of *Pym*:

> Penguins are very plenty, and of these there are four different kinds. The royal penguin […] is the largest. […] The chief beauty of plumage, however, consists in two broad stripes of a gold color, which pass along from the head to the breast. (Poe, *Poetry and Tales* 1117)

Most importantly, Lake's enthusiastic conviction that his findings would revolutionize long-held scientific tenets recalls Pym's confidence "in time and progressing science to verify some of the most important and most improbable of my statements" (1044), a plea to credibility that would be reaffirmed later in the novel:

> I must still be allowed to feel some degree of gratification at having been instrumental, however remotely, in opening to the eye of science one of the most intensely exciting secrets which has ever engrossed its attention (1134).

Yet, contrary to the generally shared belief that *Pym* did influence *At the Mountains of Madness* (Navroth 192; Ringel 270; Wijkmark, "Poe's Pym" 86-87; "Review" 91), S. T. Joshi maintains that

> the casually made claim that the novel is a 'sequel' to Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* deserves some analysis. In my view, the novel is not a true sequel at all [...]. It is not clear that *Pym* even influenced the work in any significant way. (874)

While I would agree with Joshi that *Mountains* is not an outright sequel to *Pym*, it is equally impossible to deny the thematic and formal organization that Lovecraft's novel owes to its predecessor, especially the hoaxing trope, which, as I argued earlier on, also acts as an essential structuring principle in *Mountains*. By constructing the narrative as a meticulous journal (another cardinal aspect that the novel shares with *Pym*) Lovecraft is, albeit only metaphorically, committed to deceiving the public, with particular attention paid to reducing what horror literature scholar Terry Heller terms "aesthetic distance" (n. pag.), an interpretation of Edward Bullough's classic notion of "psychical distance" (n. pag.). The conceptual core of said principle consists of "putting the phenomenon, so to speak, out of gear with our practical, actual self," in order to appreciate it "objectively," and is used most effectively when the artist performs an "utmost decrease of distance without its disappearance" (Bullough n. pag.). Filtering Bullough's concept through the lens of horror fiction, Heller argues that "it seems to be in the nature of a tale of terror to threaten aesthetic distance," which works best "when it involves the readers in it as completely as possible without their forgetting that it is a work of art and interacting with it as if it were reality" (n. pag.). Thus, Heller's ideas seem to overlap with Lovecraft's aim to have "our extravagant lie accepted as literal truth" (*Collected Essays* 179), to which end he creates a narrator manifestly reluctant to discussing his bewildering experience, as the very first lines of Dyer's report demonstrate:

> I am forced into speech because men of science have refused to follow my advice without knowing why. It is altogether against my will that I tell my reasons for opposing this contemplated invasion of the Antarctic [...] and I am the more reluctant because my warning may be in vain. Doubt of the real facts, as I must reveal them, is inevitable; yet if I suppressed what will seem extravagant and incredible there would be nothing left. (Lovecraft, *Tales* 481)

This passage is uncannily similar to Pym's words in the preface to his narrative:

> One consideration which deterred me was, that [...] I feared I should not be able to write, from mere memory, a statement so minute and connected as to have the *appearance* of that truth it would really possess [...]. Another reason was, that the incidents to be narrated were of a nature so positively marvellous, that, unsupported as my assertions must necessarily be [...], I could only hope for belief among my family, and those of my friends who have had reason, through life, to put faith in my veracity. (Poe, *Poetry and Tales* 1007)

Lovecraft takes great pains to counteract the supernatural element of the novel, and the skepticism of both his actual audience and Dyer's fictional readership. Compared to others of his stories, such as "The Call of Cthulhu" or "The Colour Out of Space," in which the (questionable?) narrators function as resonators of past events actually experienced by different characters,[5] *Mountains* is structured as the objectively assembled account of someone who witnessed the events in person. This pattern is evident for nearly the entirety of the novel's third and fourth chapters, where Dyer makes it unquestionably explicit that he does not want to share with the rest of the world the horrors that his team had witnessed during the expedition, and that he is "forced into speech" to warn against future explorations of a similar kind:

> It is only with vast hesitancy and repugnance that I let my mind go back to Lake's camp and what we really found there [...]. I am constantly tempted to shirk the details, and to let hints stand for actual facts and ineluctable deductions. (Lovecraft, *Tales* 514)

Before the geologist takes courage to describe the conditions of what was left of Lake's camp, he reveals that the "tremendous significance lies in what we dared not tell – what I would not tell now but for the need of warning others off from nameless terrors" (510). Only after a reiterated attempt to hide the truth from the public does Dyer "break through all reticences at last – even about that ultimate nameless thing beyond the mountains of madness" (514). Dyer's reluctancy allows Lovecraft to take a distance from the trend of pulp literature that he so vocally criticized, which is the lack of coherent psychological reactions to the uncanny. In Dyer, Lovecraft also finds a character through which that "hoax" can be

convincingly delivered both to the fictional (textual) audience of Dyer's reports, and to the actual (extratextual) readership that Lovecraft hopes will accept his narrative extravaganzas as "literal truth."

## A Spatiality of Madness

To have the novel accepted as "literal truth," disorient his audience and deploy his cosmicist philosophy, Lovecraft also relies on particularly accurate descriptions as well as desolate and intricate spatiality. A still fairly unexplored continent between the World Wars (Navroth 190), Antarctica provided the perfect geographical context for Lovecraft's literary and metaphysical speculations. Considering Lovecraft's appreciation of *Pym*, his long-standing fascination with the Antarctic regions and the poles in general (191), and his manifest outrage at a *Weird Tales* story published in 1930 that poorly dealt with a similar topic (Joshi 870), it is no surprise that the author saw in the South Pole a captivating opportunity for one of his most conceptually innovative narratives.

Because Lovecraft prioritized the atmospheric element of a story over characterial relationships and crude facts, after the initial suspense generated by Dyer's hesitation regarding the ensuing report, the author presents the reader with an unsettlingly sublime landscape:

> Through the desolate summits swept raging intermittent gusts of the terrible antarctic wind; whose cadences sometimes held vague suggestions of a wild and half-sentient musical piping, with notes extending over a wide range, and which for some subconscious mnemonic reason seemed to me disquieting and even dimly terrible. (Lovecraft, *Tales* 485)

Here it is possible to appreciate Lovecraft's trademark indirect description, a technique that object-oriented ontologist Graham Harman describes as "an allusion to something beyond the bounds of perception and language" (66). Harman pinpoints in Lovecraft a convergence between two distinct phenomenological tensions: a vertical axis between an unknown entity and its nebulous, perceivable properties; and a horizontal one correlating

an object to its numerous sensible qualities (88). The gusts of wind that "sometimes" recalled with "vague suggestions" a distant music, and "which for some subconscious mnemonic reason seemed" disturbing to the narrator (Lovecraft, *Tales* 485), relate to the former relationship. This referential uncertainty operates as an appropriate rhetorical mechanism to suggest unknown entities, phenomena and landscapes that elude the efficacy of traditional denotation. Another manifestation of this linguistic concealment occurs when Dyer and Danforth set out to fly over the mountains West of Lake's laboratory. Faced with a barely describable vista, Dyer recounts:

> Our sensations of tense expectancy as we prepared to round the crest and peer out over an untrodden world can hardly be described on paper [...]. The touch of evil mystery in these barrier mountains, and in the beckoning sea of opalescent sky glimpsed betwixt their summits, was a highly subtle and attenuated matter not to be explained in literal words. (486)

The geologist's inability to put matters into "literal words" parallels his reluctancy to disclose the unnamable discoveries made by Lake. The narrator's increasing hesitation to discuss the details of the expedition, along with his incapacity to render with words the uncanniness of those mountains, signal an epistemological turn from the nebulous descriptions of those "desolate summits." While at first Dyer struggles to lexically encapsulate the sublime, as in a sort of romantic contemplation of an object "cleared of the practical, concrete nature of its appeal" (Bullough n. pag.), he later surrenders altogether to the unrepresentable. Lovecraft thus shifts from suggestive evocation to (openly admitted) verbal deficiency. To counterbalance this tendency to allusion and elision, the author starts, hereafter, supplementing the narrator's loss for words with passages of ultra-realistic descriptiveness, which result in the same syntactic frenzy previously displayed by Lake in his five-page-long reports of the fossilized aliens.

The paradox inherent to such linguistic hypertrophy, however, is that, rather than eliciting clarity in the reader's mental images of the scene, it only generates confusion. A look at the verbal representation of the primordial city discovered among the mountains should suffice to show this:

> The nameless stone labyrinth consisted, for the most part, of walls from 10 to 150 feet in ice-clear height, and of a thickness varying from five to ten feet. It was composed mostly of prodigious blocks of dark primordial slate, schist, and sandstone – blocks in many cases as large as 4 × 6 × 8 feet – though in several places it seemed to be carved out of a solid, uneven bed-rock of pre-Cambrian slate. (Lovecraft, *Tales* 524)

Following this list of oddly specific dimensions – Dyer and Danforth are still observing this part of the city from inside their airplane – the geologist adds that although the general shapes of the buildings are "conical, pyramidal, or terraced," there are also "many perfect cylinders, perfect cubes, clusters of cubes, and other rectangular forms, and a peculiar sprinkling of angled edifices whose five-pointed ground plan roughly suggested modern fortifications" (524). Harman sees in Lovecraft's complementary amassing of features and topographical specifications the literary application of the horizontal gap between things and their multiplying qualities:

> Here we have something different: a "horizontal" weirdness that I would not call allusive but rather "cubist," for lack of a better term. The power of language is no longer enfeebled by an impossibly deep and distant reality. Instead, language is overloaded by a gluttonous excess of surfaces and aspects of the thing. (26)

Harman equates this abundance of characteristics and details in Lovecraft's fiction with cubism in light of the latter's groundbreaking defiance of classic notions of perspective via the representation of an object's aspect as if it were seen simultaneously from multiple viewpoints (33-34). I would argue that Lovecraft's descriptive over-accuracy is an intrinsically bound-to-fail response to supplement the undecipherability of reality and prompt a simultaneous appreciation of its manifold essence. At the level of content and diegetic flow, Lovecraft's voracious and dizzying descriptions appear to go towards what Joseph Frank would describe as the "spatialization of form" ("Spatial Form I" 231) in literature. Drawing on Ezra Pound's poetic conception of the image, Frank claims that, to interpret the manifestation of scattered referents and meanings, they

> must be juxtaposed with one another and perceived simultaneously; only when this is done can they be adequately understood; for while they follow one another in time, their meaning does not depend on this temporal relationship. (229)

Frank here suggests that the disjointed "word-groups" of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* – a clearly different work in terms of genre, theme, and composition from *Mountains* – may be made sense of only if the reader somehow rereads or mentally reconstructs the textual fragments of the poem, ignoring their temporal succession in favor of a more visual – hence spatial – appreciation of the text. Lovecraft, instead, privileges an "excess of surfaces" textuality (Harman 26), which goes beyond Eliot's fragmentary poetics referenced by Frank. Indeed, the descriptions used by Lovecraft have "a total effect not reducible to a sum total of architectural sub-units" (125). However, there is a stronger connection between Frank's theory and Lovecraft's aesthetics. Modern(ist) literature, Frank writes, is striding towards and embedding itself in space as a consequence of the reduction of the literary work of art's perceived temporality ("Spatial Form III" 651). Relying on Worringer's aesthetic theory in *Abstraction and Empathy* (1907), Frank argues that the spatial turn of modernist literature depends on the artist's "condition of disequilibrium with nature" (650): "man [...] no longer feels able to cope with the bewildering complexities of megalopolitan existence" (648). Lovecraft was certainly affected by such disharmony with the cultural, social and spatial milieu, as the explicitly racist and grotesque depictions of New York's urbanscape in "The Horror at Red Hook" and "He" demonstrate. But it is in *Mountains* that Lovecraft's method of (re)presenting a weird fictional universe enacts the disillusioned artist's breakaway from naturalism. By verbosely focusing on the spatial deformations of the novel, Lovecraft foregrounds space as content (the mountains, the structure of the Elder Ones' city, the interiors of the edifices), but also employs spatialization as a linguistic technique that calls for a readerly effort to grasp the multi-faceted reality displayed through the novel's abundant descriptions. Furthermore, the overall spatial complexity of the city is mirrored on a smaller but equally detailed level by the labyrinthine structure of its edifices. For instance, the building into

which Dyer and Danforth enter after landing at the mountains' foothills is "a continuous maze of connected chambers and passages," with "rooms [...] of all imaginable shapes and proportions, ranging from five-pointed stars to triangles and perfect cubes," which measures "about 30 × 30 feet in floor area, and 20 feet in height" (Lovecrat, *Tales* 534). The same building is later described (again) as an "aeon-silent maze of human masonry" (538), a miniature but specular image of the city earlier referred to as a "stupendous stone labyrinth" (528), a "maze of stone-shadowed twilight" and a "labyrinthine town" (531).

Lovecraft's accumulation of spatial elements can also be seen at work in the moment when Dyer and Danforth decide to venture towards an abyss that previously discovered carvings hinted at, and into which the Elder Ones had fled:

> As we threaded our dim way through the labyrinth with the aid of map and compass – traversing rooms and corridors in every stage of ruin or preservation, clambering up ramps, crossing upper floors and bridges and clambering down again, encountering choked doorways and piles of debris, hastening now and then along finely preserved and uncannily immaculate stretches [...] – we were repeatedly tantalised by the sculptured walls along our route. (558)

Here Lovecraft masters the technique in two ways: he first reconstructs within the space of a parenthetical segment (a textual spatialization in itself) a narrative sequence that must have lasted at least a few hours, but which is exhausted very rapidly at the level of discourse; and then he interrupts the narrative flow to create suspense and set the mood for Dyer and Danforth's successive finding of Gedney's corpse. Moreover, this succession of movements and locations allow Lovecraft to emphasize the complexity of the Elder Ones' cityscape at the level of language. In other words, the use of a notably convolute syntax and the amassing of descriptions referring to the same object, circumstance or space, function as a signifier of the novel's content.

Lovecraft's technique does not apply exclusively to spaces. Another example of his over-descriptive technique can be witnessed in the crucial scene where the geologist and his assistant are chased by a furious shoggoth:

> It was a terrible, indescribable thing vaster than any subway train – a shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and unforming as pustules of greenish light all over the tunnel-filling front that bore down upon us, crushing the frantic penguins and slithering over the glistening floor that it and its kind had swept so evilly free of all litter. (581)

The reader again is burdened with the accumulation of descriptive clusters, which aptly displays Lovecraft's attempt to bridge the "gap between an accessible object and its gratuitous amassing of numerous palpable surfaces" (Harman 30).

In a final twist of cosmic horror, Danforth takes one look at a more shocking sight – mountains far higher than the madness ones: "I have said that Danforth refused to tell me what final horror made him scream out so insanely – a horror which, I feel sadly sure, is mainly responsible for his present breakdown" (Lovecraft, *Tales* 585). After a series of lengthy, cubist, incredibly descriptive passages, Lovecraft suddenly goes back to verbal reticence for one last moment of unutterable terror – so unutterable that the novel ends by sparking only conjectures about what Danforth may have seen on the flight back to the camp: another shoggoth? An intratextually quoted "colour out of space" (586)? A monster with five dimensions? These are just a few of the entities that the irreversibly traumatized Danforth rambles on about, leaving the disoriented reader to guess what to make of the assistant's scream of Poesque origin "Tekeli-li." The sharp return to allusiveness ultimately signals the surrender of human knowledge to that final horror's "radical unkowability", which "defies all supplementary efforts of scientific realism" (Yi Lee 22).

## Conclusion

With this study, I have attempted to illustrate how Lovecraft turns to intertextuality, analyzing the tension between allusiveness, a – sometimes excessively – descriptive language, and spatial over-accuracy to represent the unknown and perplex the reader in *At the Mountains of Madness*. While

drawing extensively upon the exotic and sublime imagery of Antarctica hinted at in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Lovecraft appears to be more fascinated by the compositional principle underlining Poe's novel: the hoax device. To substantiate this shared aura of deception, Lovecraft borrows key motifs from *Pym*, thus giving new life to specific elements of Poe's storyworld, and making them as real and reliable as the historical figures Ernest Shackleton and Roald Amundsen, both repeatedly mentioned in Lovecraft's novel. At work in *Mountains* is a "remotivation" (Genette 325-30) of Pym's hesitations and tepid drive for knowledge into Dyer and Danforth's undying curiosity and hyperbolic reluctancy – a typically Lovecraftian syncretism at play in his neosupernatural fiction. The reader is confused by the liminality of the narrative, positioned on the threshold between reality and fiction, in the same way that the protagonist and deuteragonist are puzzled by the albino penguins and the "Tekeli-li" cry, which were believed to be the mere product of Poe's creativity. To harmonize the different components of a weird story (the conceptual, the stylistic and the spatial-temporal setting), Lovecraft complicates his prose and the spaces within which it is embedded. Mixing different temporal dynamics, while foregrounding its overly detailed and maze-like spatiality, Lovecraft moves, albeit unknowingly, towards the direction of coeval arts, that is, "a direction of increased spatiality" (Frank, "Spatial Form III" 650). Such scenery defies not only the principles of standard architecture, but also those of linguistic referentiality and imagination, which is Lovecraft's ultimate purpose. His literary obsession with bizarre geometry aligns with the "crisis of representation" (Blacklock 1111) discussed by Frank when he theorizes about the non-realistic, spatial turn of the modern artist, disillusioned by the complexities of the twentieth century between the two world wars (Frank, "Spatial Form III" 648). Meaning-making can only be possible when "the piecing of dissociated of knowledge" (*Tales* 167), as Lovecraft wrote at the beginning of "The Call of Cthulhu," finally takes place, leaving the characters (and the readers) more cognitively disoriented (more) than they are terrified.

## Notes

[1] Just to list a few examples, *At the Mountains of Madness* alone features 92 inflections of the verb "to seem"; the asteroid in "The Colour Out of Space" "appeared to promise both brittleness and hollowness," causing later in the story a "phosphorescence [which] appeared to stir furtively in the yard near the barn (Lovecraft, *Tales* 345-346, 351); and in "The Call of Cthulhu", the bas-relief of the titular creature "seemed to be a sort of monster, or symbol representing a monster, of a form which only a diseased fancy could conceive" (169).

[2] I am here using the term "parascientific" instead of the more negatively connoted "pseudoscientific" to emphasize Lovecraft's aspiration to a science-like fictional discourse rather than a commitment to divulge theories of dubious scientific value.

[3] Like its predecessor, "The Outsider" is set in a castle, from which the guests of a party flee following the vision of an "inconceivable, indescribable and unmentionable monstrosity" (Lovecraft, *Tales* 231).

[4] Thomas Ollive Mabbott argues that Poe's use of the adjective "boreal" in the nineteenth line of "Ulalume" to denote the South hemisphere was partly influenced by contemporary French, in which the needle of the compass pointing to the South was indeed called "boreal." Mabbott goes on to claim that Poe's source of inspiration for Mount Yaanek in the second stanza was Mount Erebus, discovered by British polar explorer Sir James Clark Ross in 1840 (Poe, *Poems* 419, nn. 16-19).

[5] In "The Call of Cthulhu" the main narrator (I) tells the story found in his uncle's journal (II), which contains another character's account (III), which features an anecdote told by a secondary character (IV). In "The Colour Out of Space" the story is second-handed to the reader by an observer who had heard the verbal account of the events from a senile narrator.

## Works Cited

Blacklock, Mark. "Higher Spatial Form in Weird Fiction." *Textual Practice* 31 (2017): 1101-16.

Bullough, Edward. "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle." *British Journal of Psychology* 5 (1912): n. pag. <https://home.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361_r9.html>.

Frank, Joseph. "Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Three Parts. (I)" *The Sewanee Review* 53 (1945): 221-40.

—. "Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Three Parts. (III)" *The Sewanee Review* 53 (1945): 643-53.

Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. 1982. En. Trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln and London: Nebraska UP, 1997.

Harman, G. *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*. Alresford: Zero Books, 2012.

Heller, Terry. *The Delights of Terror*. Urbana and Chicago: Illinois UP, 1987.

Johnson, Brian. "'The Strangeness of My Heritance'." *The Lovecraftian Poe: Essays on Influence, Reception, Interpretation and Transformation*. Ed. Sean Moreland. Bethlehem: Leigh UP, 2017. 1-26.

Joshi, S. T. *I Am Providence: The Life and Times of H. P. Lovecraft*. New York: Hippocampus Press, 2013.

Lovecraft, H. P. *Collected Essays. Vol. 2: Literary Criticism*. Ed. S. T. Joshi. New York: Hippocampus Press, 2004.

—. "Confessions of Unfaith." *Brown University Library*. 21 March 2022: n. pag. <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:709536/>.

—. *Selected Letters II (1925-1929).* Eds. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei. Sauk City: Arkham House, 1968.

—. *Tales*. New York: The Library of America, 2005.

Moffitt Cecil, L. "The Two Narratives of Arthur Gordon Pym." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 5 (1963): 232-41.

Navroth, John M. "Lovecraft and the Polar Myth." *Lovecraft Annual* 3 (2009): 190-98.

Poe, E. A. *Poems: Vol. 1*. Ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1969.

—. *Poetry and Tales*. 1984. New York: The Library of America, 2005.

Ringel, Faye. "I Am Providence." *A Companion to American Gothic*. Ed. Charles Crow. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2013. 265-78.

Wijkmark, Johan Fredrik. "Poe's Pym and the Discourse of Antarctic Exploration." *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* 10 (2009): 84-116.

—. Review of *The Sphinx of the Ice Realm* by Jules Verne. *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* 14 (2013): 91-98.

Worringer, Wilhelm. *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*. 1953. En. Trans. Michael Bullock. Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1997.

Yi Lee, Chia. "On *At the Mountains of Madness*: Enveloping the Cosmic Horror." *EurAmerica* 39 (2009): 1-27.

Livia Bellardini

# Assessing a Poetics of the Lyric in the Works of Claudia Rankine and Jonathan Culler

When it comes to her approach to the lyric, Claudia Rankine makes things look easy: her love of poetry in general, and the lyric genre in particular, originates from both her expressed desire and the ongoing poetic task of "pull[ing] the lyric back into its realities" (Chiasson n. pag.). By voicing her personal commitment to lyric poetry, not only does Rankine openly declare both a formal and a professional intention that impacts her engagement with poetry writing, but she also announces her contribution to an ongoing project in poetics[1] organized around intense reflections regarding the formal developments that the Western lyric has undergone in time, and from which Jonathan Culler's far-reaching work *Theory of the Lyric* (2015) is often singled out. Apart from recognizing certain continuities within the genre across time, Culler's study progressively reveals a number of similarities between canonical lyrics from very different periods which allow him to identify specific lyrical tenets capable of addressing the lyric's "vital generic tradition" (*Theory of the Lyric* 33), of shaping that tradition, and of resisting the temptation to read lyric poetry with a view to either linking it to fiction or to the intense expression of subjective experience.[2]

By staging a dialogue between Rankine and Culler, namely between a poet and a critic, this article will discuss extracts from Rankine's first and penultimate collections to show how her approach to lyric poetry has been incremental, guiding her writing towards a poetic practice that has grown to be both intrinsically poetic and socially charged. While the publication of *Nothing in Nature Is Private* (1994)[3] signaled Rankine's poetic debut in the public sphere, it nonetheless moved into areas usually assigned to fiction: e.g., the location within US society of a Jamaican American woman, whose life experiences and encounters are communicated via plain dialogues among the poems' speakers. Since Rankine's poetics has only

gradually grown into a lyric understanding of poetry, an outspoken interest in the genre does not appear until *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), and *Citizen* (2014), both bearing the subtitle "An American Lyric." Rankine's choice of qualifying these collections as "lyric" directly links her work to the large tradition of lyric poetry her poems derive from and speak back to; yet, her move is an even bolder one, as she tellingly defines her lyrics "American", thus geographically, historically, and socially tracing them back to "their own realities" in order to address the instances of systematic racism occurring within a highly racialized society.[4] By staunchly grounding her lyrics in current American society, Rankine is also questioning the idea that lyric poetry should tend towards abstraction, i.e. its traditional "stripping away from all details associated with a socially-specific self" (Vendler 3).

Although my attempt to build a connection between Claudia Rankine and Jonathan Culler might appear unusual – given the fact that Rankine is ardently engaged in the workings of racial imaginaries and in blending aesthetic experimentation with social awareness, while Culler is particularly interested in the effects that the lyric's structure brings about – such effort seems to me to be justified by the way both authors maintain an open and inclusive critical perspective towards any attempt at defining the lyric. Whereas Culler favors the incorporation of issues and constants from different periods and languages in *any* account of the lyric genre (*Theory of the Lyric* 38), Rankine's poems have worked both within and against the very tradition of lyric poetry. Moreover, the inductive influence that a poet's work can have on a critic's descriptions of generic features is profoundly significant to developing a body of criticism that is keenly aware of the creative pathways of lyric poetry and its relation to the everyday. This is precisely why I chose to propose a dialogue between these two different angles of vision, a choice that finds its bearings in the necessity to foreground mutuality and to speak of tradition in more contemporary and revisionist terms: if Culler's delineation of salient features that are distinctive of the lyric helps readers approach difficult formal questions, it also speaks to the contemporary desire to venture beyond a conceptualization of lyric poetry determined by form, as present-day practitioners of the genre display. Notably, although Rankine's *Citizen* works within the lyric's main tenets, her readers have questioned whether

this is the best approach to experiencing and describing lyric poems. As a matter of fact, I believe Rankine picks up the conversation where Culler's survey left it, placing the interchange of "Lyric and Society" (*Theory of the Lyric* 296) and the relation between imagination and ideology at the heart of lyric studies today.

Over a twenty-year timespan, Rankine's poems have progressively drawn from aesthetic sources capable of challenging readers' built-in assumptions, with a view to ultimately renewing their contact with the world, as well as guiding them towards "questing what might otherwise be" (Rich 234). Similarly, Culler's argument in *Theory of the Lyric* is not limited to a mainly aesthetic account of the lyric. His propensity to formulate a poetics does not express "an attempt to make explicit the moves of the interpretative process, to systemize the operations of literary criticism," but rather reveals a current need to "explore the most unsettling and intriguing aspects of lyric language and the different sorts of seductive effects that lyric may achieve" (viii). While lyrics must not be deprived of salient features that are especially lyrical, literary analysis should still be devoted to developing reading strategies that work *against* readers' expectations. In this sense, Rankine's conception of the lyric aligns with Culler's to the extent that they both reconcile one major theme of poetry with the act of poetic imagination. Lyric's potential role of helping readers structure a new understating of the world achieves social effectiveness once lyric's potential for critique is received and welcomed by readers, or once "the predictability of the subject's response to experience" is undermined, and the ideology informing that response is exposed (338). In "On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary," Rankine and Beth Loffreda reflect on the role readers' and writers' imagination plays when it enters into dialogue with a literary text, whether that imagination is put to use for the creation of a poem or a novel, or whether it is activated by the process of reading. As Culler suggests, when one's imagination is struck by its encounter with a text's unsettling features and intriguing language, the text is also performing a social role in the sense that it foregrounds ideology and unseats any cut and dried position the reader might be inclined to assume. In this sense, Rankine and Loffreda's essay presents a solid argument in favor of the imagination's dependence on the tangible reality that shapes one's frame of

mind. They also argue for literature's role in providing a critique of both society and its tendency to maintain the status quo. While Rankine and Loffreda direct their critical attention to writers who wish to imagine the life of an "other" whose race is different from their own, they also query misleading assumptions usually ascribed to the imagination by those who define the latter as a dimension free of race. Accordingly, their advice to artists is to engage in a self-searching act which would gradually enable them to determine to what extent an imaginative frame thus defined can actually mediate or limit one's view of the world. They also sustain that by regularly attending to it, writers can support the imagination's infinite capacity for readjustment.

Nonetheless, both Rankine and Culler seem to be telling us that in order to become aware of social phenomena we *do* need the lyric; in other words, we need to listen to the text, "hear a different note" (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 291), and "fall back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor" (Rankine, *Citizen* I). In light of the above, Rankine's call to bring the lyric back into its realities raises the following question: which realm did the lyric poem flee to and now works in, if one needs to "pull it back" into its realities? In addition, by wishing to return the lyric to *its* realities, one is also making the claim that there is such a thing as a lyrical dimension, proper to this literary genre alone. This, in turn, begs the question as to what distinguishes this dimension from that of everyday life and provokes us into considering why the lyric is necessary. The series of questions solicited by Rankine's statement fully complicates her initial reflection on the lyric's comeback for the simple reason that they reflect the middle-ground position the lyric occupies: anchored in the "here" and "now" of poetic enunciation as much as it is rooted in the "here" and "now" of our contemporary historical moment. Working both within and against Culler's lyric parameters, *Citizen* represents Rankine's first critical attempt at expanding existing theories of the lyric.

When compared to *Citizen*, *Nothing in Nature Is Private* seems to conform to one of lyric's most-referred to models by coupling it "to the fictional representation of a speaker character whose novelistic situation the reader is asked to reconstruct," simply by asking what would lead someone to speak thus and to feel thus (Culler, "Why Lyric" 201). Rankine considers

her first poems – written in 1993 as an M.A. student in Fine Arts – rather neat in form and stereotyped in their depiction of her characters' early life experiences, which are described by the poet as performances of blackness and immigration (Schultz 118). In "Before *Citizen*: Lyric Subjectivity and the Language of Experience in Claudia Rankine's *Nothing in Nature Is Private,*" Kathy Lou Schultz highlights how the aesthetic of her earlier poems did not reflect the sense of freedom – or of "messiness," for Rankine a synonym for formal liberation – that her subsequent poetry collections exemplify by means of an overall experimental aesthetic frame. The poet herself recognizes how upon writing the poems that would later become *Nothing in Nature Is Private*, she underwent the experience of working to a deadline, "trying to hit poems over the net back to a room full of people," and facing up to the "constant struggle between satisfying the expectations of the program and what your unconscious wants to investigate" (qtd. in Schultz 118). Indeed, if one compares the stanzaic arrangement of Rankine's juvenilia with the formally experimental nature of her 2014 publication *Citizen: An American Lyric*, the above-mentioned messiness is perceptible from page one. *Citizen's* hybrid aesthetics makes one question the subtitle the collection bears. However, although in her review of the book Kate Kellaway believes that "the question becomes insignificant as one reads on" (n. pag.), her further remarks on the collection's contents do not shy away from *Citizen*'s lyrical character: "her achievement," she declares, "is to have created a bold work that occupies its *own* space powerfully" (n. pag; italics mine). By contrast, both Rankine's and the readership's scant consideration of her first volume seems to originate from the poems' lack of formal rebellion against established notions of poetry. Apart from encouraging a definition of lyric as *mimesis*, these early poems can also be read and analyzed as the expression of the subjective experience of the poet since they draw on events from Rankine's own life: probably at the age of seven, Rankine left Kingston Jamaica and traveled to the US.

"New Windows" is a three-page-long poem prefaced by a descriptive epigraph that sets the tone for the poem's ensuing "digression." Fulfilling its rhetorical role, the epigraph anticipates the content one will read in the text, functioning as a temporal reference point for the reader's *quasi* narrative reconstruction of the speaker's life story. It is 1968, and we learn

from the poem that the speaker is a six-year-old child flying to the US, when a flight attendant approaches the child's seat and hands her a white eyelet sweater, with the words: "*This is America/ {…} cold, not like the West Indies. / One needs a jacket of some kind here*" (Rankine, "Nothing in Nature…" 25). Following the epigraph, a three-word sentence – "I trailed off" – moved to the right-hand side of the page seems to announce an almost theater-like change of scene: lights dimming, only to grow brighter and focused on a different scenario. Temporally speaking, the poem flashes forward to two adults sitting next to each other in first class on an ordinary Thursday. While one of the passengers is definitely a white southern businessman, the person sitting next to him is neither described nor defined, even though the reader's imagination is likely to picture a black woman in her forties. The choice of words Rankine resorts to as the poem's speaker accounts for the circumstance is sufficient to allow us to draw conclusions about the races of the interlocutors. The speaker describes the man as eager to start a conversation with her, "or more/ precisely, he wished to understand how / he came to be sitting next to me in first / class on that otherwise ordinary Thursday" (25). Defining that Thursday as "otherwise ordinary" testifies to the fact that, because of the white passenger's "need to place" (26), the scene of a black woman sitting in first class is looked upon as an unlikely daily occurrence.

This being said, Rankine provides her readers with just enough material to visualize the rest of the poem. Although poems' "tangling with ideology" (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 337) usually informs their success with the readers – whether by meeting or by working against the latter's expectations – lyric poetry is typically known for negating, opposing, or "infiltrat[ing} the ideology {it} may have sought to engage" (337). Even so, Rankine's "New Windows," rather than "infiltrating ideology" seems to predict readers' responses to the living arrangements the poem gives shape to. The poem exposes such arrangements by representing an event that might likely happen in one's daily life. In this sense, while the scenario depicted in the poem readily catches the readers' imagination, it nonetheless takes up imaginative space that could have been dedicated instead to indeterminacy of meaning, or to shaking built-in assumptions. In other words, by reading this poem according to the two models that Culler works towards opposing, one can notice how its language does not

yield the sort of seduction that poetic language and form are capable of generating. On the contrary, one is led to participate in a narrative-like reading of the poem, as the temporal details presented in the opening epigraph again suggest – "It was late November, 1968" (Rankine, "Nothing in Nature…" 25).

Despite Rankine's own claims against the integrity and potential of this first collection, and despite the fact that the poems themselves seem to reinforce Rankine's thematic concerns, *Nothing in Nature Is Private* is really representative of how the task of restoring the lyric back to its reality has actually been incrementally engaged in her work. Whether stereotypical or not in their depictions, Rankine's first poems still show signs of an interest in the formal fabric of the lyric. For example, the presence of ellipsis separating the poem's lines performs the function of a sensuous factor that negotiates both the communication between the two speakers (the woman and the businessman), and the relation between text and reader. Thus, the ellipsis takes what happens in the poem outside of the poetic zone itself. Thanks to this small formal device, the poem also raises questions about the connection between form and content (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 31). Accordingly, because of the visual break the ellipsis generates, the poem simultaneously achieves a change of content, a re-framing of scene, and a re-contextualization of both the section that is being read and of previous stanzas, now read in the light of the content provided by new sections. The inclusion of ellipsis within the poem also allows for a counterpoint of voices to enter into dialogue with each other and for multiple temporal planes to coexist. Moreover, the repetition of ellipsis in various moments of the poem foregrounds the poem's "ring structure," or rather "the return at the end to the request of the beginning" (16). In the third section of the poem, a man in a gray suit rings the doorbell of the speaker's home. After greeting him with a smile, the man "looks past me / in search of – I'll use his words – / *I need to speak to your employer, / to someone who lives here*" (Rankine, "Nothing in Nature…" 26). The poem continues:

After he left – he had come
about new windows – I remembered
the southern businessman. His litany
of questions. His need to place.

> The persistence with which he asked,
> *You aren't a lawyer, are you?*
> His curiosity had made me laugh,
> So I told him everything,
> described everything, including
> the first flight I ever flew in. (25-26)

Closing the poem's last section with two lines that hint back to the epigraph, not only is Rankine's poem building a circular structure, but is also thematically engaging with its own title.

The relatedness encouraged by the formal structure of the poem and enacted through a repeated use of ellipsis and temporal juxtapositions, simultaneously mirrors the connectedness the image of the window invokes. Much like the bridging role Rankine assigns to ellipsis, the window, too, occupies a middle space between two positions and environments. The title of the poem is therefore poignant, as it thematizes the genre's persistent thrust towards renewal. Having said that, one can formulate the following generative questions: could the new windows the man had come for refer to the need to reset one's imagination to new interpretative pathways ultimately capable of undermining one's already established view of the world? Or do windows both metonymically and metaphorically stand for the imaginative frame one preemptively projects upon the world? Although between the second and third section of the poem one learns that the reason behind the man's visit are windows, and *new* ones (26), the poem's voiced desire to think about new ways of living, structuring, and channeling one's connection to reality, does not seem to actually offer any chance to "break open locked chambers of possibility" or "restore numbed zones of feeling" (Rich xvi). It seems, instead, to show how relationships function when they are informed by structures of power. Hence, rather than building an actual relation between the poem and its readers, the connective spaces "New Windows" generates work towards the creation of a storyline that the readers are required to reconstruct. Therefore, the poem's narrative builds upon both the content and the formal arrangement of its sections, as the progression of stanzas is faithful to the poem's structural and thematic coherence. Although the poem's specific formal devices can be read as sensuous features capable of attracting attention, they nonetheless remain

functional to the working of the text itself, rather than being in the service of increasing the readers' awareness of or feeling of responsibility for the unjust reality they might unwittingly contribute to perpetuating. Put more simply, readers are not asked to actively participate in the realm of the poem, since the poem's voices, instead of entailing a performance by readers themselves, have already been assigned to specific characters and it is in this guise that they are presented to the audience. Because the poem does not call for the readers' participation in the meaning-making process, their imagination remains inactive: instead of unfixing meaning and unsettling positions of power, Rankine's "New Windows" seems instead to expose fixed relations of power governed by dichotomic principles.

Poetry and imagination share common ground if one considers poetics as the exploration of the formal means readers are intrigued and unsettled by in their encounter with the poetic text, and imagination as "the great inbuilt instrument of othering"[5] capable of connecting the poem's language to desire and the everyday. The desire to change the everyday is rooted in an idea of poetry as the celebration of imaginative possibilities through readers and language or, more specifically, through the readers' performance of the poem's language. With relation to this, Culler has identified four constant parameters[6] that distance the lyric from the novel or from narrative poems. These parameters are organized according to four topics which respectively emphasize: lyric's systematic structure of enunciation and use of indirect address; its ritualistic aspect, which can be described as the possibility of repeating lyric language in different time spans; lyric's achieved status as an "event," vis-à-vis its definition as the *representation* of an event; its optative quality, and more specifically its capacity to articulate desires in the world. In "New Windows," however, the sections of the poem as well as the characters' dialogue provide snapshots of the speakers' lives, steeping the poem in realism rather than suffusing it with surprise, and imbuing it with an anecdotal rather than a lyrical quality. Instead of reporting a dialogue between fictional speakers, lyric address should "lift us out of an anecdotal space into a distinctly poetic one" (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 23) that remains indexical rather than exhaustive (Vendler 6). Again, in dealing with the conundrums of representation and perspective, the poem smoothly adheres to a narrative reading lens: "New Windows" introduces speakers or personas rather than presenting events that need to be voiced by the reader.

"Fragment of a Border" ventures into a similar territory: the poem is presented as a scene from a wider plot wherein a contextually-situated speaker voices their concerns and stands their ground:

> See me standing here
> Waiting for the lights to change?
> Recognize me. I was born black
> With bloodshot eyes [...]
> In your face recognize,
>
> my Jamaican face,
> an American face. (Rankine, "Nothing in Nature..." 21)

The location of the self and the claim for recognition and intimation of multiple identities are the overarching themes addressed in this first collection of poems. Despite the employment of literary devices usually reserved for fiction, Rankine's early works are representative of the sound balance between accuracy and aesthetics that the contemporary lyric seeks to accomplish when "it decides to face outward rather than inward" (Vendler 6). Rankine's task of "pulling the lyric back into its realities" can be read as a poetic endeavor aimed at remarking how the social and the cultural keep intruding into the space of the lyric, hence developing an aesthetics that demands the attention of critique.

In the introduction to *American Women Poets in the 21st Century*, a collective volume co-edited by Rankine and Juliana Sphar, lyric's problematic *locus* of investigation takes central stage. Far from being a "simplistic genre" (1), the anthology emphasizes lyric's inevitable link to innovation and experimentation, as well as its potential for creating "connective spaces" (11). Indeed, the contemporary seems to be paying keen attention to the ways the social and the political alter or encroach on the defining aspects of the lyric. Even so, I believe that the core of the debate over the novelties that the lyric genre must take on does not lie in the influence of extratextual affairs on the lyrical language: such an interchange is a given. Rather, it is the *utter visibility* of this relation that critics are calling into question, given the fact that lyric is the genre of indirection. Rankine's project in poetics is keenly aware of the bond between forms and conventions insofar

as such bond draws on their respective relation to material existence. In this sense, Culler's four parameters are both explanatory and exploratory of lyric's inescapable connection with the everyday, and of Rankine's opening statement in support of her own poetic project. Although Culler remains uncertain of lyric's capacity to actually embolden social change or to determine when such a change can happen in time, he nonetheless believes that lyric's formal solidity is capable of conveying a feeling and guiding readers into traveling alterative pathways of understating that may ultimately undermine or expose the existing concepts that structure our world. Much of lyric's social efficacy and ability to create a formal dynamic within the text depends on the extent to which lyric language can "embed itself in the mind of readers, to invade and occupy it, to be taken in, introjected, or housed as instances of alterity that can be repeated, considered, treasured, or ironically cited" (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 305).

Rankine's *Citizen* offers a powerful example of how contemporary poetry can draw on the lyric genre and achieve lyrical effects by means of a very innovative aesthetic frame: comprised as it is of accumulated instances of microaggressions, Rankine's *Citizen* relies on depictions of lyric temporality and of lyric's mode of address to underscore the ever-present pervasiveness of acts of racism in the US. She also brings into play these two lyric features to raise questions and concerns about the status of the lyric "event." In his article "Citizen: A Lyric Event," Grant Farred elaborates at length on Rankine's fidelity as well as resistance to the lyric genre as Culler defines it. By refusing to align lyric discourse with fiction, Culler connects what is happening within the space of the lyric poem with the act of enunciation itself, comprised of sensuous features such as rhyme schemes (where there is one), sound patterns, and triangulated address (or indirection), all striving to make something happen in the "now" of poetic discourse (Farred 95). Indeed, Culler maintains that the main focus of lyric reading should be directed to experiencing the poem itself as an *event,* rather than as the expression of, or the assertions made by, a speaker. While foregrounding the lyric's status as an "event," Culler is also introducing its *ritualistic* features; as the reader voices the poem, the latter is constituted as an event that can be conceivably re-enacted for as many times as the lyric is actually uttered by readers. This allows lyric poems to build a constantly

renewed connection to the world they access by "offering a performative unity into which readers and auditors may enter at will" (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 123). Despite the fact that Culler conceives of readers' free access into the lyric space and into the lyric event as a crucial generic possibility enacted by lyrics' textual features, he nonetheless laments how criticism neglects such a significant and powerful device. Through their act of voicing, each time they utter the poem, readers ritualistically live in the space of lyrics, while at the same time distancing lyric reading from a fictional and novelizing track. The indeterminacy conveyed by the second person pronoun together with a speech act happening in the present tense contribute to developing lyric's enunciative function as much as its endurance in time and space. Lyric does not so much represent a past event, as it evokes this same event in the lyric present by means of readers. Despite lyric's self-uttered statement and intrinsic potential of living in the "here and now" of past, present, and future spatial realms, Culler's parameters are nonetheless subject to methodological limits if one considers the emergence of various and divergent critical approaches to poetry analysis based on how the poem marries poetics with public affairs. In the first section of *Citizen*, one poem voices the following:

> A friend argues that Americans battle between the "historical
> self," and the "self self." By this she means you mostly interact
> as friends with mutual interests and, for the most part,
> compatible personalities; however, sometimes your historical
> selves, her white self and your black self, or your white self
> and her black self, arrive with the full force of your American
> positioning. Then you are standing face to face in seconds that
> wipe the effable smiles right from your mouths. What did you say?
> (Rankine, *Citizen* 14)

The interplay between the abstraction lyric poems are asked to achieve and the "punctuation" of those abstractions by means of context is visible from the start. There are moments – this extract communicates – in which one's unquestioned and equal right to citizenship intrudes on a one-on-one conversation with a close friend. The commonly-shared value of friendship is disrupted by the full force of their "American positioning." At this point,

what the lyric can do, and what I contend Rankine's extract achieves, is to recreate the tension that caused the encounter to become uncomfortable in the first place, and recover a poetic device capable of calling the reader to take on their part in the poem: the second person pronoun. The lyrical "you," Culler contends, "is at bottom characterized by the foregrounding of that indeterminate potential that makes *you* at once a specific other, the most general other, and *one*" ("The Language of Lyric" 165). While Rankine qualifies her pronouns first as "historical selves," and then as either black or white, thus resisting any lyrical attempt at generalization, the ultimate effect of the lyric is withheld and left up to the reader. In a similar fashion, Farred's article argues that *Citizen* "fits the lyric as a language for disrupting the now" (110), instead of keeping it in a state of fathomless arrest. Accordingly, he illustrates how Rankine's "you" works towards punctuating and halting the ordinary flow of events, giving voice to racist occurrences that would otherwise remain concealed or dismissed. As Rankine turns to the lyrical "you" to expose acts of microaggressions inflicted on African American citizens, she is both pulling the lyric back into its own realities and linking lyric language to the American experience. In *Citizen*, the lyric's juxtaposition of "soul and self" (Vendler 7-9) – namely, lyric's own voice lifted from the specificities of context and lyric's grounding in real-life occurrences – only partly gives way to the rules of abstraction, immortality, and freedom. While one can argue that the references included in her extract are indexical, the fact remains that the smooth conversational tone and the foregrounding of the "self" clearly point to a decided critique of and a resistance to social conventions and ideology. Hence, by connecting her work to a very long generic tradition, and by tinging this tradition with everyday occurrences, Rankine's *Citizen* reframes the lyric as,

> that which happens in the world, and as that which happens (in part) because of what is happening in the world […] As such, the happening – that happening, we might say – that is the lyric as poetic event disarticulates the world by investing it […] with a new social imaginary. In this regard, as we well know, there can be no alternative social imaginary without the event. (Farred 97)

Paraphrasing Farred's insights, Rankine's lyric achieves the status of event to the extent that the subtle acts of racism she uncovers in language are thought to alter the existence of those whom her lyrics address. This being said, the project in poetics Rankine undertakes turns out to be an imaginative project as well, rooted as it is in imaginative possibilities and desires.

*Citizen*'s capacity to speak to the Western poetic tradition by formally reframing conventional parameters is reflected in the poet's choice to subtitle her volume "An American Lyric." In Christopher Lydon's *Open Source* interview with Claudia Rankine and her fellow poets, poet and professor Jessica Bozek concentrates on the immediate encounter one has with the book upon reading its lyrical premise: glancing at the cover of the collection, the title as a whole, together with the image of a suspended black hoodie held up against a blank white background anticipates the material to be found in the work, while also questioning the notion of how lyric poetry can be described (15:20). In accordance with Farred's critical reading of the book, the *Open Source*'s discussion of *Citizen* centers round Rankine's distinctive use of the lyrical "you." As the poets participating in the interview describe the second person pronoun as both a problematic and intriguing rhetorical resource in tune with the poetic thrust towards experimentation, it still feels pivotal to underline that Rankine's use of such an innovative means is rooted in lyric's traditional use of indirection, or indirect address. It also speaks to the connection between poetry, imagination, and society. As much as contemporary times have given rise to different types of poetry that seek to speak for and back to society, in fact, the link between art and society is by no means a recent formulation. In his 1833 essay "What Is Poetry?," John Stuart Mill expressed his disappointment with the lack of what he called "the ideal lyric" poet, one that could be representative of both originality and acquired culture, a personality not yet seen in his time. In order to distinguish between different modes of discourse, Mill also wrote that while "eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard" (n. pag.), a distinction later retrieved by Northrop Frye as he recognizes the foundation of lyrical dynamics in the moment poets turn their back on their listeners and pretend to be talking to themselves or to someone else (*Anatomy of Criticism* 248-9). However, by turning their

back on their listeners/readers, poets can still offer their language to them with *indirection*, that is, through a lyric structure of triangulated address whereby readers are addressed through the act of address to an imagined addressee.

Although in the English language the second-person pronoun lends itself to such indeterminacy, it is also suggestive of intimacy; the pronoun's act of addressability is potentially both plural and singular, therefore capable of achieving an indirect form of address, while also functioning as a "pure place holder" (Culler, "The Language of Lyric" 165). By engaging with the long and always evolving tradition of lyric genre, Rankine's work proves to be remarkably welcoming towards the potentialities of lyric conventions while, at the same time, demonstrating her ability to be responsive to what her own times are asking for. She specifically engrosses readers in a very instructional reading of her own poems, by showing what changes occur in the space of the poem, the readers themselves, and lyric genre in general when the poetic materials are drawn from everyday occurrences. In her interview with Rankine, Lauren Berlant remarks on *Citizen*'s creation of spectatorship: it is not conjured, she comments, "from a protected space that gets projected into a public, but from an intimate distance that is both singular and collective, overwhelming and alienating, crowded and lonely" (n. pag.). By ignoring her listeners or readers, Rankine has chosen to resort to a mode of address capable of conveying indeterminacy as well as immediacy and directionality. Whether her "you" is addressing one reader in particular or an indefinite group, it nonetheless expands towards individually addressing readers as a collective, or as citizens of the book. As one cannot escape the poet's invitation to participate in the aftermath of micro-aggressions that the book recounts, *Citizen* takes her first collection's descriptions of race and immigration to another level of understanding: the second-person pronoun no longer fits its traditional definition as a lyrical feature employed to indirectly address readers. Rather, Rankine resorts to this pronoun as a way to directly call upon readers' efforts to consider and perhaps accept her invitation to enter the poem's dimension and inhabit a space that may feel uncomfortable. As she is aware of the possibility that readers might also withdraw from such a solicitation, she maintains that the distance they place between themselves and the text remains indicative

of their engagement with the collection ("Citizen Speak" 33:32). Hence, their attention is always asked for.

Rankine's career-long approach to the lyric genre has been impressively both experimental *and* traditional. By "pulling the lyric back into its reality," she has increasingly created a dialogue with lyric's enduring tradition and long-standing practice, while also bending lyrics' salient features in order to suit her own poetic needs. She has responded to established uses and functionalities of lyrics' indirect address to reveal the importance of the readers' participation in works of art, in spite of the challenges they are invited to face. Rankine works within the lyric genre only to expand its boundaries, question the dangers certain lyrical features can have on one's imagination, and reveal the inconsistencies of those features with regard to what is happening in the tangible world. Indeed, one foundational difference between traditional descriptions of the lyric and its contemporary outposts can be found in present-day endeavors to unsettle lyric's traditional propensity towards repetition and timelessness. While lyric's ritualistic aspect allows the poem to keep living in time, *Citizen*'s accumulation of micro-aggressive acts testifies to the need to both lay bare and stop ongoing and unconscious racist behavior. In this light, Rankine's poetic project will continue working towards extending existing theories of the lyric by interweaving formal exploration with a pedagogical reading of social standards present both in society and in generic categorizations. Conceiving of the lyric as both a genre where language is organized in a highly conventional fashion and a literary space in which the "intrusion" of extratextual dimensions inevitably alters existing aesthetic frames offers a conceptualization of the lyric genre that ultimately attends to lyrical form as much as to its ethics, while also encouraging aesthetic participation.

In this sense, Culler's articulation of specific formal parameters that may or may not embolden change are formally revisited by Rankine in her own poetic project which is aimed at primarily emphasizing lyric's unique connection to the everyday. Rather than seizing on lyric's claim to indirection and abstraction as topical pre-requisites for the genre, *Citizen* incorporates and negates canonized features in order to *redirect* the tradition of American public poetry, and ultimately transform the type of spectatorship that her readers will themselves perform. By bringing the

lyric back into its realities with *Citizen*, not only has Rankine provided critics with new materials whereby to extend already existing theories of the lyric, but she has also reconceptualized lyric's encompassing scope, reframing its outreach towards universality as a promise for the future rather than as a *sine qua non*.

## Notes

[1] Rankine is not alone in her critical evaluations of the state of the lyric today. Lyric's recent drive towards new interpretative models responds to writers' and scholars' desire for critical openness towards detailed textual analysis. This is reflected in their constant efforts to equip students and researchers with reading criteria that accept the form's versatility, while also staying mindful of standard visions that have contributed to shaping lyric's enduring reading models. *The Lyric Theory Reader* (2014), *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), *Don't Read Poetry* (2019), and *Forms of Poetic Attention* (2020), for example, represent a selection of relevant monographic works which have described and inquired into the "lyric turn" the contemporary is bearing witness to (Comparini 403). By emphasizing poetics as a reading approach, these volumes choose to pay close attention to the aspects that make, and keep making, interpretation(s) possible; they work towards finding new criteria for describing form, and for reinvigorating aesthetic response; they engage in tracing textual networks aimed at opening literature to "the richness and complexity of lived experience" (Arata 700); and they maintain a keen eye towards both artistic conventions and methodological questions.

[2] Culler traces back lyric's description as mimesis to Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which rhetoric and poetics are treated as separate domains: rhetoric referring to the art of persuasion, and poetics to mimesis or representation (*Literary Theory* 70). However, differently from Aristotle's demarcation, when speaking of "poetics," Culler is actually referring to the means through which literary effects take place; which features of lyric language are potentially able to construct very effective discourses. While his account of poetics is closely related to rhetoric, the extravagance he relates to lyric discourse is not applicable to lyric's definition as mimesis. This being said, despite all efforts to reunite lyric genre with a very ancient tradition, Culler confidently distances his critical stance from Aristotle's description of poetry. By foregrounding mimesis, Aristotle "focus[ed] on tragedy, comedy, and epic, and [left] lyric aside" (*Theory of the Lyric* 35).

[3] *Nothing in Nature Is Private* was published by The Cleveland Poetry Center as part of an International Poetry Competition organized by the Center and for which the collection won first place in 1993.

[4] In his work, Culler has remarked more than once on lyric's powerful ability to maintain a very close dialogue with the world it both calls forth and derives from. As long

as readers keep ritualistically re-enacting lyric's language, they will continue to voice a reality formally conjured by the lyric itself, while allowing the lyric to constantly rebuild their connection with the world through specific readers/performers across generations.

[5] This definition of imagination was borrowed from *American Poetics of the 21st Century. The New Poetics*. In her critical essay on Juliana Sphar's poetics, Kimberly Lamm espouses Gayatri Spivak's description of imagination as "the great inbuilt instrument of othering" to endorse the creation of a poetry capable of posing ethical challenges to contemporary historical moments by "resisting and retraining the imagination [...] to see and respond to a planet increasingly split and homogenized by globalization, marked and mapped by capitalist and exploitation" (134). What this description invokes is the necessity of poetry's unordinary language to address and make claims about *this* world as readers are asked to voice the poem's claims in their living present.

[6] For further insight into Culler's description of lyric genre and lyrical devices, see "Apostrophe," "The Language of Lyric," "Why Lyric," and "Extending the Theory of the Lyric." To explore Culler's evolving approach to poetics, compare *Structuralist Poetics* with *Theory of the Lyric*.

## Works Cited

Arata, Stephen. "Form." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 46 (2018): 700-2.

Berlant, Lauren. "Interview with Claudia Rankine." *BOMB Magazine*. 1 October 2014: n. pag. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/claudia-rankine/>.

Chiasson, Dan. "Color Codes." *The New Yorker*. 27 Oct. 2014: n. pag. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/10/27/color-codes>.

"Citizen Speak: A Conversation with Claudia Rankine at ArtsEmerson, Boston – 4 March 2018." *YouTube*, uploaded by HowlRound Theatre Common. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIoK1qd0QA8>.

Comparini, Alberto. "*Forms of Poetic Attention* by Lucy Alford. Review." *Between.* Nov. 2020: 403-9.

Culler, Jonathan. "Apostrophe." *Diacritics* 7 (1997): 59-69.

—. *Literary Theory. A Very Short Introduction*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.

—. "The Language of Lyric." *Thinking Verse* 4 (2014): 160-76.

—. *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2015.

—. "Why Lyric." *PMLA* 123 (2008): 201-6.

Farred, Grant. "*Citizen*: A Lyric Event." *Diacritics* 45 (2017): 94-113.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957.

Kellaway, Kate. "*Citizen*: An American Lyric by Claudia Rankine Review – the Ugly Truth

of Racism." *The Guardian.* 30 Aug. 2015: n. pag. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/30/claudia-rankine-citizen-american-lyric-review>.

Mill, John Stuart. "What Is Poetry?." 1833: n. pag. <http://www.lyriktheorie.uni-wuppertal.de/texte/1833_mill1.html>.

"Poetess Claudia Rankine on Poetry & Microaggressions. *Open Source CBC Radio*. 2016 Aug 30." *YouTube,* uploaded by Adreana Langston. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OYtF7KBrVU&t=960s>.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric.* New York: Penguin, 2014.

—. *Nothing in Nature Is Private*. Cleveland: Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 1994.

—, and Beth Loffreda. "On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary." *Literary Hub.* 9 April 2015: n. pag. <https://lithub.com/on-whiteness-and-the-racial-imaginary/>.

—, and Lisa Sewell, eds. *American Poetics of the 21st Century. The New Poetics*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2007.

—, and Juliana Sphar, eds. *American Women Poets in the 21st Century. Where Lyric Meets Language*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2002.

Rich, Adrienne. *What Is Found There. Notebooks on Poetry and Politics.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993.

Schultz, Kathy Lou. "Before *Citizen*: Lyric Subjectivity and the Language of Experience in Claudia Rankine's *Nothing in Nature is Private.*" *Journal of Foreign Languages and Cultures* 3 (2019): 117-26.

Vendler, Helen. *Souls Says. On Recent Poetry*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1995.

# L’inedito

Carla Francellini

# Introduction

Maria Mazziotti Gillan (Paterson, NJ, 1940), one of the most prolific Italian American poets, has already published more than twenty volumes of and about poetry. The Founder and Executive Director of the Poetry Center at Passaic County Community College in Paterson, NJ, and editor of the Paterson Literary Review, Gillan received the 2014 George Garrett Award for Outstanding Community Service in Literature from the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP), the 2011 Barnes & Noble Writers for Writers Award from Poets & Writers and the 2008 American Book Award for her collection *All That Lies Between Us* (Guernica Editions). Bartle Professor and Professor Emerita of English and Creative Writing at Binghamton University-SUNY, she co-edited some groundbreaking anthologies on ethnicity with her daughter Jennifer – *Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry* (Penguin, 1994), *Identity Lessons: Contemporary Writing About Learning to Be American* (Penguin, 1999), *Growing Up Ethnic in America: Contemporary Fiction About Learning to Be American* (Penguin, 1999), and *Italian-American Writers on New Jersey: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose* (with Edvige Giunta, Rutgers, 2003) – and an essay collection with Susan Amsterdam, *The Poetic Legacy of Whitman, Williams, and Ginsberg* (The Poetry Center Passaic County, 2017). Gillan's artistic production – which in the last two decades came to include her works as a painter – is the most surprising outcome of the interaction between her cultural and emotional legacy as a daughter of southern Italian immigrants and her cultural experience as a second-generation Italian/American woman.

The unpublished poem "What Is This Absence in the Heart?" celebrates her regret as a mother for having lost the emotional bond with her son John, who lives with his family far away from her[1] – "the distance between us can be counted in more than miles." Intensely autobiographical and unique in her literary *corpus*, Gillan's poems for John prove essential

to a complete understanding of her work as they insist on some crucial issues such as separation, absence, isolation, and incommunicability.[2] Even though Joe Weil labeled her work as "normative free verse confessionalism" (80), this poem in four stanzas seems to defy any label. "Pre-aesthetic" and "refreshingly devoid of postmodernist posturing" (73), Gillan's poetry dramatically differs from that of Plath and Sexton – among her favorite women poets – who framed their works in myth and psychology whenever they entered a world that made them feel uncomfortable with emotions. Her words, on the contrary, are most often a reaction to things on an almost physical level, a kind of "poetry rooted in the body" (Dougherty 17). No obscure allusions to other poets, no hints at any metaphysical reading of our society, but a kind of *whispered howl* – vaguely recalling Allen Ginsberg's tones – is the poem's pulse. Unlike her chief mentor, though, Gillan does not defy "the convention, but [performs] at convention's highest levels so as to steal the thunder from those who would exclude her" (Weil 75).

The *silent cry* of a mother facing a solitary failure – a defeat sounding more like a total débâcle than an unconditional surrender on her part – animates these verses. Resorting to an understated elegiac apostrophe to address her son, Gillan adds gravitas and a sense of magic (Francellini 128) to the poem through the use of anaphora and repetition – "So much that is broken or lost, / So much that we can never get back." Moreover, through the "gush," a peculiar "strategy of ecstatic speech [...] far clearer than rhapsody," Gillan "states the obvious [...] with such enthusiasm that the listener or reader is won over not by verbal strategy, but by its absence" (Weil 76). "What is This Absence in the Heart?" is built upon a "gush," since the factual matter of the poem is announced in the first two verses and pours forth in subsidiary sentences in the following stanzas. The syntax of "gushing, of someone getting emotional over a memory" (77), dominates the poem's overt, explicit, and prominent language. Gillan's style eschews the most obscure codes of postmodernist poetry or normative free verse confessionalism out of which, nonetheless, her work draws its structure and emphasis.[3]

Language, moreover, is a means more than an end to her as she speaks "from the standpoint of an immigrant's child," "an outsider" whose perspective is "complicated and, eventually, enriched by having lived a

more or less exemplary American life as an upwardly mobile suburban wife, mother and professional" (74). Part of the complexity of Gillan's poetry lies, in fact, in the process of constructing her voice as an Italian/American woman artist. Acting as the "literary foremother" in Italian/American poetry,[4] Gillan celebrates a world forever lost, crowded with people, sounds, tastes, colors, streets, stories from the past, and funny, heartfelt insights into the future. Underneath such a rich cosmos of feelings and subtle perceptions lies Gillan's unceasing quest for a "place to call home," where her identity – deeply rooted in her *Italian* childhood in Paterson – can be possibly defined.[5] Not *confessionalist* in the crisis sense of Ginsberg, nor a *sentimentalist*, Gillan "is a poet who risks sentiment by forging a poem out of it" (Vallone 53-54). She is "a poet of emotion rather than feeling, and this is almost in opposition to [...] William Carlos Williams, who believed poetry was not the fit vehicle for emotion and that emotion was better rendered in prose" (Weil 74).[6] Her poetry is also "anti-intellectual, [...] highly wise and even shrewd – the sort of honest shrewdness of someone who feels she has battled for every gain and who does not have time for convolution or deception" (75). At the same time, Gillan's production turns out to be highly "subversive," for it is not "what the French critic Roland Barthes termed 'a scriptable text' – aimed toward other aesthetes" – and does not require "the critic as middleman in order to be explicated and 'understood,' or, in the words of Harold Bloom, 'mis-read'" (73).

Most of her poems for John focus on memories in an apparent attempt to go back to the precise moment in time where everything happened, changing the terms of the mother and son relationship, as if returning to the point of trauma and acknowledging it could suggest how to negotiate between past and present. Gillan's fascinating journey into memory – "Memory opens like a hand inside me and, all the secrets I cannot bear to know spill out" ("If I Had the Courage," *Where I Come From* 182-83) – brings the past back into the future, as in the most powerful poem, "Strange," where John appears again as a child and adolescent:

> Strange how some moments remain caught
> in our memory, John at four on his new two-wheeler,
> his grandpa, helping him until John took off and rode away.

> It seems to me he's been riding away ever since,
> first to college, then law school, than with his family
> to Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina and now Dallas,
> but as if it had happened yesterday, I remember
> sitting on the side of his bed the night before
> he started high school, his hand in mine,
> while I found the words to give him courage
> [...]
> this moment was one where I was learning,
> what I'd learn again and again,
> how to let him go.
> (*The Place I Call Home* 44)

The first lesson here is about *things*[7] vanishing quickly, but the second is about learning to let people go. Alternating past and present, Gillan keeps confronting the reader with the process of the corruption of a fundamental relationship. If the first stanza of "What Is This Absence in the Heart?" insists on *grief* and *regret* – "In memory, you still lean into the circle / of my arm, lean your heavy head / against my chest" – the second focuses on some vivid memories of John as a child:

> I read a book to you.
> You are two years old,
> already in your flannel pajamas,
> getting ready to sleep,
> though you will keep on asking for another book and then another.

Another picture of John sitting on the laundry wicker basket, "turning the pages in a book [he] can't read but ha[s] already memorized," brings about a topic very dear to Maria Gillan, her passionate love for books and reading, described as a salvific boat to reach a world of magic and creativity.[8] Resorting to the literary device of the "spotlight" – "a loving, glowing light in which the speaker feels protected and included" (Jennifer Gillan 38) – the poet involves the reader in an atmosphere of fear, love, and sadness lingering in the poem. Through the harsh juxtaposition of past and present scenes, Gillan magnifies the contrast between communion and isolation, dialogue

and chit-chatting, openness and closure in a frame where words are all that matters. An objective correlative of the troubled relationship between mother and son is the telephone, a symbol of the frailty of their connection – "a phone wire the only tentative cord left between us" ("Poem to John," in *What Blooms in Winter* 275). This ever-occurring element – whose cord alludes to the umbilical cord – is the only means through which Gillan can "auscultate," in the literal meaning of "examine by listening," her son's "tight" voice, its "tense tone" and "heaviness [...], weighing [him] down as though [he] were carrying stones in [his] pocket." No further intrusion into her son's emotional world is allowed, but a few minutes in a phone call are enough for her to perceive his unhappiness, distress, and pain. In another poem, "Letter to My Son," a younger version of the poet appears next to John: "I remember / you as a little boy, your legs chunky, / your eyes gray and dreamy as a Turner / landscape..."; "A figure moves toward you, / a younger version of myself. / She holds your hand, You speak" (*What We Pass On* 17). The juxtaposition of past and present – "You, miles away, have grown into a man / I can be proud of" – imbues life into the jarringly painful contrast, highlighted by some keywords often occurring in Gillan's poems for John: "miles away," "phone call," but also the verb "struggle" reveal her efforts to find the right words to say and mark the feeling of irredeemable loss, made even stronger by the lack of any physical contact between mother and son. Gillan therefore establishes a connection between "the act of speaking" and "the physical contact" between mother and child. By writing, "She holds your hand, You speak," Gillan elicits the fact that, by "holding" his mother's hand, John "holds on" – another idiom of phone conversations – to a salvific dialogue with the only woman who can "find the words to erase [his] sorrow" ("What Is This Absence in the Heart?").[9] Locked in a prison of *mute* dialogue, on the contrary, he grows more and more convinced of the inanity of words to fill the gap between him and his mother.[10] The magic circle where they both used to be safe – "We are unchanged, moving / in our accustomed circle;" "I'm safe in a circle of love" ("Letter to My Son," *What We Pass On* 17); "In memory, you still lean into the circle of my arm" ("Awakening," 23) – seems lost in a distant time in the past.[11] Mother and son also share a common need to take care of the

people they love, almost a neurotic impulse pooling them together, and the poem concludes on this fundamental element:

> I can't resist taking care
> of the world,
> I who find myself
> giving unasked for advice
> like my mother,
> […]
> … my son
> who, though he doesn't know it
> now, is me, the one
> who takes care of everyone,
> the one his family goes to
> for advice and comfort,
> […]
> my son whom I so annoy,
> my son who is just like me,
> though he would deny it
> and refuses to recognize
> when he speaks sometimes
> it is my voice he hears.[12]
> ("When I Speak Sometimes," *The Place I Call Home* 69-70)

Lack of communication and chit-chatting take the place of a frank, open dialogue in "What Is This Absence in The Heart?" ("Your voice tells me how you are, / though you no longer tell me"), and separation wins over communion. The looming presence of what is forever lost or broken leaves the poet at the mercy of fear, anxiety and a strong desire not to keep holding on to the slender cord linking her to John. An invisible "screen" separates mother and son – "when you call, / I feel I'm speaking to a person / hidden behind a screen" ("Letter to My Son," *What We Pass On* 17) – a wall made up of bricks of silence and misunderstanding, the last act of their problematic relationship.

A dramatic poem, "My Son, the Lawyer Quotes Dylan Thomas to Give Me Courage," from Gillan's recent collection *When the Stars Were Still*

*Visible* (2021), seems to turn the whole situation around. Here the poet is "brought low" by a bad fall: "I lose my balance and fall, / smashing my nose against the hardwood floor. / I slip in a huge puddle of blood, / try to stand up but my feet keep sliding" (74-75). Despite this sudden and depressing "recognition of frailty," she still drives four-hours to Binghamton, teaches her "class, looking battle-scarred," and, only then, starts coming to terms with her "son who used to tell {her}" to "cut back and give up poetry," proving once again "that he did not understand anything about" her (74). Surprised and "shocked / to hear defeat," in the words of his mother, "always optimistic about everything / even in the middle of calamity," John seems to find his own voice and addresses her, speaking from the depths of his heart: "How many women your age have a life they love, / work they love doing?" Is it the terrific end of a long-lasting, chilling silence, or a gentle prelude to what John will do next? "Later," – we read in the poem – John sends his mother a quote from Dylan Thomas: "Do not go gentle into that good night, / Old age should burn and rave at close of days; / Rage, rage against the dying of the light" (74-75). As we keep these lines in mind – "I repeat the lines over and over to myself, / grateful to this son I was sure didn't understand anything about me" (75) – we cannot help thinking that poetry – "Words {sparkling} like stars" ("My Mother Used to Wash My Hair," *The Place I Call Home* 14) – has once again manifested its immense power "to turn straw into gold" and break down the walls of isolation, changing a mute dialogue into a few powerful words. Upsetting the old painful balance, John lets his mother enter his own "magic circle," a place of perfect beauty where everything lost can be found again and starts "to fix what is broken in" her.

## Notes

[1] "My son, whom I cannot talk to, my son, who seems so distant from me" ("If I Had the Courage," *What We Pass On* 182). Interestingly enough, Gillan experienced something very similar in her youth: "The world I was constructing for myself was so different from the world my mother had known" ("Carlton Fredericks and My Mother" 264).

[2] "Letter to My Son," "Poem to John: Freshman Year, Drew University, 1983," "The Leavetaking," "My Son, That Gray-Eyed Dreamer," "In the Pages of a Photo Album,"

"Yesterday," "Poem to John," "What I Can't Face About Someone I Love," "Is This the Way It Is Between Mothers and Sons" (*What We Pass On* 17, 36, 88, 131, 180, 184-85, 274-76, 401-02, 403-04). Some short proses – "My Son Tells Me Not to Wear My Poet's Clothes," "If I Had the Courage, I'd Ask My Children What They Remember About Me When They Were Growing Up," "In My Family," "How to Turn a Phone Call into a Disaster" (*What We Pass On* 120, 182-83, 299, 328-29) – deal with the problematic mother/son relationship.

[3] "I think of my own poems, the ones I wrote thirty years ago which suffered from the deliberately obscure Greek god reference syndrome, and the ones I write today that are as direct and honest and plain as I can make them" (Gillan, *Writing Poetry* 51). For another example of "gush" see also "Blessed" (*Italian Women in Black Dresses* 11).

[4] "Maria Gillan has been an influence on and a supporter of Rachel Guido De Vries, Maria Russo Demetrick, Maria Famà, Denise Leto, Mary Ann Mannino, Vittoria Repetto, Mary Jo Bona, and Jana Patriarc;" "Her modus operandi is fundamentally collaborative. Poets like Rose Romano demonstrate a connection with Gillan in poetic style and editing projects, such as Romano's chapbook series and anthology *La Bella Figura*, which features Gillan's most famous poem, 'Public School no.18: Paterson, New Jersey,' as its first epigraph" (Bona 257, 161).

[5] Gillan's perception of having grown up in *Italy* reflects in her feeling that she "was always Italian" (Dougherty 16).

[6] "Of poetry, Ginsberg writes: 'Poetry is not an expression of the party line. It's that time of night, lying in bed, thinking what you really think, making the private world public, that's what the poet does'" (Weil 79).

[7] See Gillan's "My Father's Tuba Disappeared," and "The Cedar Keepsake Box" (*The Place I Call Home* 33, 45).

[8] "Books were the boats that carried me away from the skin / I was born in" (*The Place I Call Home* 14). In "Why I Loved the Library" (*What Blooms in Winter* 17) Gillan recalls the feeling of "stepping into another land, / one full of quiet, the soft muted colors / of the book covers, the well-worn pages, the hours in the children's section, the chairs the perfect / size for me." Similarly, John seems to merge himself in books in this unpublished poem.

[9] "Words that offer comfort stuck like a fishbone in my throat" ("Poem to John," *What We Pass On* 275).

[10] In *Writing Poetry to Save Your Life,* Gillan focuses more on the writing process than the writing craft.

[11] See also "Magic Circle" (*Italian Women in Black Dresses* 38) where Gillan encloses the women of her family into an enchanted ring to keep them and their stories safe from the assault of time.

[12] "My son John wants to think he is not like us. […] He takes everything seriously. […] I know that even my son, who wants to think he is not like our family, is driven as we are, to keep on going, no matter what" ("In My Family," *What We Pass On* 209).

## Works Cited

Bona, Mary Jo. *By the Breath of Their Mouths: Narrative of Resistance in Italian America.* New York: SUNY Press, 2010.

Dougherty, Sean Thomas, ed. *Maria Mazziotti Gillan: Essays on Her Works*. Toronto: Guernica, 2007.

Francellini, Carla. "A Home in Poetry: Maria Mazziotti Gillan." *The Poetic Legacy of Whitman, Williams, and Ginsberg.* Eds. Maria Mazziotti Gillan and Susan Amsterdam. Paterson: The Poetry Center Passaic County, 2017. 127-149.

Gillan, Jennifer. "Spotlight. Two Daughters, One Voice." *Maria Mazziotti Gillan: Essays on Her Works*. Ed. Sean Thomas Dougherty. Toronto: Guernica, 2007. 31-50.

Gillan, Maria Mazziotti. "Carlton Fredericks and My Mother." *Growing up Ethnic in America: Contemporary Fiction About Learning to Be American*. Eds. Jennifer Gillan and Maria Mazziotti Gillan. New York: Penguin, 1999. 260-67. It. trans. "Carlton Fredericks e mia madre." *Uè Paisà: Racconti dall'identità italoamericana*. Ed. Carla Francellini. Lecce: Manni, 2012. 115-22.

—. *Italian Women in Black Dresses*. Toronto: Guernica, 2002.

—. *The Place I Call Home*. New York: NYQ Books, 2012.

—. *Things My Mother Told Me*. Toronto: Guernica, 1999.

—. *What Blooms in Winter.* New York: NYQ Books, 2016.

—. *What We Pass On: Collected Poems 1980-2009.* Toronto: Guernica, 2010.

—. *Where I Come From. Selected and New Poems.* Toronto: Guernica, 1995.

—. "Why I Took Back My Name." *Voices in Italian Americana* 9 (1998): 31-33.

—. *Writing Poetry to Save Your Life: How to Find the Courage to Tell Your Stories*. Toronto: Guernica, 2013.

—, and Jennifer Gillan, eds. *Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry*. New York: Penguin, 1994.

—, and Jennifer Gillan, eds. *Growing Up Ethnic in America: Contemporary Fiction About Learning to Be American*. New York: Penguin, 1999.

—, and Jennifer Gillan, eds. *Identity Lessons: Contemporary Writing About Learning to Be American.* New York: Penguin, 1999.

—, Jennifer Gillan, and Edvige Giunta, eds. *Italian-American Writers on New Jersey: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2003.

—, and Susan Amsterdam, eds. *The Poetic Legacy of Whitman, Williams, and Ginsberg.* Paterson: The Poetry Center at Passaic County, 2017.

Hutcheon, Linda. "Crypto-ethnicity." *PMLA* 113 (January 1998): 28-33.

Vallone, Antonio. "(Re)-claiming the Hyphen: The Italian-American Poetry of Maria Mazziotti Gillan." *Maria Mazziotti Gillan: Essays on Her Works*. Ed. Sean Thomas Dougherty. Toronto: Guernica, 2007. 54-56.

Weil, Joe. "The Whole Peach: Reading the Poems of Maria Mazziotti Gillan." *Maria Mazziotti Gillan: Essays on Her Works*. Ed. Sean Thomas Dougherty. Toronto: Guernica, 2007. 73-83.

Maria Mazziotti Gillan

# "What Is This Absence in the Heart?"

So much that is broken or lost,
so much that we can never get back.
In memory, you still lean into the circle
of my arm, lean your heavy head
against my chest.

I read a book to you. You are two years old,
already in your flannel pajamas, getting ready to sleep,
though you will keep on asking for another book
and then another. During the day you sit in the wicker
clothes basket playing with your Matchbox cars
or turning the pages in a book which you can't read
but have already memorized.

So many hours between then and now.
So much that is broken or lost.
Your voice on the phone tells me how you are,
though you no longer tell me.

We are so alike, you and I, that I know
the sound of your voice when you're unhappy,
the tightness in it, the tense tone –
the heaviness of it, weighing you down
as though you were carrying stones in your pocket,
and how it leaves me afraid for you, leaves me
struggling to find the words to erase your sorrow.

I wish I could carry us both back to those days
when I held you in my arms and where there was

always something I could do to help you and not like now
when the distance between us can be counted
in more than miles. We both know
you need to take care of everyone,
to fix what is broken in those you love,
in this way we are alike, and that is the one thing
you cannot bear to know.

# "Che cos'è questa assenza nel cuore?"

Traduzione italiana di Carla Francellini

Quanto si è spezzato o perso,
quante cose non torneranno più.
Nel ricordo, ti appoggi ancora alla curva
del mio braccio, poggi la testa tua pesante
contro il mio petto.

Ti leggo un libro. Hai due anni,
nel pigiama di flanella, pronto per dormire,
e mi chiedi un libro e un altro e
un altro ancora. Di giorno siedi nel cesto
di vimini della biancheria a giocare con le macchinine Matchbox
o a sfogliare le pagine di un libro che non sai leggere
ma sai già a memoria.

Quante ore tra quei giorni e adesso.
Quanto si è spezzato o perso.
La tua voce al telefono mi dice come stai,
ma tu non me lo dici più.

Siamo così simili io e te, che riconosco
il suono della tua voce quando sei infelice,
il timbro stizzito, il tono teso –
pesante, che ti trascina giù
come se avessi le tasche piene di sassi,[1]
e mi lascia così in pena per te, mi lascia a cercare le parole
per cancellare il tuo dolore.

Vorrei tornare indietro con te a quei giorni,
quando ti tenevo tra le braccia e sapevo

sempre come aiutarti e non come adesso
che la distanza tra noi non si calcola più
solo in miglia. Devi sempre prenderti cura di tutti,
lo sappiamo entrambi,
aggiustare quel che si spezza in quelli che ami,
in questo siamo simili io e te,
e questo tu non lo vuoi sapere.

## Notes

[1] A recurring element in Sylvia Plath's poetry, the stones appear in many other Gillan's poems: "This is a safe place we've come to, / a place where all our scars can be revealed, / a place where we can put down our sorrow/ like a basket full of *stone*" ("Here in This Gray Room," *The Place I Call Home* 79); "I struggle as if I were speaking to a person/ I barely know, the conversation so heavy / it is a sack of *stone*…" ("In the Pages of a Photo Album," *What We Pass On* 180).

# Abtracts

**Stefano Luconi, "The Least Worst Place": Guantánamo in the US "War on Terror"**

"The least worst place" in the world to hold "unlawful combatants," in Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld's words, the military detention camp within the US naval base at Guantánamo Bay stands out as the epitome for the primacy of national security over due process, habeas corpus, and the safeguard of human rights in Washington's "War on Terror." Since late 2001, in the eyes of the federal administration, GITMO has enjoyed the double benefit of being under US jurisdiction but in a foreign country, which has enabled Washington's personnel to be in control but has also allegedly exempted them from applying US laws. As such, though not without precedents, the existence of GITMO, along with the related indefinite confinement without trial and resort to torture of prisoners, points to the blatant inconsistency between, on the one hand, the US longing for global leadership in the promotion of freedom and the enforcement of the rule of law and, on the other, Washington's failure to protect these values in times of national emergency. Drawing mainly upon the rulings by the US Supreme Court on previous and coeval cases, this article reconstructs how jurisprudence initially supported Washington's arrogant and go-it-alone style in waging the "War on Terror" by crushing the Guantánamo inmates' most basic rights, too. It also highlights how political expediency has subsequently interfered with the slow inroads of due process and habeas corpus into GITMO.

**Alessandra Calanchi, Out of Exception, Into Emergency: Fast-forward to Earth Zero**

Inevitably interconnected with the "Great Acceleration" of the Anthropocene, space race has played a substantial role in the reassessment of humankind's identity as interplanetary. The growing perception of new possible frontiers beyond the Earth's borders, whether on the Moon or on Mars, has opened an era of neo-colonial projects involving language(s),

culture(s), and media. More than in Elon Musk's and Robert Zubrin's recent proclamations, however, my article focuses on the durable effect of the myth of nation building on the quest for extraterrestrial territories. It is a fact that the current debate on Terraforming and manned expeditions frequently refers to Pilgrims, pioneers, transplantation, Dream, and Destiny. What is almost completely absent, on the other hand, is the awareness that counter-narrations existed since the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century. As early as 1890, in *Mars as the Abode of Life*, astronomer Percival Lowell insisted that extraordinary measures be urgently taken to keep the Earth from meeting the same destiny as the red planet – that is, to be reduced to a wasteland. Long before climate change, globalization, and world pandemics, Lowell was fully aware that neither our planet nor America were *exceptional* sites: on the contrary, they were places on the verge of an unprecedented and irrevocable state of *emergency*. This essay deals with such counter-narrations and with their controversial legacy.

**Salvatore Proietti, The Provisional Utopia and the State of Exception: On *Ceremony* and *The Stand***

Both written in the late 1970s, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Stephen King's *The Stand* participated in the contemporary revision of the notion of utopia highlighted by critics such as Fredric Jameson, Tom Moylan, and Darko Suvin. I argue that in both novels this revision occurs because they stage, in different ways, a refusal of solutions akin to Schmitt's and Agamben's state of exception, shown as inadequate to the task of rebuilding a sense of community in the aftermath of radical crises. Silko's 1977 landmark in Native American fiction is the story of WW2 veteran Tayo who turns to the ceremonies of his people's oral culture in his search for healing, a way out of his post-traumatic stress, presented as a personal analogue to the drought affecting his Laguna Pueblo reservation. In the shadow of white people's wars, including nuclear experiments, the native tradition must meet forms of renewal, capable of rejecting the threat of downward spirals of individual and collective counter-violence. King's 1978 post-apocalyptic novel juxtaposes genres, from realism to science fiction and religious fantasy. In the aftermath of disasters that include deindustrialization, a global pandemic spawned by military research, and the Bomb, *The Stand* gathers a polyphony of viewpoints, with a sophisticated encyclopedia of cultural allusions, from

literature to rock music, to approach and challenge many facets of US national self-confidence, from expansionist rhetoric to racial conflicts, self-consciously aimed at contesting survivalist rhetorics of emergency. Both novels include a *pars construens*, in which survivors to literal and cultural world-shattering catastrophes try to imagine their future as *novum*, in contrast to scenarios of extraordinary measures breaching rules of law and human dignity, a reconstruction presented as inseparable from the ecosphere's healing, and above all as provisional – its self-doubt the evidence of a lasting awareness, grounds for utopian hope.

**Ali Dehdarirad, "The Other Side of the Ditch": (De)Constructing Crisis in William Vollmann's *Imperial* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road***

Although in different ways, William Vollmann's *Imperial* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* engage with environmental and societal problems. Representing a state of ecological crisis, among other things, they indicate the fragility of human beings in the world. Against the backdrop of their shared, though not similar, conceptualization of climate issues, the article examines how these books depict the USA as an ongoing site of emergency through an ecocritical approach. More broadly, I analyze how the economic and political apparatus have historically exploited America's natural resources for capitalist profiteering, most often by recourse to states of emergency. *Imperial* depicts Southern California as a dystopian wasteland as well as a haven of possibility. Imperial County's arbitrary border with Mexico delineates the violent imposition of human will on the natural territory for economic and political reasons. At the same time, it represents hope for Mexican immigrants. Vollmann's Imperial County shows immigration as a long-lasting, neglected issue of concern at the US-Mexico border. *The Road* offers a post-apocalyptic vison of the world where natural resources are exhausted. The unfolding of the (natural) catastrophe has led the main characters, a man and his son, to migrate across the USA. Like in *Imperial*, migration seems to promise a better condition of life. Nevertheless, the gray sea at the end of the journey suggests "a world unheard of." By providing such descriptions of the American landscape, these books delve into the anxiety of living in an uncertain world while challenging the US system of socio-political governance.

**Cinzia Schiavini, Constructing and Contesting the State(s) of Exception: Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* and the American Transnational Novel**

The article investigates how the state(s) of exception generated by 9/11 events, post-national dreams and not-so-postnational realities are at play in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008). Constructed as a series of flashbacks from the narrative present of 2006 in London, the story is told from the perspective of the Dutch-born equities analyst Hans van der Broek, who, after moving to New York in 1998, experiences the social and psychological consequences of 9/11 and becomes emotionally estranged from his wife Rachel (who decides to return to England with their infant son). He seeks refuge and companionship in the immigrant world of American cricket and in his friendship with Chuck Ramkissoon, an Indo-Trinidadian immigrant, entrepreneur and small-time gangster, whose dream of building the nation's first multicultural cricket park ends with the recovery of his body in a canal in Brooklyn. With a special focus on the self-reflexive dimension of the novel, the article explores the dialectics between the 9/11 anxieties and the endless promises of the American Dream, and in particular the state of emergency/exception as an identitarian mode of representation and the processes of memorialization and (re)memory it engenders.

**Angelo Arminio, An Alternate History of the Warring States: Matt Gallagher's *Empire City* and Global War in a State of Exception**

Matt Gallagher's 2020 novel *Empire City* features an alternate history where the USA, having emerged victorious in Vietnam, have gone on to wage an endless war in the Mediterranean while citizens live in a militaristic police state. This article argues that Gallagher's novel moves between alternate history and superhero fiction to highlight the consequences of an indiscriminate use of executive power through the imposition of a perpetual state of exception – a pervasive feature of western democracies according to Giorgio Agamben. This alarming rupture between the government, citizens, and soldiers exposes an authoritarian threat that, unlike in typical alternate histories, is not tied to a foreign menace or ideology. Rather, it originates within the American democratic state, where the alienating absence of truly democratic decisions on military operations results in a sharp divide between civilians and service members, raising questions

about the motives of the US imperialist practices. In this context, the story reads like a cautionary tale that responds to a perceived state of emergency of American democracy and its declining global hegemony.

**Stefano Franceschini, A "Maze of Stone-shadowed Twilight": The Disorienting Nightmarescape of H. P. Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness***

This article analyzes H. P. Lovecraft's only novel *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), the author's most representative endeavor of what I would refer to as "neosupernatural parascientific fiction" – a literary mode defined by the efficacious interplay of (dreadful) unnatural phenomena and science-oriented veracity. Interrogating the persistent oscillation between linguistic overdescription and referential ambiguity in Lovecraft's longest story, while assessing its evident but idiosyncratic indebtedness to E. A. Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1837), I argue that *At the Mountains of Madness* dwells on conceptual, chronospatial as well as textual complexity to establish a connection between form, content and readerly experience. I turn to Graham Harman's weird realism theory and Joseph Frank's seminal notion of literary spatiality to posit that the story's thematic apparatus, labyrinthine discourse, and intertextual dynamics concur to set up a trap into which readers are lured, in order to elicit in them a growing sense of disorientation.

**Livia Bellardini, Assessing a Poetics of the Lyric with Claudia Rankine and Jonathan Culler**

From the publication of her first poetry collection *Nothing in Nature Is Private* (1994) to the successful reception of *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) twenty years later, Claudia Rankine has both engaged with established models of the lyric genre and altered the genre's parameters to suit her own ethical purposes. Mainly drawing on Jonathan Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), I argue that by creating a dialogue between his approach to the lyric form and lyric reading, and Rankine's thrust towards formal experimentation, we can fully appreciate the surprising impact that the lyric has on readers. Moreover, we can trace comparisons between poems from different times and identify their foundational points of contact. In this light, the attention both Culler and Rankine give to the potential social

role of poetics derives from their shared trust in the powerfully intriguing language of lyric to broaden one's imagination. However, whereas Culler identifies the capacity of the lyric to inform the imagination with its use of unordinary language and indirectionality, Rankine's Citizen fulfills its imaginative endeavor by directly calling upon the readers' participation in the text.

# Notes on Contributors

# Notes on Contributors

Angelo Arminio is a PhD student at the Sapienza Università di Roma and at the University of Silesia in Katowice. He earned both his BA and MA at Sapienza, with periods of study abroad at the University of York and at the Freie Universität Berlin. His current research focuses on the evolution of the fictional narratives of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, exploring questions of authority, memory, and the use of fictionality as a rhetorical tool. His research interests include contemporary narratives of war, postmodern and contemporary fiction, autofiction, and postclassical narratology.

Livia Bellardini is a PhD student in Anglo-American Literature at the University of Roma Tre. Her project focuses on the dialogue between the poetry of Adrienne Rich and Claudia Rankine, with the aim of revisiting the connection between poetic temporalities and extra-textual historical times, and expanding the boundaries of both lived experience and criticism. Her interests range from lyric studies, feminist writing and poetics, to Caribbean notions of relationality. Her MA thesis – *Reconsidering the Lyric in a Quest for Inclusivity: Claudia Rankine's* Nothing in Nature Is Private – was awarded the 2021 Agostino Lombardo prize from the Associazione Italiana di Studi Nord-Americani (AISNA), of which she is a member. More recently, she was awarded a Dissertation Grant from the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University.

Alessandra Calanchi is professor of Anglo-American Literature and Culture at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo, Italy. One of her fields of research is the controversial representation of planet Mars in literature and film. Her publications in this area include the volume *Marziani a stelle e strisce* (2019) and the essays "'American Mars-scapes': Le rappresentazioni letterarie dei paesaggi di Marte prima, durante e dopo Percival Lowell," "An Eco-Critical Cultural Approach to Mars Colonization," "Eco-men from the Outer Space? Mars and Utopian Masculinities in the *fin-de-siècle*,"

"La spettacolarizzazione del *Terraforming*: Per un'ecologia delle migrazioni su Marte," "*The machine in the desert? The Martian* e il pianeta rosso," and "An Interplanetary Transplantation, or, Reloading the Anthropocene on the Red Planet." In 2020 she was a speaker at the 23rd Mars Society International Teleconvention, "Rising Together", with a paper entitled "A Cultural and Ecological Approach to Mars Colonization."

LORENA CARBONARA is Associate Professor of English Language and Translation at the Department of Human Studies, University of Calabria. She is the current coordinator of the transnational research group *S/murare il Mediterraneo* and a member of the a®tivist network *VoxFem: Unearthing the Female Voice* and of the American Studies research group *Passaggio a Nord Ovest*. She is also a member of the AISCLI (Associazione Italiana Studi Culture e Letterature di Lingua Inglese) Board and she serves on the Editorial Board of the journal *Iperstoria*. She was the recipient of a grant by the US Mission in Italy to teach Culture letterarie e visuali anglo-americane at the University of Bari (2018-2019). In 2020 she collaborated on the project *Still Here: A past to Present Insight of Native American People and culture* with Italian photographer Carlotta Cardana and Húkpapa Lakóta artist Danielle SeeWalker. She has published extensively in several national and international journals on Native American autobiography, Native American cinema, the Third World women writers community, a®tivism across the US/Mexico border and across the Mediterranean, and English as *Lingua Franca* in migration contexts.

ALI DEHDARIRAD currently teaches American literature and culture at the Sapienza University of Rome, where he obtained his PhD in English-language Literatures. The title of his doctoral dissertation was *"The Map is Not the Territory": A Spatial Reading of Pynchon's California Trilogy*. He has published critical essays on the works of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Paul Auster. His main research interests include postmodernist and contemporary American literature, urban humanities, geocriticism, California studies, and environmental literary criticism.

CARLA FRANCELLINI teaches American Literature and Literary Translation at the University of Siena. Her research focuses, among other interests, on

Italian/American literature and translation studies. She is the author of Visible/Invisible*: Incursioni nella narrativa italiana/americana contemporanea* (2018) and co-editor with Sabrina Vellucci of *Re-Mapping Italian America. Places, Cultures, Identities* (2018). She also edited *Uè Paisà: Racconti dall'identità italoamericana* (2012), Women in Translation*: Donne in traduzione* (2014), and *Miraggi italiani* (2019). The recipient with Sabrina Vellucci of the 2022 Romeyne Robert and Uguccione Sorbello Fellowship, she is also the Director of the book series Miraggi for the publishing house Artemide, entirely devoted to publishing Italian/American literary works, criticism, and translation. She also published extensively on Melville, Steinbeck, and the modernist novel.

Stefano Franceschini is a PhD student at Roma Tre University. His research project – *"What Does That* Tune *Mean?": Phonosemiosis and Heteromediality in Richard Powers's Novels* – focuses on the interplay between literature, sound and music in Richard Powers's fiction. AISNA awarded him the 2021 edition of the Caterina Gullì prize for his MA dissertation on H. P. Lovecraft's cosmicist tales, *A New Supernatural Literature: Cosmic Art and Parascience in H. P. Lovecraft's Fiction*. He is currently member of AISNA and of the scientific committee of the Center for American Studies. He has written on, besides Richard Powers, popular music, American urban Gothic and Ambrose Bierce. His research interests include intermediality, intertextuality, Gothic and weird fiction, and musical semiotics.

Stefano Luconi teaches US history at the University of Padua. His research interests focus primarily on US-Italian relations as well as on Italian migration to the United States. His publications include *From Paesani to White Ethnics: The Italian Experience in Philadelphia* (2001), *The Italian-American Vote in Providence, Rhode Island, 1916-1948* (2004), *La "nazione indispensabile": Storia degli Stati Uniti dalle origini a Trump* (2020), and *L'anima nera degli Stati Uniti: Gli afro-americani dalla schiavitù a* Black Lives Matter (2022). He also edited, with Mario Varricchio, *Lontane da casa: Donne italiane e diaspora globale dall'inizio del Novecento a oggi* (2015) and, with Simone Battiston and Marco Valbruzzi, *Cittadini oltre confine: Storia, opinioni e rappresentanza degli italiani all'estero* (2022).

Salvatore Proietti teaches Anglo-American Literatures at the University of Calabria. His main areas of research include utopian and science fiction, popular culture, the early republican period, Henry David Thoreau, and Mark Twain. He is the author of *Storie di fondazione: Letteratura e nazione negli Stati Uniti post-rivoluzionari* (2002) and *Hippies: Le culture della controcultura* (2nd ed. 2008), of articles in volumes and journals including Ácoma, *Leviathan* and *Science Fiction Studies*, and of numerous translations.

Cinzia Schiavini is Associate Professor of American Literature at the Università degli Studi di Milano. She is the author of *Strade d'America: L'autobiografia di viaggio statunitense contemporanea* (2011) and *Leggere Twain* (2014), and has published essays on nineteenth-century American literature (Herman Melville, Mark Twain), nature and travel writing, and life writing (Willliam Least Heat-Moon, Jonathan Raban, David Foster Wallace). Her current research is focused on contemporary Arab-American theatre and culture, and the 9/11 novel and its transnational turn.

Paola Zaccaria was Professor of Anglo-American Literary and Visual Cultures at the University of Bari until 2019. She is an activist in human rights and gender issues, co-founder and President (2000-2003) of the Italian Society of Literary Women (SIL), founder of the Gender Archives at the University of Bari, member of the scientific boards and contributor of various national and international journals. She has lectured in Spain, France, Greece, Great Britain, Colombia, Romania, Turkey, Norway, Malta and the USA. Her research interests are Border and Diaspora Studies, Visual Studies, Translations/Transpositions/Transcodifications, Decolonial Epistemology, Border Critical Chinking, Geocriticism, twentieth-century Anglo-American avant-gardes, Emily Dickinson's poetry, Chican@, African-american and Caribbean Literatures, Artivisms, and Feminist/Gender/Migration and Race Studies. She has been Visiting scholar at CUNY-New York, Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Austin, and Santa Barbara. In 2009 she created the international project *Un/Walling the Mediterranean: Local, National and Trans-Border Artivist Practices for a Poetics and Politics of Hospitality and Mobility*. In 2022 she published the new Italian translation of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*/La Frontera.