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Mapping the Contemporary US Novel: Theories, Forms and Themes

Pia Masiero and Virginia Pignagnoli*

Introduction: A Vocabulary of Reclaim

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Cinzia Schiavini

Questioning the Borders of Contemporary US Fiction: H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*, 9/11 and the American Novel

We must understand how "America" is a relational, comparative concept, how it changes shape in relation to competing claims to that name and by creating demonic others, drawn proportions as mythical and monolithic as the idea of America itself.
(Amy Kaplan, "Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today")

{T}he hybrid is the only space in which the location of cultures and the bearing witness to trauma can really occur. These fictions 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, as well as 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.
(Richard Gray, *After the Fall*)

One of the many consequences and effects of the events of 9/11 has been the redefinition of the dialectics between outer and inner spaces, cultures and identities; a redefinition that has inevitably affected fictional worlds as well, as Amy Kaplan's advocacy for a reconceptualization of national identity in American Studies (whereby the United States and Americanness are treated as relational, transnational concepts) and Richard Gray's comment on the failure of many American mainstream novels to come up with an adequate answer to the crisis underline.

What is American and who is American have been very difficult to determine in a globalized world, with the US as both agent and object of globalization. The forms of deterritorialization of American culture are phenomena that have been investigated for at least two decades, both in terms of influence and dissemination on the one hand, and reaction and counteraction on the other. As Paul Giles has pointed out, "American literature is not a natural phenomenon based on national affiliation, nor a narrative whose teleology is directed inexorably toward emancipation, but a field whose perimeters expand and contract in accordance with the maps it projects and the particular atlas it is enclosed by" (277).

The blurred zones created by US deterritorialization have also been fruitfully investigated by postcolonial and world studies, especially regarding the effects of the US "imperiality", as Revathi Krishnavamy defines it (12), that has for a century generated its own forms of economic and cultural influence, and often overlaps with postcolonialism. So-called "post-migratory literature" in particular (Boehmer 250), one of the corollaries of this imperiality, questions and problematizes migrancy, reframing it in global dynamics, particularly after 9/11. As Ahmed Gamal explains,

> the "post" therefore represents an oppositional rhetoric of emerging voices which are profoundly contestatory of the hierarchy of binaristic essentialism. In response to the post-9/11 nostalgic discourse of the dominant which excludes difference and heterogeneity as terror or impurity, post-migratory literature offers textual models of hybridization and dialogic exchange as well as resistance and liberation. (598)[1]

In the investigation of the cultural hybridization and deterritorialization of American culture and literature, of post-migratory phenomena, and of the frictions and reactions generated by this encounter,[2] forms of cultural and literary affiliation to US literature that transcend political status and/or geographical location should be taken into account, as Michael Rothberg suggested in reply to Gray's comments on a US situated "between cultures." Whereas Gray, in his search for literary narratives that could reframe American experience after 9/11, looked mostly, although

not exclusively, at the plurality *within* US borders and at the processes of dislocation and relocation of individuals and cultures within the Western World, Rothberg suggested an investigation of the "fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship [...] a centrifugal mapping that charts the outward movement of American power. The most difficult thing for citizens of the US empire to grasp is not the internal difference of their motley multi-culture, but the prosthetic reach of that empire into other worlds" (154). As Rothberg argues, "[w]hat we need from the 9/11 novels are cognitive maps that imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others" (157-58). Can the American novel be reconfigured on a global scale not only in terms of reception, but of creation as well? To put it in botanical terms, does the American novel germinate where American culture has been sowed, or can it sprout also where the winds (of the soft or hard power) have scattered its seeds?

The inclusion of specific works in the American literary field according to factors that transcend the author's political and geographical belonging is a tendency shared by various scholars dealing with specific issues or sub-genres of the New American Novel. As Caren Irr states in her exploration of the twenty-first century "geopolitical novel" (that is, contemporary US novels engaging with political issues that transcend the domestic dimension),

> more important than biographical markers for my purposes is an explicit effort to address a North American audience. In general, I view internal evidence such as voice, style, and narrative frame as more reliable indicators of a particular work's having an American reference point than authorial biography. Inclusion in "US fiction" is a matter of genre. It is the use and revision of historically American narratives for making sense of the rest of the world that marks individual works as examples of "US fiction." These genre commitments easily coexist with participation in other national or regional traditions as well. (11)

What I suggest here is that, due to the processes of cultural deterritorialization on the one hand and increasingly transient and hybrid forms of location (and relocation), displacement and migration on the other, works by "traditional" immigrant authors should now be joined by those

by transnational writers whose geographical positionality is less definable, but who are nevertheless repositories of a "performative Americanness" originating both from their temporary first-hand experience as migrants/expatriates and from the effects of American cultural dissemination in their home countries – even in those where the use of both soft and hard power has generated over time a contested terrain of affiliation and disaffiliation, such as in the Arab and the Muslim worlds.

From post-Colonial to neo-Imperial: Pakistani Writing and 9/11

In the investigation of the borders of "America at large" and the dialectics between the US and elsewhere, Pakistan is certainly a peculiar arena of dissemination and conflict. A multilingual and multicultural country created on the basis of a specific religious identity, Pakistan has always been a theater of tensions – from the trauma of the Partition from India to the fractures created by geopolitics and war scenarios in nearby countries. These pluralities and instabilities have become the themes of most Pakistani fiction, with "the emergent dialectical narratives of homecoming and leave-taking as founding metaphors in the modern alternative histories of the nation" and "the proliferation of the liminal space of an expansive South Asian identity and its consequent affiliation with a transnational sensibility resulting from one of the world's largest diasporas" (Ghamal 599). However, deconstructing the idea of an "exclusivist and hegemonic national identity" (Nazir 360) and the attempt to make it more inclusive, both within and outside Pakistan borders, has become increasingly difficult after 9/11, due to both the enforcing of binarism on political, social and cultural terrains in the Western world (and in the US in particular), and the counter-reactions in Middle and the Far East countries (see Kanwal; Aslam; Rana).

Not surprisingly, after 9/11 Pakistani fiction in English, that had already enjoyed international visibility since the 1990s, also began to give voice to the anxieties and the effects of the War on Terrorism on the Muslim population, especially those residing in the US, who were automatically included in the broad category of the "inside enemies." Whereas in previous

decades Pakistani-born authors, like other minority groups, rooted their narratives in the loss of home culture, "substituting personal traumas for politics" (Irr 23), 9/11 forced them to interrogate and explore their liminal status, both in experiential and in artistic terms.

Labeled by the critic Claudia Nordinger "inoutsiders," that is, "authors engaging with the Western World from a position outside the European and American mainstream" (59), Pakistani-born authors like Mohsin Hamid, Ayad Akhtar, Kamila Shamsie, Nadeem Aslam, and H.M. Naqvi are repositories of new, transnational forms of double vision that resemble the "syncretic border intellectual," caught between two spaces and yet "able to combine elements of the two cultures in order to articulate new syncretic forms and experiences" (Mohamed 97). These authors constantly negotiate their relation to the center and the peripheries of the American experience, to its literature and culture (Ghamal 597) – from a position that, although made fluid by their geographical impermanence, is nevertheless sustained by cultural and literary dialectics of appropriation and revision.

Focusing on a transnational Pakistani author, H.M. Naqvi, and his 9/11 novel *Home Boy* (2009), this article investigates how and to what extent novels written by transnational authors interact, or become part of, American literature; how this prosthetic affiliation to a national literature and culture can take place and question, beyond literary borders, the distinction between "Self" and "Other"; and how these narratives and their interaction with (and place in) the American literary canon can both perpetuate and revise the tradition itself.

Naqvi, *Home Boy,* and America at Large

Among the work by inoutsiders which interrogates and reimagines the interstitial spaces of the post-national scenario, H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* (2009) explicitly tackles the contradictory and divergent terrains of US politics and its culture, and thus questions the experiential and literary borders of America at large. A London-born Pakistani writer who grew up in Karachi, Naqvi moved to the US, graduated in 1996 from Georgetown University, and worked in the financial industry before leaving his job to

become a writer. He taught creative writing at Boston University and moved back to Karachi in 2007, where he completed his first and most famous novel, *Home Boy*, recipient of the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2011. *Home Boy* is part immigrant novel, part *Bildungsroman*, part New York City novel. Written *a posteriori* in the first person, *Home Boy* recounts the American period of the self-proclaimed cosmopolitan protagonist Shayzad Lala, alias Chuck, who arrived in New York City from Karachi four years prior to the timeframe of the novel, with a scholarship to study Literature at NYU. Employed in the financial sector after graduating, he enjoys the New York nightlife, clubbing with his friends: Pakistani-born immigrant AC, a PhD scholar, an "intellectual dandy, a man of theatrical presence," and DJ Jimbo, "gentle, moonfaced man-mountain with kinky dreadlocks with a Semitic nose" (Naqvi 2), born and raised in Jersey City. Unexpectedly fired after less than one year, in July 2001 Chuck decides to "take a sabbatical" and become a taxi driver. Certain that "we had our fingers on the pulse of the great global dialectic" (1), Chuck, AC and Jimbo have to change their mind after 9/11, especially after the failed attempt to discover what happened to a not so close friend, Mohammed Shah, alias The Shaman, alias "The Pakistani Gatsby," who lived in Connecticut and whose parties the three friends used to attend. Found by the police in Shah's house, the trio are suspected of being a terrorist cell. They are imprisoned, denied their rights and almost starved to death. Chuck, finally released, despite his love for Jimbo's sister Amo and the prospect of another well-paid white collar job, decides to return to Pakistan. Our last sight of him is aboard a plane, contemplating New York from the sky – his future somewhere else, at least for a while.

Although Naqvi is not a New York native, writing in continuum with the American tradition is at the core of his writing: "I had to consciously think about coming at New York and America as a Pakistani. And I had to think about which tradition I wanted to locate the book in. What made most sense to me, in a conscious or a visceral way, was to locate it in contemporary American fiction" (qtd. in Mohammad 41). While thrusting its prosthetic roots into the American soil and 9/11 novels in particular, *Home Boy* also explores the contradictions generated by material and immaterial American politics, the processes of cultural and literary

affiliations (and disaffiliations), and their forms and effects in the fictional and real worlds.

Shades of Ethnicity: from Other to Othering

One of the characteristics Caren Irr underlines in her analysis of contemporary American novels is their attempt to correct stereotypical ideas about one's own ethnic or religious group, characteristic of the author's aim to address an American audience (11). Naqvi's revision of the immigrant novel pattern can definitely be read in this light. The protagonist's status as an "expatriate" and the heterogeneous community surrounding him allow Naqvi to investigate old and new forms of belonging, articulating the traditional immigrant experience as a plurality of political, social and cultural trajectories, including circular/transnational patterns that question the ways Muslim identities are shaped and re-shaped within the US but also across borders and states.

As in most immigrant narratives, what lures Chuck to America is a distant, mythic version of the country, an apparent "terra cognita as I had been educated by classics such as *Coming to America*, *Crocodile Dundee*, and *Ghostbusters*, and by American programming on PTV that included *A-Team* and *Manimal*" (Naqvi 126-7) – an assumed knowledge that is the first effect of deterritorialization of American culture, but that creates first disorientation, and then the inability to cope with the 9/11 backlash.

Home Boy depicts ethnicity neither as a condition nor an act of self-determination, but a question of readings and misreading, within and outside the Pakistani community. Through the three friends' different status, Naqvi focuses on "gradations" of ethnicity (Cilano 200): Jimbo/Jamshed Khan is a "bonafide American," "born and bred in Jersey" (Naqvi 3); AC/Ali Chaudhry has a green card thanks to his older sister's sponsorship; Chuck/Shehzad is an "expatriate" who had come to the US with a scholarship and then obtained a work visa. Shahzad/Chuck is Urdu, AC is Punjabi, and Jimbo is Pathan; and the only common element is that they are Pakistani by birth or origin.

Whereas for the elder generation ethnicity is the core of identity – Jimbo's father is a devout Muslim, AC's sister Mini is "a pillar of the city's expatriate Pakistani community" (17) – before 9/11 Chuck and his friends naïvely believe in the power of self-determination:

> We fancied ourselves boulevardiers, raconteurs, renaissance men, A.C. Jimbo, and me. We were self-invented and self-made and certain we had our fingers on the pulse of the great global dialectic. We surveyed the *Times* and the *Post* and other treatises of mainstream discourse on a daily basis, consulted the *Voice* weekly, and often leafed through other publications with more discriminating audiences such as *Tight* or *Big Butt*. Save Jimbo, who wasn't a big reader, we had read the Russians, the postcolonial canon, but had been taken by the brash, boisterous voice of contemporary American fiction; we watched nature documentaries when we watched TV, and variety shows on Telemundo. (1)

Together with their nicknames, their self-definition as "Metrostanis" (Metropolitan Pakistanis) – a neologism, coined by AC, that makes them at the same time local and exotic – commodifies their ethnic identity for a system that buys them and endorses an Orientalist vision, eroding individuality and differences. Even when they enjoy some measure of celebrity, their agency is very limited and their inclusion in the *beau monde* is granted by the protection of the affluent (in this case the blue blood patron Dora, Jimbo's girlfriend). However, as believers in the nation's mythologies, Chuck, Jimbo and AC fail to recognize the dynamics of exclusion until the very end:

> In prison, I finally got it. I understood that just like three black men were gangbangers, and three Jews a conspiracy, three Muslims had become a sleeper cell. And later, much later, the pendulum would swing back, and everybody would celebrate progress, the storied tradition of accommodation, on TV talk shows and posters in middle schools. There would be ceremonies, public apologies, cardboard displays. In the interim, however, I threatened order, threatened civilization. In the interim, I too had to adhere to an unwritten code. (121)

More than the transition from "Other" to "Othering" caused by 9/11, in *Home Boy* the turning point is the protagonist's resistance/acceptance to come to terms with a system of discrimination and exclusion at work after as well as before the terrorist attacks. 9/11 forces Chuck to re-read his past experience in a new light: to recall how the city initially appeared to him as "an epic party taking place to which you have not been invited" (162); how the Jewish curator of an art gallery lamented being bullied at junior high because of his ethnic background; how the black *maître* was treated with contempt by customers to whom he was describing six-hundred-dollar wine bottles (120). 9/11 forces Chuck, likewise, to experience the present with a deeper understanding of human relations. He recognizes and benefits from ethnic and inter-ethnic solidarity – from the Moroccan newsagent to the "cabbie brotherhood" (146) of immigrant taxi-drivers.

This awareness contributes to shaping the different epilogues: Jimbo's acceptance of the status quo and his release, helped by the powerful family of The Duck; Chuck's new awareness and his return to Pakistan despite his new job and the prospect of a visa; AC's inability to accept the consequences of 9/11, that worsens his position during and after his arrest, and leads him to be sentenced from fifteen years to life; not to mention the fate that awaits the Pakistani Gatsby, the accidental *deus ex machina* of the story and the one entirely devoted to the American Dream.

Home Boy as City Novel and 9/11: Decentering the Absence

> *Every New Yorker has a 9/11 story and every New Yorker has a need to repeat it, to pathologically revisit the tragedy, until the tragedy becomes but a story. Mine goes like this.*
> (Naqvi, *Home Boy*)

Since it tackles dynamics and effects that go well beyond national borders, the 9/11 novel is inevitably, or should be, transnational (see O'Gorman). Transnationality in *Home Boy* extends beyond place, themes and perspective. It involves the extent to which American culture informs the narrative (Mohammad 41)[3] on multiple levels and the novel's capability to project

the events on a wider scenario, in dialogue with what is outside both New York and US borders.

As most 9/11 novels, *Home Boy* focuses on the relation between the self and the city before and after the tragedy. Chuck's fantasy of mastering the metropolis that opens the narrative – "I'd since claimed the city and the city had claimed me" (Naqvi 3) – is paralleled by his illusion that the city is easy to decipher, like its topography. However, the emphasis on the grid structure reveals Chuck's superficial knowledge of New York, whose complexities are revealed to him by the two abrupt events in his American life – the sudden loss of his job in the financial sector and 9/11.

Becoming a taxi-driver allows Chuck to become an integral part of the city, to understand "connections between places" (Golimowska 91) – topographical, social and cultural: with and among the outer boroughs (Jackson Heights and Queens) and their ethnic communities. These outskirts and their immigrants join the ones Chuck already knows, first and foremost Jersey City, "like Manhattan gone awry" (Naqvi 44), where Jimbo's sister Amo and his father live. As Golimowska notes, "Jersey City is the counter-society, a distorted reflection of Manhattan, an answer to the metropolitan flair and character of the 'real' city on the other side" (88-89). Untouched by New York's splendor, it will also remain unscathed from the wounds and ruins of 9/11, though of course Jersey City was marked by its own decay well before the fall of the Towers.

After 9/11 only the "skyline of memory" (17) is left, a skyline that is inevitably two-dimensional. When the three Metrostanis "become Japs, Jews, Niggers. We weren't before" (1), their relationship with the city changes as well. Chuck's fear and sense of vulnerability leave him at a loss, incapable of finding reference points in the world surrounding him (Golimowska 6). Venturing downtown again after three weeks, the night is "slightly out of frame, slightly off-kilter" (Naqvi 7): Chuck recognizes almost no one in his favorite bar and even Jimbo has been replaced with another DJ. Although AC, with notable concision, declares that "[t]hose bastards [the terrorists] have fucked up my city! They have fucked up everything!" (22), the city is no longer *theirs* (as it probably never has been), as the thugs mistaking them for Arabs and beating them a few moments later make clear. Contrary to most 9/11 American fictions (from DeLillo's

The Falling Man to Jonathan Safran Foer's *Incredibly Loud and Extremely Close*) the protagonist does not and cannot make the city familiar again, as the night of the "Shaman Run" proves: Chuck is first stuck in traffic, then forced to give his former boss a ride even though he is off duty, and finally arrested and taken to the Brooklyn Metropolitan Detention Center, where he is deprived of food, and physically and mentally abused.

The most evident change after 9/11 is obviously the scar in the geographical and social fabric of the city. Ground Zero becomes the void core of the urban experience, a void that needs to be revised and transformed into a story – a hard task, after the hyper-medialization of the terrorist attack and its visual consumption. Like most 9/11 American novels, Naqvi opts for the "speaking of silence" through elision. First, he interrupts the long flashback and resumes it two or three weeks after what is left implicit; then, when Chuck's mind goes back to that day, what he and the employees of the 55th floor of the Midtown building saw outside the windows facing South remains unspoken. Naqvi's narrative expedients have different meanings, the first being the refusal to transform the tragedy into a spectacle. At the same time, de-materializing the contours of that absence allows Naqvi to link this void to other absences in the story (Cilano 193-94, 203), to connect the expatriate's two *loci* of affiliation, and thus question the centrality and exceptionality of 9/11.

Absences and voids in New York multiply after 9/11: Pakistani enclaves like Jackson High and Little Pakistan become desolate and empty. Many "fled across the border" (Naqvi 229), to Mexico or Canada, afraid of the backlashes fuelled by racism and xenophobia. It is the sense of alienation from the city and his American life after 9/11 and the Detention Center that leads Chuck to attempt suicide by taking pills: and tumbling on the floor after overdosing, he "felt numb, dead, like my father" (200).

When it comes to "fathers", absences abound in the novel. In a world where women are the fulcrum of families and communities (Mini, The Duck, the late Mrs Khan, Amo, and Chuck's widowed mother), the Shaman's disappearance, which the narrative ambiguously suggests could be related to the attacks, becomes even more disquieting. Although he is only an acquaintance, The Shaman is the closest to a father figure to Chuck, even in his end. Chuck's father's death too, allegedly an accident

in the bathtub, remains a mystery, and the suspect that Chuck's father actually committed suicide remains. The "accident" took place in 1985, when the Afghan war was having a profound impact on Pakistan and its society – a war that involved the US too. Although the connection between the Afghan war and Chuck's father's death is never stated, the fact that he died in a time of conflict re-enforces for Chuck the connection between Pakistan and the United States – both wounded by the violence of wars, one experienced directly, the other as a blurred memory by the protagonist; both sites of absences for fatherly figures gone missing, real or putative ones, as the two countries are for the protagonist.

Both absences require narratives to transform those traumas into words in order to find reconciliation and healing. However, the continuity of memory has been broken and only fragments that cannot be interpreted remain – like the Shaman's (almost empty) house and the few traces of him left there; like Chuck's father's camera, preserved as a shrine, with pictures still inside, or his suitcase, Chuck's mother's gift for his trip to the US: "There was some story there but I didn't know it. I didn't know anything about anything" (126).

As Cilano notes, "tying together migrancy and absence, the suitcase represents for Chuck missing narratives" (205-06). The emptiness of the suitcase exemplifies the transnationality of absences: these absences become connections, underlying the interdependence between places like Karachi and New York, united by the signs of a glorious past, of an uncertain future and by voids at their core. By intertwining a Pakistani missing family narrative with 9/11 events, connecting New York and Karachi, *Home Boy* takes a step forward on the path of 9/11 American novels and indirectly questions the exceptionalism and uniqueness of the American narration of tragedy and absence.

Conquerors, Mohicans and Pakistani Gatsby(s): Literary Performativity and the American Canon

"Americaness" is performed in Home Boy not only through the protagonists' attitudes and behavior, but also through the literary performativity of

the text itself. Besides formal and thematic affinities with contemporary American novels, *Home Boy* abounds in direct and indirect references to works, characters and voices from the American canon and thus engages in an articulated and continuous dialogue with the American literary tradition. By incorporating elements of US writing and reframing them through the migrant's perspective, Naqvi shows the pervasiveness of the American imagination, in its territorialized as well as de-territorialized forms. At the same time, Chuck's reading of his and his friends' experience in the paradigm of the American classics is also a strategy that questions to whom that tradition belongs, who and what informs it, and ultimately who is and who can be considered "American".

Mohammed Shah, alias the Shaman, alias "The Pakistani Gatsby", is the character that constitutes the most explicit link between Naqvi's novel and the American classics. The fascination with Gatsby and its re-writing in a transnational framework characterize several post-9/11 novels, like Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2009), all works that, like Naqvi's, create interesting parallels between two different moments of crisis in American history and literature. However, in *Home Boy* the transition from the national to the transnational is more evident, with all the main characters belonging to the Pakistani world – and with the implications that this belonging entails.

Just as in Fitzgerald's text, Mohammed Shah's is an American success story, "from rags to riches," that turns into tragedy, ending with a sudden and violent death. Like his precursor, Naqvi's Gatsby also hides his real identity and his obscure past in order to erase the barriers of ethnicity and power. His "ostentatious parties" (Naqvi 21) in his Connecticut house, his ambition propelled by a need to be accepted in the community he wants to be part of, his essentially solitary nature, his death (in the fall of the Towers) as an indirect consequence of what he has longed for – not love for a woman, but economic power, and the hate it generates (Golimowska 93) – are all elements that the Shaman and Fitzgerald's character share. Here too Gatsby's dream is still a contagious aspiration for the new migrants (Heidemann 293), as Chuck makes clear when he reacts to AC's insistence on driving all the way to Connecticut to check whether the Shaman is safe and sound: "this isn't about the Shaman. This is about you" (Naqvi

85). Together with Gatsby's glittering world, the temporal and spatial peripheries of that universe (and of Fitzgerald's novel) are also investigated and transposed by Naqvi to the twenty-first century, ethnic scenario. It is not difficult to glimpse a contemporary "valleys of Ashes" in the empty Little Pakistans after the attacks and, in particular, in the abovementioned Jersey City, with its first generation blue collar immigrants still nurturing suburban dreams.

Naqvi's re-writing also shares the geographical locating of origins and destinations with Fitzgerald's masterpiece. *The Great Gatsby* is both an immigrant and a migrant story: if Jay Gatz is of obscure origins and foreign descent, and Nick Carraway migrates from a periphery (the Midwest) to the center (New York) and then back, the same can be said of the Shaman and Chuck. In the latter case Nick's circular journey is turned into a spiral – from (and to) the borders of the deterritorialized America to the US and its internal margins, the Pakistani community, the center and the NY glamorous club scene, then to the Pakistani community after his release from prison, and ultimately back to Karachi, his old and new home.

Gatsby is the most recognizable of the literary figures and models Naqvi re-writes. The "performative literary Americaness" enacted by the author through themes and plot sits alongside that performed through the narrator's voice, his reading of his and his friends' experience in changing cultural frames that testify to a Pakistani's shifting positioning in American society – or, rather, to Chuck's perceptions of it. Significantly, in the hectic and fragmented time sequence of the long flashback that constitutes the backbone of the narrative, the meta-textual level, with its ventriloquism of American literary voices, is the only diachronic pattern followed by Chuck.

At the very beginning, when claiming the city, echoes of conquerors and explorers clearly resonate in Chuck's voice. Pakistanis are, in his perspective, the "New Breed" half-mocking in the bitter irony of his backward glance both Columbus and the Pilgrim Fathers:

> We who arrived in the West after the colonial enterprise, after our forefathers, heroes, icons – the likes of Syed Ahmed Khan, Mulk Raj Anand, and M.A. Jinnah – found the east coast of the Atlantic habitable if not always hospitable, but America was something else. You could, as Mini Auntie told me once,

> spend ten years in Britain and not feel British, but after spending ten months in New York, you were a New Yorker, an original. (15)

When their vulnerability is revealed, their literary persona changes accordingly. Like Aru, the Jewish curator of a Chelsea art gallery who confessed that as a kid he felt like "the Last of the Mo's" (4), after 9/11 Pakistanis become the "New Mohicans," as one of the thugs labels them before the fight: "Moslems, Mo-hicans. Whatever" (24). The shift from the "rhetoric of the conquest" of the opening to the allusion to Cooper's most famous novel addresses the new post-9/11 forms of American imperialism and xenophobia (Hai 84), which bind Pakistanis in the cultural reservoirs of the "inside enemy". At the same time, the parallel emphasizes how Other and Othering are extremely relative concepts ("Others" also being the original inhabitants of the land) and the need for a reconceptualization.

Who is American and who is not? According to Jimbo, Chuck is "the good man Charlie Brown" (Naqvi 179) since he takes care of the loved ones, whereas Chuck, in his bewilderment after his release, feels closer to Holden Caulfield, a frail and frightened adolescent in search of answers, although probably not exactly those sought in Salinger's novel: "I drifted south, in the general direction of the Pond. It wasn't to ponder the age-old question: where do the ducks fly in the winter?" (193). If "every New Yorker has a 9/11 story," Chuck not only proves himself a New Yorker by telling his story, writing it along the lines of the most famous pages of American literature; his performative cultural affiliation to the US and its narrative is also useful to critically articulate the epilogue and the protagonist's final decision which is both the refusal of an American social identity and a reappraisal of a renewed cultural one.

Go East, Young Man: Escape and Return in a Post-migrant Perspective

From its very title, *Home Boy* openly address the question of belonging and its complexities in transnational geographies and cultural deterritorialized landscapes. "Homeboy" itself is a definition that generates ambiguity

along Chuck's path: Who is a homeboy? While for the gang of Latinos that use this epithet he is the greenhorn easy to scare – and probably to rob or beat – (Naqvi 64), for the Duck the "Pakistani homeboys" are duplicitous in their (different) altered behavior at home and outside (73), whereas for the sympathetic detective who releases Chuck the term turns into a suggestion, or a warning – "Go home, boy" (119) – although where to return to remains uncertain.

The epilogue is inevitably related to the definition of who Chuck is and where he belongs to. Although the ending seems to enforce the opposition between here and elsewhere, New York and Karachi are constantly superimposed in the protagonist's mind. His decision to go back to Pakistan is a refusal of an American life in a country he feels he does not belong to, but also of a path he had already envisioned when Amo tried to persuade him to stay – with what to Chuck seems a "suggestion of marriage in the tenor" (Naqvi 211). Chuck is aware that going back to Karachi is a return, and at the same time an escape, not only from hate and discrimination, but also from the prospect of settling down – something he finds he "could not quite commit to" (212).[4] This decision is read by Chuck in continuity, rather than in discontinuity, with the American spirit – or at least the one that informs most of its narrative:

> When you think about it, the peculiarly American trope of escape has informed narratives spanning the western to the comedy [...]. The protagonists, often paired, are not in pursuit of golden fleeces or holy grails, like the heroes of yore, but are pursued, usually by the long arm of the law. They are outlaws or are rendered outlaws by the whimsical, uncharitable vicissitudes of the modern world. Like the residents of New Hampshire, they aspire to live free or die.
>
> And though you root for the youthful antiheroes, you know dam well they were doomed from the word go. They will never make it to the Promised Land.
>
> Escape is not so much a destination as a frame of mind.
>
> I was there.
>
> (198-99)

Running away is American; from law, from persecutions, and from the prospect of a family of your own – something that can be dreamed of, like

with the Girl from Ipanema rejecting him (13), but remains, as it was at the beginning, "minus father figure" (28).

Becoming American is a matter of laws and politics. Being American is, to paraphrase Naqvi, a frame of mind. And the American spirit can be found more in those who leave than in those who stay. Chuck's departure then is not a rejection of Americanness, but an amplification of its contradictions, an affirmation of a liminal status of dissent and belonging. Questioning US politics and its internal and external borders is not contradicted, but legitimated, by a cultural appropriation of the US in its imaginative and literary milieu that expands the limits of national literature and contributes to the reframing of its geographies of identity.

Notes

[1] See also Alali, "Introduction"; Medovoi; Versluys.

[2] See Edwards, *After the American Century*, where the author discusses the way American culture is appropriated, transformed and integrated in a specific context thanks to digital media and its circulation.

[3] "What do I mean by contemporary American fiction? I would think of Don DeLillo onwards. So in 1971, I think, DeLillo published *Americana* and that kind of sensibility informs *Home Boy*. And of course there's Jonathan Franzen and Michael Chabon [. . .] and Rick Moody. This is the broad framework *Home Boy* is located in. There are no allusions to Shakespeare. It's all contemporary Americana. I'm contending with America, you know, in the twenty-first century, so there is a conscious effort to kind of summon Americana in this novel" (Mohammad, 41).

[4] "I would have to be employed and prospering, and Amo would have to complete her studies before the subject could be officially broached. Then one day I would travel to Jersey City on the train, sweaty and anxious and dressed in my Sunday best, to ask Old Man Khan for his daughter's hand. [...] Afterward we would rent a junior one-bedroom on the Upper East Side before applying for a mortgage on a more accommodating apartment, and in a decade or so, with both of us earning six figures, we might move to the suburbs, like the Shaman, Scarsdale perhaps, because of the schools. After producing progeny, we would live out the rest of our days with a SUV in the garage, assorted objects d'art in the drawing room, and a view of the manicured lawn. At the end of the day, it was a vision I found I could not quite commit to. 'Maybe you could visit me in Karachi,' I said. 'You'll like it there. It's a lot like New York.' That was the truth" (Naqvi 212).

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Cristina Iuli

Extinction, Rememory and the Deadly Work of Capitalism in Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*

> *There are things that can only be understood retrospectively, when many years have passed and the story has ended. In the meantime, while the story continues, the only thing to do is tell it over and over again as it develops, bifurcates, knots around itself. And it must be told, because before anything can be understood, it has to be narrated many times, in many different words and from many different angles, by many different minds.*
> (Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*)

> *Wherever the Europeans had trod, death seems to pursue the aboriginal.*
> *We may look to the wide extent of the Americas, Polynesia,*
> *the Cape of Good Hope, and Australia, and we find the same result.*
> (Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle*)

Valeria Luiselli's 2019 novel, *Lost Children Archive*, attends to the inherited repressions, silences, and erasures around the official chronicling of the current migrant and refugee crisis on the Southwestern border between Mexico and the US and addresses these topics in original narrative format by creating a literary space of personal "re-memory" that situates that specific crisis in the longer, colonial geopolitical history of the United States. Resonating in the novel, fictional and nonfictional events, real and imagined books, actual and invented case studies, documents, maps, polaroids, soundtracks, audiobooks, recorded voices, radio-news, immaterial suggestions and literary citations engender a network of references out of which the novel's archive and its narrative lining emerge, generating a polymorphous, multi-genre, meta-narrative structure that organizes and keeps together multiple stories. Each story departs from the

main frame and develops around one or more thematic clusters, unfolding distinct tales by mixing different analogic media.

This strategy, I claim, suggests that at least one of the novel's projects is to both generate and collect, gather together and consign to posterity its own posthumous archive of "old" narrative techniques for connecting stories about the past that yield no archival record. By the same act and for purposes both aesthetic and ethical, the novel also attempts to retrieve the echoes of a past silenced by colonial violence in order to disclose its impact on today's patterns of human dislocation on the American continent, and to capture the soundscapes of the dead in the space they once inhabited "through their reverberations" in today's landscapes, in order to make their "absence audible" (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 98). By picking through the loom of a family plot that weaves together History and stories and reveals the entanglements of the past in the present – of the protagonists, of the nation, and of the environment – Luiselli not only probes the possibilities and limits of narrative consistency and history writing vis-à-vis the overlapping of multiple, irreducible temporalities engendered by the so-called "Columbian Exchange": she also implicitly raises the question of the contemporary value of literature as a technology for the production of fictional knowledge against the background of a dominant algorithmic or numerical *reason* that relies on the production and management of data for educational, governmental and societal purposes. I contend that the conspicuous investment the novel makes on old media in the context of the contemporary hegemony of digital communication and information systems should be understood – and this is my second claim – as the main index of the novel's discourse on literary narrative and on the status of the novel as a form vis-à-vis the proliferation of digital mediality in the twenty-first century. Engaging narratively what Julietta Singh calls the "ghost archive" – that unidentified "everything that keeps affecting us and affecting others through us" (96) while being forever out of reach – the novel institutes a conversation with many pasts that resists narrative closure, highlights the contested character of history, and rejects reductive forms of knowledge exclusively based on documents, monuments and data retrieval. In so doing, it underscores the irreducibility of phenomena as complex and interconnected as past colonial violence and contemporary

migration into the US to data-based forms of knowledge on which "algorithms of oppression" depend (McCarrol 708), and affirms instead the epistemological value performed by the literary imagination, and particularly through what Saidiya Hartman has called, in a different context, a "recombinant narrative" (12).[1]

Finally, the novel engages the contemporary migrant refugee crisis on the US-Mexico border as the long-term effect of settler colonialism at home and imperialist politics abroad, framing this double-faceted issue by connecting present and past detentions and deportations of native populations from the national archive. While, in the present, the novel incorporates official and fictional accounts of the removal of unaccompanied "alien" children who enter the United States across the Arizona-Mexico border by traversing the Sonora Desert,[2] its focus on the past is directed to the nineteenth-century removal of native populations from their land by the US Government. In this connection, I argue, the narrative centrality of the story of Geronimo and the deportation of Chiricahuas, "the last Apache leaders of the last free peoples on the American continent" (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 21), does not only powerfully work to discount and dismantle the myth of freedom as foundational to the ideology of the American experience; it also mirrors the pattern of incarceration, deportation, and death to which Indigenous populations on the American continent and in the US are still subjected.[3]

The continuous recursions the novel makes into native history suggest – and this is my final claim – that the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their ancestral land, and the ensuing record of dislocation and extinction forced upon them, is positioned as the foundational crime of conquest and colonization in its specific North American declination. The novel crucially frames such crimes as paradigmatic of the nation building process and as a parable of capitalist modernity in its deadly drive to accumulate by accelerating extinction at an unprecedented human-made rate.[4] This logic entered the continent with the so called "Columbian Exchange," simultaneously introducing early forms of colonial extractivism, land dispossession, and slavery, and a mode of production that, together with "the destruction of life-enabling commons in ancestral territories on the North American continent," was responsible for "an unprecedented

disruption and death of native populations and ecosystems" (Broswimmer 60). By framing the experience of loss on the geopolitical and affective terrain in which family history and colonial history stratify and sediment, the novel binds capitalism's narrative of modernity to its specific US declination, insisting on its racist, genocidal, depletive growth, thus prompting a reflection on capitalism's endless drive to accumulation as not only productive, but also – to use Justin McBrien's term – *necrotic* (116).[5]

By addressing the relation between past and present, older and younger storytellers, and original enunciation and citation in the form of re-enactment, the novel posits narrative as a technology for metabolizing the past through the ongoing iteration of previous stories by later ones, in a circuit of repetition without a terminal point where re-memory may trigger revision. In this sense, it establishes a recursive lexicon, a network of parallelisms, and a dense citational apparatus that resonates and bounces back and forth across several media, shaping the memory-scape of the novel as a claustrophobic, mirror-like *archive* suggestive of a view of history as a circuit of re-enactment, and of a notion of the historical "unconscious" as mediatic – or, in other words, as extraneous to personal, Oedipal conflicts and internal to an ecology of media. Thus, while the aim of using literature to expose the colonial legacy ingrained in the current discourse of illegal migrant children from the South as "disposable life" remains central to *Lost Children Archive*, no less important to the novel is a display of the hypermediality that constitutes not only the novel itself but its very relation to documentability, historical memory and political accountability.

Storytelling/Story Retelling

Lost Children Archive is the fictional account of the cross-country journey undertaken by a family of four unnamed characters across the US, from New York to Arizona. In New York, wife and husband work on projects based on presenting and documenting sound: the mother records vanishing languages and volunteers as translator for asylum-seekers' unaccompanied migrant children; the father works as a sound catcher, "sampling echoes, winds and birds" in the city sonicscape (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 99). The

husband/father embarks on the trip to pursue a project he himself defines as "an inventory of echoes" (21), a documentary soundscape about "the ghosts of Geronimo and the last Apaches" that will take him to the Chiricahua Mountains, in "the heart of Apacheria," where "the last free peoples on the entire American continent lived before they had to surrender to the white eyes" (26). The wife/mother follows along but is headed South in order to locate the daughters of Manuela, a Mexican woman she had met in New York and whose two migrant children are held in a migration detention facility somewhere in Arizona after having crossed the desert and the border.

Travelling with the family is a load of seven boxes containing "personal" items that each member of the family carries with them: "our archive – though it's optimistic to call our collected mess an archive – plus the empty boxes for the children's future archive" (42). The boxes host the rich bibliography Luiselli incorporates in the novel and provide the main narrative device around which the storytelling is organized; the other two being Ella Camposanto's *Elegies for the Lost Children*, the little book the mother reads to herself and to her son during the family trip, and a polaroid camera that the boy uses to create his own archive for the future.

The first part of the journey, told by the wife/mother, unfolds across the American landscape as the family navigates through a geography of decadent, abandoned, empty places that still preserve traces of their past, visiting national mythological landmarks, historical sites, and Indigenous territories. As the travelers approach the Southwest and get closer to their final destinations – the Apacheria and Echo Canyon (the father) and the Arizona Artesia Airport whence the UAC (Unaccompanied Alien Children) are deported back to their home countries (the mother) – the scenery changes dramatically, turning into an America, "bony, desolate and factual" (77). The second half of the novel starts where the first half ends, but instead of moving forward, it moves in circles and backward. Almost entirely told by the son to his little sister, it re-enacts the first section and mirrors it. Mixing factual and fictional registers, it tells the story of the brother and sister's escape into the desert, headed to *Echo Canyon* in search of Manuela's daughters and of the "lost children" from Camposanto's *Elegies for the Lost Children*. At the end of the novel the family is split: mother and

daughter fly back to New York, while father and son stay in the Southwest; we are informed that Manuela's daughters are found dead, and the boy's storytelling is revealed to be a recording he made on his mother's tape recorder in order to leave for his sister in the future a documentation, an account, and a story of the last time they were together as a family and of their experience as lost children.

If the aim of *Archive of Lost Children* is to make memorable in the present what has disappeared from historical accounts, then its methodology is not simply revisionist, but re-memorist. Affections and memories that the past carries into the present in the form of phenomenological disturbances, such as ghosts, literary suggestions, impressions belong here. This methodology Toni Morrison famously called "rememory": "Rememory as in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past" (324); rememory is a recursive return to memory that shapes both the narrative and its archival consciousness. Nested in the storytelling of both narrators, other stories circulate, among which the father's stories about Geronimo and the Chiricahua Apaches fulfill a crucial function, since they both supplement key information and exemplify a methodology of rememory in a non-linguistic medium. Rememory is a strategy of re-enactment, and by definition entails a creative work of the imagination performed here in opposition to the linearity of a discourse of history organized as data retrieval and management. It is a poetic act motivated by rethinking the past in the present from an archive that, in the case of the deported Chiricahua, works, to borrow from Hartman, as "a death sentence, a tomb" (2) that opens no window on the life of the missing and the disappeared. Historical understanding, as the mother's muses, requires, instead, "some kind of reenactment of the past, in its small, outward-branching, and often terrifying possibilities" (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 156). Hence her comments on her husband's project:

> I think I finally begun to understand. I think his plan is to record the sounds that now, in the present, travel through some of the same spaces where Geronimo and his people, in the past, once moved, walked, spoke, sang. He's somehow trying to capture their past presence in the world, and making it audible, despite their current absence, by sampling any echoes that still reverberate of them. When a bird sings or wind blows through the branches

> of cedars in the cemetery where Geronimo was buried, that bird and those branches illuminate an area of a map, a soundscape, in which Geronimo once was. The inventory of echoes was not a collection of sounds that have been lost – such a thing would in fact be impossible – but rather one of sounds that were present in the time of recording and that, when we listen to them, remind us of the ones that are lost. (141)

Both narrators engage with the problem of how to achieve consistency and readability from narrative fragments, explicitly giving voice to – the problem of how to navigate the gap between history, stories and archive, how to negotiate between aesthetic and documentary functions – each in their proper register. For instance, the boy's hermeneutic concerns are cast specifically as the archival tension between order and disorder, between signification and chaos, given that time and technology – reading – may obfuscate the logic of his carefully crafted archive. He frames this problematic concern in relation to the legacy he will leave to his little sister: "I thought about writing stuff down in a notebook for you to read one day, but you are a bad reader still, level A or B, still read everything backward or in a mess, and I have no idea when you'll finally learn to read properly, or if you ever will. So I decided to record sound instead. [...] So I made this recording and took all these pictures" (349).

The mother's pseudo-documentarian worries are focused, instead, on the principle of composition that organizes the scattered records of life and history toward meaning: "It comes to me that maybe, by shuffling around in my husband's boxes like this, once in a while, when he's not looking, and by trying to listen to all the sounds trapped in his archive, I might find a way into the exact story I need to document, the exact form it needs" (42). More directly, she is concerned about the relation between documenting and storytelling, and truth and meaning, and the proper way to inscribe the life of the "lost children" into a narrative that would not simply fix them once again as disposable life: "What does it mean to document something, an object, our lives, a story? I suppose that documenting things – through the lens of a camera, on paper, or with a sound recording device – is really only a way of contributing one more layer, something like soot, to all the things already sedimented in a collective understanding of the world" (55).[6] Finally, and more extensively, the mother's obsession with the

relation between writing as a documentary technology and writing as art, or between information and literature, is exposed in all its entanglements and left unresolved:

> Aesthetic problem: why should a sound piece, or any other form of storytelling, for that matter, be a means to a specific end? [...] Ethical concern: And why would I even think that I can or should make art with someone else's suffering? [...] Constant concerns: Cultural appropriation, pissing all over someone else's toilet seat, who am I to tell this story, micromanaging identity politics, heavy-handedness, am I too angry, am I mentally colonized by Western-Saxon-white categories, what's the correct use of personal pronouns, go light on the adjectives, and oh, who gives a fuck how very whimsical phrasal verbs are? (79)

That the boy's concerns read as a re-inscription of the mother's documentarian and aesthetic preoccupations, but with the distance and difference marked by age and expectations, fulfill the logic of re-enactment and iteration explicitly presented as the poetic program of the novel, and are consistent with the epistemological machine of the stories and of History. The novel brings into focus, as announced early in the text, the fact that "[w]e tell them all the stories we are able to remember. Always, if we miss a part, confuse a detail, or if they notice any minimal variation to the version they remember, they interrupt, correct us, and demand that the story be told once more, properly this time. So we rewind the tape in our minds and play it again from the beginning" (8).

Such a rigorously organized structure suggests that the novel itself is conceived of as its own archive, and this effect is reinforced both by the incorporation in the main fiction of the entire *corpus* of polaroids taken by the boy along the journey and eventually stored in box #7, and by Ella Camposanto's *Elegies for the Lost Children,* a fiction within the fiction presented, elegy by elegy, as an allegory of reading, since reading here literally both "adds" something to writing – "a plenitude enriching another plenitude" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 145) – and supplements it. Also, and crucially, *Elegies* embodies Luiselli's literary and ethical response to the methodological question that the novel raises about the difference between information and literature, since it is the device that allows the author to bypass the risk of cultural appropriation by displacing the representation of

Manuela's lost children through the incorporation/invention of the children of the *Elegies* in their full, fictive reality as children. As the narrator puts it:

> The story I need to document is not that of the children in immigration courts […] I am still not sure how I'll do it, but the story I need to tell is the one of the children who are missing, those whose voices can no longer be heard because they are, possibly forever, lost. Perhaps, like my husband, I am also chasing ghosts and echoes. Except mine are not in history books, and not in cemeteries. Where are, they – the lost children? And where are Manuela's two girls? […] If I'm going to find anything, anyone, if I'm going to tell their story, I need to start looking somewhere else. (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 146)

Camposanto's *Elegies* are claimed to be based on the historical Children's Crusade involving tens of thousands of children who travelled alone across Europe in 1212. In this version, however, the crusade takes place "in what seems like a not-so-distant future in a region that can possibly be mapped back to North Africa, the Middle East, and southern Europe, or to Central and North America" (139). *Elegies* is the main "infra-text" of the novel. Incorporated in *Lost Children*'s multiple stories, it connects narrative segments by giving rise to a meta-historical "structure of replacements (*suppléances*) such that all presences will be supplements substituted for the absent origin, and all differences, within the system of presence, will be the irreducible effect of what remains *epekeina tes ousisa* (beyond beingness or presence)" (Derrida, *Dissemination* 167). The centrality of reading to the making of writing is established by placing *Elegies* as the central object of the reading/writing exchange between mother and son. The scene of reading is performed in the first part by the mother, who reads the little book first to herself and then to the boy, and in the second part it is re-enacted by the son, who reads first to himself and then to his little sister. As the boy recalls: "I was in control of the situation and proud to be able to follow a map as well as Mama did. Then I asked you if you wanted me to read you a bit from the story of the lost children, both because I really wanted to read to you but because I wanted to know what came next in the story" (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 263).

So framed, the invented book requires being seen as the fictional narrative that both sets the tone of the novel as elegiac and literalizes the

act of reading as a supplement to writing, as though to suggest that the force of the written word is a political and philosophical question in that it regards the very condition of what is written as a technology already open to and marked by contradictions and possibilities. Referring to the state of writing as "all that gives rise to an inscription" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 9), the logic of the supplement allows for the re-inscription of what is lost to the record of history in/through the work of rememory. Unscripted in maps, without place in the tomb of the historical archives, the disappeared are returned in this novel to shake the complacency of our present. The work of rememory/reenactment that connects the dots between the events of the present and the long history of US settler colonialism and imperialism, and both to the history of Atlantic capitalism, is the aesthetic and political task the documentarian mother-narrator sets for herself:

> No one thinks of the children arriving here now as refugees of a hemispheric war that extends, at least, from these very mountains, down across the country into the southern US and northern Mexican deserts, sweeping across the Mexican sierras, forests, and southern rain forests into Guatemala, into El Salvador, and all the way to the Celaque Mountains in Honduras. No one thinks of those children as consequences of a historical war that goes back decades. (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 50-51)

By incorporating a novel within the novel and assigning it such centrality in the thematic and structural *mise-en-abyme* of the "main" novel and of its theoretical and poetic claims, Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* should be seen as an aesthetic-political statement about the full metabolization of twentieth-century literary theory in the twenty-first-century meta-historical novel, as the mother's states in one of her first, intimate encounters with *Elegies*:

> I read those first lines once, then twice – both times getting a little lost in the words and syntax. So I flip back a few pages, to the editor's foreword, which I'd left unfinished. I read the rest of the foreword, rushing over some parts and zooming in on some details here and there: the book is written in a series of numbered fragments, sixteen in total; each fragment is called an "elegy," and each elegy is partly composed using a series of quotes. Throughout the book, these quotes are borrowed from different writers. They are either

> "freely translated" by the author or "recombined" to the point that some are not traceable back to their original versions. In this first English edition (published in 2014), the translator has decided to translate all borrowed quotes directly from the author's Italian and not from the original sources. Once I reach the end of the foreword, I reread the first elegy to myself again, and then begin reading the second one, out loud and into my recorder. (143)

Bridging the story of Manuela's lost children with the radio news reports about the lost migrant children, the accounts and the photo of the Orphan Trains, the photo of "Geronimo and fellow prisoners on their way to Florida, September 10, 1886," *Elegies* surfaces as the creative filter through which events of the past are literally rememoried into the plot of *Lost Children Archive* as it unfolds to the end of the first part and is mirrored in the second, when brother and sister become "the lost children" by re-enacting the stories heard and by mirroring – in their own story – the stories of the seven children of the *Elegies*, until, eventually, the two narrative threads merge.

Lost Children Archive literalizes the notion of language as a technology for the production, storage, and reproduction of experience and the recursive articulations of memories and writings. It should be seen as a major contemporary literary work in which the technical, cognitive, social, and philosophical conditions of mass-mediality are fully presupposed and self-reflexively embodied as the novel's material infrastructure and "natural" environment. The novel's exposure of the media system on which it relies, of the conditions of signification it opens, and of the very possibilities of narrativity it defines is – in and of itself – a declaration that the narrative ecology of the novel as a form has always already been a media ecology in itself. In this connection, the novel can be seen as a sort of echo chamber in which narratives of all kind resonate ghost-like, flattening the difference between recorded and unrecorded voices, thereby validating the aesthetic project of the father as an echo-chaser. The novel can be seen – in a reversed synecdochic relation – as a kind of metaphoric Echo Canyon amplifying, re-enacting and recombining voices and signs from irreducible time-frames. As the son admits in the stream-of-consciousness section of his tale, when the pronominal voice shifts from second to first person:

> I wondered if we were hearing the sound of all the dead in the desert all the bones there, and remembered that time Papa had read us a story about a body some people found in a field and just left there, and the body in that story had got stuck to some part of my brain and kept coming back to me, because stories can do that, they stick in your head. (325)

The life story of Manuela's lost girls, together with the hundreds of stories of the migrant children broadcast by the radio, the elegies for the lost migrant children in Ella Camposanto's *Elegies* and the cemetery where the Apache native culture lies entombed, frame the novel's semantics of death, loss and disappearance further reinforced by its complex citational structure referred to a vast body of literature in which movement in space and time is bound to plots of death, catastrophe, violence, genocide and deportation. Together, Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* and the archive it engenders reverberate in the scene of American modernity as the scene of settler colonial violence and its long legacy. The literary macrotext that underlies Luiselli's novel brims with apocalyptic or dystopic stories featuring children as the signifiers of a dead end in human history, colonial violence and capitalism's deathmarch: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies,* whose incipits are played out over and over again in the family car, the father's story of the deportation of Geronimo and the extinction of the Apaches, the mother's story of the Abandoned Children of New York and the "Orphans Trains," the retrospective, singularized reconstruction of the nameless child, from his dusty remains soiling the mat of the Border Patrol station, all the way back to when he was alive in his village, to Camposanto's *Elegies for the Lost Children*, which is too close to our present to be offhandedly declassified as "fiction."

Disappearances: Relocations, Removals, Deportations

The same regressive disposition we have so far seen at work in the metafictional structure of the novel is also explicitly exposed in the novel's thematic engagement with its own archival commitments. In inscribing absences from the present and from the past, *Lost Children Archive* does

not only dwell on the tension between loss and preservation embodied by default in all archives; it also delivers several narratives of lost children, lost people, lost sounds, lost landscapes and lost species. In so doing, it encourages a wider investigation into the meaning of getting terminally lost, interrogating our conceptual preparedness for the prospect of extinction, to what it means to disappear as a species, to dis-imagine the future. By asking the question about disappearing and archiving, and by attending to the echoes and traces lost life leaves in its wake, the novel – I contend – leads to a consideration of the relation between disappearance, death and extinction as personal and collective facts, as events affecting us both as individuals in societies and as a species among other species. The novel works through this question by deconstructing the dichotomy between natives and aliens on which not only the definition of ab-original species and culture depend, but on which US citizenship and its derivate attribution of institutional status (refugee, migrant, illegal) are based. "Americans" in the novel are those reduced to the condition of aliens or condemned to extinction by an invasive European white presence whose infestation of native species with alien species was essential to colonization and to the success of the rapacious capitalism it unleashed. From its inception, capitalism as an extractive mode of production has coincided with the project of nation building and with a model of national sovereignty based on property rights, and accomplished through the expropriation of land, the extraction of resources, and the forced relocation or genocide of human and non-human native "species".[7] The US republic was from its birth the engine of primitive accumulation in expropriating Native land to sell to entrepreneurs in order to finance the government and its military institutions – the same institutions that carried out the expulsions, removals and massacres of native peoples and quelled the resistance of both natives and slaves (see Johnson). Parallel to the violent ecocide of the land that the indigenous agriculturalists had farmed for millennia, was the invasion of pests brought by the European settlers who colonized the environment by introducing profitable biomass that transformed native landscapes and pursued what Justin McBrien calls "the reciprocal transmutation of life into death and death into capital" (117). This process also entailed the extinguishing of cultures and languages "either through

force or assimilation," the extermination of peoples "either through labor or deliberate murder," the extinction of the earth "in the depletion of fossil fuels, rare earth minerals," through "deforestation, desertification", and through all those processes by means of which the "real subsumption of the earth by capital" is attempted, by a "capital ecology" constructed "through attempted erasure of existing ecologies – ecologies that include humans" (117). The novel registers and carefully evokes the long march of capitalism, settler colonialism, nation building and native disappearance as interconnected phenomena through observations scattered across the narrative as the American family crosses the American landscape, in a crescendo that peaks while driving through Indian territory. Pointing out the connection between expropriation, appropriation and annihilation, McBrien warns about the structural effects of capitalism, which "leaves in its wake the disappearance of species, languages, cultures, and peoples. It seeks the planned obsolescence of all life. Extinction lies at the heart of capitalist accumulation" (117).[8] The capitalist pressure on natural (indigenous) resources bound the process of domestic violation of ancestral land to extractive exploitation abroad, and is reiterated as the deep root and precondition of today's refugee crisis. As the mother observes while climbing a road across the Appalachian wasteland:

> The trees along the mountain path are covered in kudzu. We had passed acres of woodland blanketed in it on our way up toward this high valley, but only now do we see it clearly. [...] kudzu was brought over from Japan in the nineteenth century, and the farmers were paid by the hour to plant it on harvested soil, in order to control erosion. They went overboard, though, and eventually kudzu spread across the fields, crept up the mountains, and climbed up all the trees. It blocks the sunlight and sucks out all the water from them. The trees have no defense mechanism. From the higher parts of the mountain road, the sight is terrifying: like cancerous marks, patches of yellowing treetops freckle the forests of Virginia.
> All those trees will die, asphyxiated, sucked dry by this bloody rootless creeper. (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 55)

The mother's descriptions of the American landscape as the car speeds southwest increasingly appears as a cartography of the violence settler

colonialism and its expansion into extractive capitalism brought on the land, and is explicitly observed on "the brutalized, almost lunar Oklahoma landscape" (140). The nexus between the beginning of the Sixth Mass Extinction and Columbus's disembarking on the island of La Hispaniola in 1492 is clear from the mere observation of the depleted American landscape:

> Looking out our windows at a landscape scarred by decades or maybe centuries of systematic agricultural aggression: fields sectioned into quadrangular grids, gang-raped by heavy machinery, bloated with modified seeds and injected with pesticides, where meager fruit trees bear robust, insipid fruit for export; fields corseted into a circumscription of grassy crop layers, in patterns resembling Dantesque hells, watered by central-pivot irrigation systems; and fields turned into non-fields, bearing the weight of cement, solar panels, tanks, and enormous windmills. We're driving across a strip of land dotted with cylinders. (177)

In her attempts to expose the invisibility of the irremediably vanished, left behind and forgotten worlds, Luiselli voices the ghost-like presence of the missing Others by tracing links between the emptied out, extracted or desertified American land and its past inhabitants. The numerous broken, empty, decadent and yet oddly beautiful places the family sees during its journey across the American landscape still preserve the memory of their absent residents, as do cemeteries filled with named or nameless graves of unique extinct beings.[9] Getting deeper into the Southwest, the mother registers the desolation and bareness of an environment that looks as if all its natural, human and cultural resources have been exhausted, leaving behind only the wastes of abandoned buildings and the ghostly signs for places to evoke a world gone extinct: "Everything looks like it's been hollowed out and gutted from the inside out, and what remains are only words: names of things pointing towards a vacuum" (54).

Fully aware of the un-archivable presence of a world that has disappeared, the documentarist-husband collects the different silences the Chiricahuas left behind, and the traces of the shattered world they once inhabited. The boy, in turn, recalls the hopeless overtones of the father's narrative in his own re-enactment of the father's stories, expanding them in the description

of a landscape that is as barren, desertified and deadly as the stage of a Beckett drama on which ultimate questions are played out:

> This whole country, Papa said, is an enormous cemetery, but only some people get proper graves, because most lives don't matter. Most lives get erased, lost in the whirlpool of trash we call history, he said.
> […] Now he was talking about this whirlpool of history, and erased lives, and was looking through the windshield at the curvy road ahead as we drove up a narrow mountain pass, where there were no green things growing, no trees, no bushes, nothing alive, only jagged rocks and trunks of trees split in half as if old gods with giant axes had got angry and chopped this part of the world apart.
> What happened here? You even asked, looking out the window, though you didn't usually notice landscapes.
> Papa said: Genocide, exodus, diaspora, ethnic cleansing, that's what happened.
> Ma explained that there had probably been a recent forest fire.
> We were in New Mexico. Finally in Chiricahua Apache territory.
> (215)

The stories of the Mexican-American family's southbound trip and of the migrant children's northbound escape meet in Echo Canyon, a spot in the Arizona desert not far from the Caribbean crucible of the European colonization of the Americas. There, the unscripted archive of their entangled histories reverberates and echoes a history that no database can deliver, and reinscribes the unfinished work of capitalism in the US historical imagination. The novel *Lost Children Archive* rethinks the methodological, theoretical and material differences generative of textual discontinuities as the epistemological precondition for the emergence of a narrative form that explores the possibilities of rememory and engaged storytelling against the condemnation of the colonial archive while also contributing to the construction of a historical consciousness irreducible to archival retrieval and data mining. The aesthetic, non-argumentative structure of the text affords it the ample speculative freedom that it needs in order to show, rather than argue, the contours of its own political project: evoking the ghosts of the American environment and its narrative ecologies at a time in which the specters of colonial capitalism in the United States stand out in all their necrotic force.

Notes

[1] On the use of big data, AI and predictive algorithms for border patrolling and anti-immigration purposes see Azizi and Yektansani; McCarrol.

[2] For detailed, accurate figures, see Robertson.

[3] If they make it to the US side of the border, migrant children arrive traumatized, beaten, famished, abused and terrorized of what may await them there. But higher chances are that they die along the journey, lost in the desert, lost to anyone until their bones are identified. See the reports and maps in the website of the NGO *Humane Borders* (https://humaneborders.org/), particularly the project "Arizona Open GIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants" dedicated to raising awareness about migrant deaths and helping to provide closure through the identification of the deceased and the return of remains.

[4] See McBrien. On the relation between colonial conquest, the eradication and disappearance of natives and its literary representation, see Lifshey.

[5] For a historical account of the narrative of European and American modernity as an outcome of the dual process of expansion of the (North) Atlantic world and of capitalism, see Trouillot. Instantiating the modern world with the new, colonial order on/of the world, European capitalism brought up the Atlantic world together with modernity and coloniality, producing what Walter Mignolo has called the foundational "colonial difference" on which modernity instituted itself. Trouillot's reading dovetails with the analysis of modernity developed by decolonial critics such as Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Walter Mignolo, and Sylvia Winter. For a history of the relation of US extractive capitalism, national expansion, and the production of environmental degradation in the tropical world outside the US, see Tucker. The long-run history of the entanglements of capitalism and ecocide is also charted by Broswimmer; Dawson.

[6] The problem of turning documents into stories is also explicitly addressed by Luiselli in *Tell Me How It Ends*, the essay she wrote before *Lost Children Archive*, where she recounts her work with immigrant children filing for refugee status: "The problem with the children stories," she argues, "is that they are always shuffled, stuttered, always shattered beyond the repair of a narrative order. The problem with trying to tell their story is that it has no beginning, no middle, and no end" (7).

[7] For a biological account of the success of European transatlantic imperialism, see Crosby. On the settlers-colonial structural logic of elimination of the natives, and "destroy to replace," see Wolfe; on settlers colonialism and environmental injustice see Whyte.

[8] Ashley Dawson well synthesizes how capitalism is dependent on the environmental conditions of production that it degrades: "As a mode of production and a social system [...] capitalism requires people to be destructive of the environment. Three destructive aspects of the capitalist system stand out when we view this system in relation to the extinction: 1) capitalism tends to degrade the conditions of its own production; 2) it must expand ceaselessly in order to survive; 3) it generates a chaotic world system, which in turn intensifies the extinction crisis" (61). For a specific history of American capitalism and the continuation of colonial and neocolonial policies toward Indigenous and First

Nations, see Fixico.

[9] As I am revising this essay, I read in a paper that the Cowessess First Nation in Canada says it has found 751 unmarked graves at the site of The Marieval Indian Residential School, a Roman Catholic Church establishment for indigenous children. in Saskatchewan. The piece of news follows by a few weeks the discovery of the remains of 215 children at a similar residential school in British Columbia.

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Queer Realities: Disidentification, Utopic Realism, and Contemporary American Fiction

{T}he utopian is an impulse that we see in everyday life.
(José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*)

Near the end of Brandon Taylor's 2020 novel *Real Life*, the narrator observes: "Consider the act of breathing, which comes regularly and without effort – and yet the great surge of air that must enter and exit our body is an almost violent event, tissues pushed and compressed and slid apart and opened and closed, so much blood all over the whole business of it. Ordinary acts take on strange shadows up close" (269). Taylor's realism illuminates the almost-violence of ordinary acts, the "strange shadows" they cast upon our perceptions of the "real." But around the turn of the twenty-first century, realism seemed, in the opinion of some literary critics, to be at a breaking point, having been "philosophically compromised" (Beaumont 3) by postmodernity from at least the 1970s onwards. This "compromised" realism perhaps reached its nadir in a polemical 2001 critique from James Wood, who argued that the then-recent novels from Don DeLillo, Salman Rushdie, and Zadie Smith, among others, depicted characters who "could never actually endure the stories that happen to them" (180). Wood's notion of "hysterical realism" has proven a long-lived shorthand for thinking about contemporary Anglophone realism after postmodernity – a still-salient site of critical inquiry.[1]

Julia Breitbach identifies two critical impulses regarding contemporary literary realism: "those who maintain that literature today is still part of the aesthetics of postmodernism," and those who "attest to a whole new era of writing 'after' or 'beyond' postmodernism" (5). Robert Rebein makes a case for discontinuity, locating a "turncoat realism" at the beginning of the twenty-first century, citing shifts by prominent American writers such as

Jonathan Franzen, from writing "postmodern" novels to more traditionally realist ones (40). David Brauner veers closer to a model of continuity, arguing that realism has remained the "dominant mode […] of American fiction" (12). Others emphasize instead how contemporary realism is predicated upon an "unselfconscious mixing" with other modes, including "a few borrowed from postmodernism itself" (Rebein 30). For these critics, contemporary realism evinces "the technical experiments of postmodern fiction," even as it strikes a kind of "gentler balance" between "the attempt to accurately render life as it is and toward formal and theoretical play" (Dawson 5; Smith 31). But despite realism's newfound hybridity, Patrick O'Donnell bestows upon it "an amorphous designation" (36), while Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard similarly describe it as "an essential – if slippery as ever" formation (6).

During this same period, queer theorists were preoccupied with the temporal and affective possibilities of queer life. Despite its binary-defying ethos, queer theory's major debates over the past twenty years have perhaps unwittingly reified new dichotomies: positivity or negativity? assimilation or anti-assimilation? relation or anti-relation?[2] José Esteban Muñoz's theories of disidentification and queer utopia have proven particularly generative in their eschewal of these more rigid formations: "Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism)," moments of disidentification attempt to "transform a cultural logic from within" (*Disidentifications* 11), by "the reworking of those energies that do not elide the 'harmful' or contradictory components of any identity" (12).[3] While he parses out disidentificatory strategies from a pure utopianism, Muñoz nevertheless avers that such performances "require an active kernel of utopian possibility," arguing that we must "hold onto and even risk utopianism if we are to engage in the labor of making a queerworld" (25).

A decade after *Disidentifications*, Muñoz fleshed out such a utopian queerworld. Expanding upon Ernst Bloch's "unorthodox and messianic Marxism" (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 86), in which the past performatively "does things" (28), Muñoz conceptualizes queerness as "a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility," a "utopian formation

based on an economy of desire and desiring" (26). Muñoz views queer identity as a desirous "horizon," an anticipated arrival, "always directed at the thing that is not yet here" (26). Taking up spaces such as stages and public toilets, Muñoz foregrounds the capacity of queer utopia to "offer us a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what can and perhaps will be" (35). Muñoz distinguishes between possibilities, which "exist within a logical real, the possible," and potentialities, which "do not exist in present things," but exist "in the horizon, which we can understand as futurity" (99). Extending this line of analysis, the contemporary queer novel emerges as a site of interrogation for what is and what could be, a twinned inquiry which, I suggest, interprets the strategies of literary realism through the disidentificatory queer utopia.

I turn to four critically-acclaimed American novels published over the past twenty years to foreground these tendencies: André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* (2007), Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015), Brandon Taylor's *Real Life* (2020), and Sam Lansky's *Broken People* (2020). These novels negotiate the temporal, spatial, and affective dimensions of queer life by tempering the literary realist mode with what, following Muñoz, I term the "queer utopic" in order to both depict and narrate beyond the various (im)possibilities and potentialities of gay masculinities. From Aciman's neo-melodramatic, first-person narration of American expatriates in northern Italy during the 1980s, to Yanagihara's and Taylor's excavations of physical and sexual trauma, to Lansky's revisionary interrogation of bourgeois self-invention, these texts demonstrate Muñoz's assertion that queerness is "a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility" (*Cruising Utopia* 16). Through their temporal slippages, these novels relentlessly ask: What is real? What is possible? For whom and when?, questions with significant aesthetic and political consequences for both theories of queer life and contemporary American realism.

Queer Fictions, Utopic Realisms

"Time makes us sentimental. Perhaps, in the end, it is because of time that we suffer" (Aciman 232), declares Elio Perlman, the narrator of *Call*

Me by Your Name, a novel with afterlives in Luca Guadagnino's 2017 film adaptation, and Aciman's 2019 sequel, *Find Me*. Elio, seventeen years old, is a Jewish American living in Northern Italy; over the course of one summer in the 1980s, he falls into a slow-burning romance with visiting American graduate student Oliver. Their relationship evokes – but is a far cry from – historical realities such as the November 1980 suicide of a fifteen-year-old and his twenty-five-year old Sicilian lover, who took "their own lives rather than face the impossibility of continuing their relationship" (Malagreca 127). Such a tragic episode reveals how Aciman's disidentificatory, utopic imagining of the 1980s relies upon a carefully scaffolded, embellished realism.[4] Richard Kaye describes Guadagnino's film adaptation as a "Mediterranean vacation from plausibility, politics, and history," one "not set in any kind of recognizable world," a "fantasy universe where homosexuality represents no social transgression" (n. pag); Justin Hudak similarly notes that the film begins "the same year in which *Brokeback Mountain* leaves off, and ends in the same year in which two separate labs published their findings about the novel retrovirus infecting people with AIDS" (158).[5] Via Kaye's and Hudak's claims about Guadagnino's adaptation, the workings of Aciman's source text come into sharper focus: how it imagines and erases different queer realities within the spatial, affective, and temporal protocols of the realist novel, shoring up the interstices of class privilege and their connections to sexual possibility.

Muñoz writes that the queer utopia "permits us to conceptualize new worlds and realities that are not irrevocably constrained by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and institutionalized state homophobia" (*Cruising Utopia* 35). *Call Me by Your Name*, then, clearly foregrounds the utopic capacities of queer possibilities – even if these might be incongruous with actual queer histories. But beyond its erasure of homophobia and the urgencies of the HIV/AIDS crisis, Aciman's novel generically disidentifies with realism through its neo-melodramatic narrative voice. Thomas Elsaesser views melodrama as "failed tragedy" wherein the "values lies in performing this failure" (37). For Elsaesser, this failure suits melodrama to "an age that not only has lost faith in utopias, but has given up on solutions" (38). In the novel's titular scene of sexual passion and identity-swapping, Elio declares to Oliver, "You'll kill me if you stop," noting retrospectively that this was

"my way of bringing full circle the dream and the fantasy [. . .] till he said, 'Call me by your name and I'll call you by mine,' which I'd never done in my life before" (Aciman 134). Elio's melodramatic rhetoric cleverly puns on the cessation of sexual intercourse as death, but beneath the surface of this aggrandizement lies melodrama's capacity, as John Champagne puts it, to "use the aesthetic to rearrange our present affective attachments" (12). Champagne argues that in the Italian context, melodrama "is not chiefly an imitation of reality" but instead uses "certain reality-effects in order to signify a 'something' else that cannot be reconciled in the symbol" (22). Aciman's disidentification with realism and his invocation of the queer utopic come into clearer focus by dint of *Call Me by Your Name*'s melodramatic first-person narration, attuned as it is to the ravages of temporal (im)possibility which unspool across its retrospective plot.

Aciman's relatively conflict-free, neo-melodramatic narrative might skirt the long shadow cast by "hysterical" realism, but Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* more readily – and intentionally – participates in the project of expanding realism's formal capacities. Intending "to marry two unlikely forms – the fairy tale and the contemporary naturalistic novel," Yanagihara wanted there "to be something operatic about the book, in both its structure and its celebration of melodrama" (Cheung n. pag.). Jude St. Francis, the novel's protagonist, is abandoned to the care of a monastery at birth; he suffers physical, sexual, and mental abuse at the hands of various men for the first fifteen years of his life, years that Jude later decides "have determined everything he has become and done," and which culminate in injury and a lifelong practice of self-harm (Yanagihara 785). In response to reader complaints that no one could suffer the amount of abuse that Jude does, Yanagihara responded, "It's simply not true, and if you think that, you're thinking very provincially and you're not looking hard enough [. . .]. It is somebody's life" (Melville n. pag.).[6] But even as Yanagihara locates her melodramatic naturalism within the realm of plausibility, she explicitly fuses it with strategies of the fairy tale, a genre which, according to Muñoz, "need not be a retreat from reality but can be a certain way of facing it" (*Cruising Utopia* 165). Indeed, the novel deploys the conventions of fairy-tale implausibility to more aggressively attenuate its naturalism: Jude gets a fresh start at life when he gains acceptance, on scholarship, to a prestigious,

unnamed university, where he meets a coterie of male friends – Malcolm, JB, and Willem. Post-college, Jude attends law school, where he meets professor and mentor Harold, who ultimately adopts Jude as his adult son. Jude becomes a successful litigator, Willem a famous actor, JB a prolific artist, and Malcolm a renowned architect. And yet, despite these upward trajectories, the novel remains steeped in naturalist tragedy, as Jude turns out to be unable to overcome past waves of trauma and abuse; as Christian Lorentzen notes in his review, Jude, "an adult player in a melodramatic lifestyle novel, in which the point is to observe the way the passing of time affects the cast of characters, is static" ("Sessions with a Poker" n. pag.).

But while *A Little Life* deploys a deep abjection, optimism remains central to the novel's operative functions. Even when those around him – such as his friend and personal physician, Andy – interpret Jude's constant self-harm as acts of self-negation, Jude avers that such negation remains imbricated within a futurist teleology: "But what Andy never understood about him was this: he was an optimist. Every month, every week, he chose to open his eyes, to live another day in the world" (Yanagihara 164). The novel's structure of feeling is akin to what Lauren Berlant terms "cruel optimism," a "relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *im*possible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic" (24). *A Little Life* also depicts what Jack Halberstam describes as a "new kind of optimism" which "produces shade and light in equal measures and knows that the meaning of one always depends upon the meaning of the other" (5). Even as Jude chastises himself for "his arrogance and stupid hope" (Yanagihara 681), he also reflects upon the utopic trajectory of his life, how he "had gone from nothing to an embarrassing bounty," almost "as if his very life was begging him to forgive it [. . .] so he would allow it to keep moving forward" (635).

The novel's central queer narrative, Jude and Willem's relationship, further reveals the interplay between the utopic and the realist-naturalist mode. Marked as heterosexual throughout the majority of the novel, Willem's "complicated" feelings for Jude compound, even as he refuses identification: "I don't really think of myself as gay," he claims (532). Willem struggles to accurately describe his relationship with Jude:

> The word "friend" was so vague, so undescriptive and unsatisfying. [...] And so they had chosen another, more familiar form of relationship, one that hadn't worked. But now they were inventing their own type of relationship, one that wasn't officially recognized by history or immortalized in poetry or song, but which felt truer and less constraining. (645)

Here, Yanagihara's realism becomes self-reflexive, calling attention to the ways in which forms of expression are defined, identified, and expressed through narrative; in this case, not "poetry or song," but the contemporary novel. But despite the novel's renderings of positive queer affect and its forays into the utopic imaginary, tragedy circumscribes the text, and returns its plot to a grimly realized conclusion.

In the novel's final pages, the reader learns from a second-person address (narrated to the now-deceased Willem) by Jude's adoptive father Harold, that Jude "injected an artery with air, and [gave] himself a stroke" (811), taking his own life. But the novel persists beyond Jude's death, ending where it begins: at Lispenard Street, in Tribeca, where Jude and Willem shared their first apartment. By recounting his and Jude's return to Lispenard Street, the novel's genesis point, Harold enacts what Nishant Shahani describes as the "retrospective possibilities of reparation" (15). Harold attempts to relegate the novel's innumerable traumas to "the past, the stuff of stories," pretending "that the time that lay behind us was scary, but the time that lay ahead of us was not" (814). The novel's final lines thus initiate another story cycle: the time that Jude jumped off the roof of Lispenard Street, and onto the fire escape, because he and Willem and their friends, hosting a New Year's party, were locked out. After the end of Jude's life, Harold remembers the time that Jude told a story about a time when he could have perished, but didn't – a recursive way to imagine possibilities of life and narrative, and a distinctly queer one.

Like Yanagihara's novel, Brandon Taylor's *Real Life* was nominated for the Booker Prize, eschews historical references, and depicts a protagonist shaped by religious abuse, sexual trauma, and financial precarity. Wallace, the black, queer biochemistry PhD student at the center of *Real Life*, falls into a relationship with his peer, Miller (who, like Willem in *A Little Life*, refuses to identify as gay). But while Yanagihara celebrates melodrama, Taylor eschews descriptors such as "raw" and "visceral," noting that 'the

work of [B]lack writers often receives these coded, confining labels" (Wheeler n. pag.). And whereas Yanagihara's novel spans decades, Taylor's takes place over a single weekend, narrating Wallace's experiences at an unnamed, predominantly white university somewhere in the Midwestern United States. Taylor interrogates "the ways that an anxious queer black brain is mutilated by the legacies of growing up in a society […] where the body that houses it is not welcome" (Harris n. pag.). As such, Taylor frames *Real Life* explicitly as a campus novel, existing alongside works by Jeffrey Eugenides, Lauren Groff, and André Aciman (Adler n. pag.). Taylor "wanted to address the fact that as a genre [...], [the campus novel] tends to exclude black people and queer people" (n. pag.); he intended to "take this genre and this milieu that I really respond to as a reader and to sort of write myself into it" (Franklin, n. pag.). *Real Life* thus functions as a conscious disidentification with the campus novel, a "working on and against," in Muñoz's words, this sub-category of the realist project.

Real Life narrates twinned dramas: Wallace's volatile relationship with the often abusive Miller, and his increasing dissatisfaction with graduate school. Wallace's cohort-mates are shocked when he finally admits, "I guess I sort of hate it here" (Taylor 24); they do not share his desire to "leap out of his life and into the vast, incalculable void of the world" (17). Wallace endures racist diatribes from his cohort-mates, but knows that his advisor, Simone, will do nothing, because "white people have a vested interest in underestimating racism, its amount, its intensity, its shape, its effects" (97). Other members of Wallace's ostensible friend group verbally torment him; others are silent, because "[s]ilence is their way of getting by […]. Only Wallace will remember it" (162). Through what Jeremy O. Harris terms the novel's "accumulation of aggressions – micro, macro, mental, physical" (n. pag.), Taylor's disidentificatory engagement with realism emerges.

Wallace's relationship with Miller occasions another textual disidentification. After a disastrous dinner party at Miller's house on Saturday evening, Miller tells Wallace he is "determined to be unknowable" (Taylor 191); Wallace relents, and finally talks about the past he has been so eager to forget. What ensues is a formal, temporal, and thematic departure from the novel's third-person omniscience: over the course of a single

paragraph spanning several pages, Wallace narrates, in the first-person, his upbringing in rural Alabama, where he was sexually abused by a boy in his neighborhood, and by an adult man. These traumas foreground Wallace's internalized feelings of shame, leading him to declare: "The past is not a receding horizon. Rather, it advances [...] marching steadily forward until it has claimed everything and we become again who we were [...]. I can't live as long as my past does. It's one or the other" (203). Wallace bifurcates his past from his present self, and his ability to survive. Eventually (like Yanagihara's Jude), Wallace "got the money to go to school and get away" (203).

Expanding notions of disidentification through quare theory, E. Patrick Johnson takes up bell hooks's notion of "homeplace," which hooks defines as "the one site where one [can] freely confront the issue of humanization, where one [can] resist" (qtd. in Johnson 112). In effect, Wallace narratively recounts his "homeplace" to Miller. A shared metaphor connects Wallace's homeplace with a newly disidentificatory, queer perspective of the "real." Wallace declares, of his time in Alabama: "if God wanted nothing to do with me, then I'd take the devil. I'd take him on my knees where I'd taken the men, let him pull me down in a bed of kudzu and fuck me, so long as I wasn't empty anymore" (Taylor 202-03). A hundred pages later, after Miller has sexually assaulted Wallace, and then repeatedly apologized, Wallace reaches the point of disidentification: "I'm bored by it now. I'm over it" (301). Miller responds: "This doesn't feel like honesty, Wallace. It doesn't feel real" (301). Wallace refuses to participate in Miller's constraining affective rubric: "You think that if I hurt you sufficiently, you will feel sufficient guilt to get you through this. Because you feel like a monster. But I don't owe that to you [...] I don't owe you any more pain than I've already dealt you. It's selfish of you" (301). Miller falls asleep, and the narrator observes: "The sound of Miller's breathing comes in and out, in and out; to Wallace it seems oddly familiar, like wind moving through the kudzu" (302). The kudzu, in Wallace's homeplace-recounting, functions as the metaphorical site of passive acquiescence to the cruelties that shaped his young life, but here, while "familiar," the evocation of kudzu gestures towards something different. As E. Patrick Johnson asserts, "quare studies

may breathe new life into our 'dead' (or deadly) stratagems of survival" (113).

Having disidentified with the intertwined constraints of racism and homophobia, Wallace applies his queer imagination to step beyond his strictured present: "This too could be his life, Wallace thinks. This thing with Miller, eating fish in the middle of the night, watching the gray air of the sky over the roof next door. This could be their life together" (Taylor 311). The reader might here object that the "thing with Miller" should *not* be Wallace's life, that he should completely evacuate himself from the orbit of Miller's aggression and violence. But crucially, Wallace thinks, this *could* be his life, not that it *will*, or that it *must*. Here, the queer utopia emerges not as idyll or pleasure, but as a steady, slow-building realization of possibility. We don't know what becomes of Wallace's future, because the novel ends with his past: narrating retrospectively the day Wallace arrived from Alabama and met his new cohort, including Miller. Like the end of *A Little Life*, Taylor's novel concludes with a foregone beginning, narrating the past in order to evince a queerly capacious future.

Following his 2016 memoir, *The Gilded Razor*, Sam Lansky's debut novel *Broken People* similarly deploys a realism predicated on the simple hope that things can improve. Both Taylor and Lansky released novels in 2020, and each shares autobiographical traits with their main protagonists; in the latter's case, even the same name, "Sam." After repeated stints in rehab as a teenager, Sam gets sober; he lives in New York, where he falls into a relationship with the wealthy Charles, and successfully sells a memoir of his teen years to a publisher. When his relationship with Charles ends, Sam, a culture editor for a large magazine (like Lansky himself) moves to Los Angeles to start anew. In L.A., he tries to write a novel, and ends an unsuccessful relationship with a man named Noah. The novel opens at a dinner party hosted by Buck, an older, well-off gay man; Sam overhears someone talking about a shaman who can "fi[x] everything that's wrong with you in three days" (Lansky 10). Sam accepts Buck's offer to pay for this experience of "transdimensional intercession" (54), led by a shaman named Jacob. The novel's plot then unfurls at two levels: the narrative present of the three-day shamanic ceremony, and Sam's psychic traversal of the past during the ceremony.

Broken People mediates the gulf between the "real" and the "possible" in part by satirizing contemporary American gay life. Sam pursues admission into the world of "rich gays," where "everything was put in its right place, where there was no dust or lint on anything, where things were expensive and beautiful and fit where they belonged" (132), but recognizes that his desires are "shallow and petty" (122). When Sam and Buck travel to Portland to meet the shaman, the narrator observes that "the whole thing felt so bougie, much more than Sam had anticipated, although given Buck's income bracket it probably shouldn't have come as a surprise that even his shaman would pick a restaurant that had Aesop hand soap in the bathroom" (53). Beyond these ironic deprecations – which temper Sam's earnest self-transformation – the novel remains cognizant of its own participation in the structures of bourgeois homonormativity.

But while *Broken People* narrates Sam's failure to integrate into the gay bourgeoisie, and his concurrent self-loathing and body dysmorphia, the novel also posits the "real" as an ever-shifting rubric: "It wasn't about the specifics – it was about the tenor of it, that rapturous young freedom and desire, this weekend and its honeyed beams of potential, of that luminous thought – *maybe it will be just like this forever*, a tangerine blur of dumbstruck euphoria, that vertiginous buzz as good as any drug" (139). While Sam is unsurprised that his relationship with Noah ends – "They were both addicts in recovery, which had given the beginning the texture of something laced with a speedy euphoria, all crackling energy and empty promises about tomorrows that felt so real in the whirl and spill of the moment" – their time together solidifies that for Sam, reality is most fundamentally something "felt" in "the moment" (32).

And so occurs the novel's utopic disidentification. Lansky uses the conventions of realism – a deep interiority and attention to detail, often modulated through free indirect discourse – to highlight its borders, the places where it seems to careen into moments of desirous, intense affect that align with the Muñozian utopic. But then, Lansky unsettles this arrangement; rather than upholding a normative vision of reality (and thereby, of realism), *Broken People* positions its psychic interrogation of Sam's past within the protocols of a shamanic ceremony which Sam himself questions throughout the text, unsure until the novel's end of its reality.

Crucial to Lansky's revised realism is the repeated embedding of doubt; numerous times throughout the novel, Sam (also voicing the reader's assumed skepticism) tries to deflate any utopic possibilities: "It wasn't possible, this idea that you could completely change in a single weekend" (28); "People did not heal in a weekend through some mystical experience. It did not matter how much money you had to try to buy it. It was not possible" (41).

Broken People thus mediates its realism by alternately puncturing and aggrandizing the possible, the potential. Sam yearns to transcend the strictures of his own reality, but the novel playfully embeds this transformation within the mundane: "He had imagined that everything about this weekend would feel serious, imbued with divine and mystical energy, but instead it was just more of the same" (150). Even when Sam thinks that the ceremony is "colossally silly […] these three grown men sitting on the floor of a house in the Hills with all their mystical knick-knacks," the novel nevertheless depicts the reality of what seems impossible, implausible: "Sam wasn't altered but he felt weird, in a nonspecific way, like things were different" (145). By the end of the novel, Sam achieves a kind of utopic clarity about his own reality: "He had used [Noah], the way he used everyone. He had made it real, in his body, in the thing he hated most […]. How strange this was, his ability to make things real. That he could will things into reality by believing in them fiercely enough" (255). Like the novelist he is striving to be, Sam can *make* reality. Recalling Wood's critique of hysterical realism – the unendurability of characters' experiences and lives – one might see a counterpoint in Lansky's hyper-subjective rendering of reality as self-made, possessing deep wellsprings of internal agency and the capacity to catalyze or change the boundaries of the "real" for oneself. Lansky's novel self-reflexively stages and rehearses the improbability, the impossibility, the unendurability of Sam's life, but in these dramatizations, he reveals its gaps, its pockets of utopic imagination – and their connection to narrative.

Early in *Cruising Utopia* Muñoz remarks, "shouting down utopia is an easy move" (10), later cautioning that "utopia is an ideal, something that should mobilize us, push us forward," that it is "not prescriptive," but rather consists of "flux" (97). One might say the same of a post-postmodern

realism; as George Levine posits, "realism has always tended to contain (in both senses of the word) idealism of some form or other" (15). It is thus precisely the qualities Muñoz locates in the queer utopia – critiquing the present, affording an ideal, and refusing prescription – which prove a generative rubric for investigating how contemporary realism narrates the possibilities and potentialities of queer lives. My point is not to offer an already-ossified descriptor for American realism today, or to suggest that these novels render plans for literally enacting utopia. Rather, I hope to have shown that these queer narratives dramatize a persistently *utopic* movement across the possible and the potential; in their heterogeneity, they evince both a post-postmodern sensibility and a distinctly queer one, informing their engagements with the "real," and realism. Much more can and should be said about these novels, as well as the numerous others which take part in the overlapping corpus of twenty-first century American fictions, realist novels, and queer novels. But the temporal and affective valences of the queer utopia, and the disidentificatory ways in which they are encountered by minoritarian subjects – whether writers, characters, critics, or readers – offer enlivening paths forward for how we understand realism today, and into the future.

Notes

[1] In a 2019 review of Zadie Smith's most recent collection of short stories, Christian Lorentzen writes that, twenty years after the fact, we live "in an age that doesn't particularly cherish realist treatments of ambiguity," that "[i]t's time for hysterical realism to return from beyond the pale" ("Press Play" n. pag.).

[2] Lacking the space to re-narrate these already well-documented debates, I recommend James Penney's *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics* (2014) for a thorough history of recent queer theory.

[3] Unsurprisingly, identity figures largely in Muñoz's conceptualization of disidentification; following William Connolly, he views identity as "produced at the point of contact between essential understandings of self (fixed dispositions) and socially constructed narratives of self" (*Disidentifications* 6). Muñoz also derives these notions from Third World feminists and Chicana feminists, whose notion of "identities-in-difference" informs Muñoz's analysis of "those subjects who are hailed by more than one minority identity" (6, 8).

[4] For further information on Northern Italy during the 1980s, see Bull and Gilbert; Golden.

[5] Miguel Malagreca notes that the "AIDS pandemic affected Italy later than the United States," and that from 1983-84 "there was intense activity in gay groups" who "tried to learn as much as possible about the disease and the means of infection" (132-33).

[6] Numerous critics pointed out – and disagreed over the effects of – Yanagihara's deployment of melodrama. For Garth Greenwell, A *Little Life*'s engagements with "aesthetic modes long coded as queer: melodrama, sentimental fiction, grand opera" enable the novel to "access emotional truths denied more modest means of expression" (*Atlantic* n. pag.). Christian Lorentzen suggests that "as the book plunges on through its ahistorical decades, its style becomes more and more breathless, perhaps a reflection of its swelling romantic theme" ("Sessions with a Poker" n. pag.).

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Chiara Patrizi

"We Ain't Going Nowhere. We Here": Survival and Witness in Jesmyn Ward's Fiction and Nonfiction

So the beginning of this was a woman
and she had come back from burying the dead.
(Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*)

In 1993, when delivering her Nobel acceptance speech, Toni Morrison narrated a fable which soon turned into an intense meditation on language and how it affects our lives. "We die. That may be the meaning of life," she declared, "But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives," thus linking mortality and language as the two elements which drive and shape human existence. She did not neglect to note that this connection does not always configure language as a positive tool. On the contrary, she warned that the "systematic looting of language" all too often transforms it into an instrument of subjugation and violence, what she called "the policing languages of mastery," which "do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas" (Morrison, "Nobel Lecture" n. pag.), and thus must be resisted. Or, as Derrida has pointed out, "an idiom should never incline toward racism. It often does, however, and this is not altogether fortuitous: there is no racism without language. The point is not that acts of racial violence are only words but rather that they have to have a word" (292). Morrison's work and, more broadly, African American literature have always had to deal with the intrinsic racism of language, the language of white people (a language which refuses to acknowledge Blackness as a part of humanity – Wilderson 13-17 – and Black people as subjects), and to reclaim in that language a subversive place for Black consciousness. This was and still is possible because language is "generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference – the way in which we are like no other life" (Morrison, "Nobel Lecture" n. pag.).

Even if they cannot substitute experience, then, narrative acts help travel through it, find meaning in it, and eventually imagine new and possible meanings: as Peter Boxall illustrates, "[n]arrative does not simply record reality; it produces it and thus can transform it" (51). In Morrison's fable, "[l]anguage alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is meditation" (Morrison, "Nobel Lecture" n. pag.), thus positing word-work as the ultimate instrument human beings possess to make sense of reality – even with all its limits.

In the case of Black authors, making sense of reality means dealing with the aftermath of slavery, of segregation, of systemic racism, that is, of a history of oppression whose causes and consequences have been piling one on top of the other for centuries and which does not seem likely to end anytime soon. As everyday US news testify, Black people endure the burden of an inherited trauma which keeps being reinforced in the present and weighs on every aspect of their life, resulting in a state of constant mourning, with slavery as the "founding trauma" (LaCapra 81) of their identity. Not surprisingly, then, survival and witness are core elements of African American art, being two acts that can represent the Black condition in America from the Atlantic Slave Trade to the present day. Among the Black writers who have taken over from Morrison, Jesmyn Ward is a key figure and perhaps the one whose works better succeed in combining past and present traumas to limn the implications of the persistence of antiblackness in the US.

Drawing upon these premises, my essay analyzes Ward's poetics as fundamentally driven and shaped by survival and witness. To do so, I will borrow from Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) the methodological metaphors of (living in) *the wake* and (performing) *wake work*, and examine to what extent they apply to Ward's style and themes, showing how her language is indeed generative when it depicts the legacy of slavery and segregation in the South through polyphonic narration, autobiography, and supernatural elements. In particular, I will focus on the memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013), on the novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), and on the recent article "On Witness and Respair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic" (2020).

In her study, Sharpe firstly examines the definitions of the term *wake*, to conclude that they all apply, each from a different perspective, to the Black condition:

> Wakes are *processes*; through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them*; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory.* Wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual [...]. But wakes are also "the track left on the water's surface by a ship; *the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved, in water*; the air currents behind a body in flight; *a region of disturbed flow*; in the line of sight of (an observed object); and (something) in the line of recoil of (a gun)"; *finally, wake means being awake and, also, consciousness.* (21; emphasis added)

The wake recognizes the persistence of systemic antiblackness and urges survivors to engage in the paradox of living within a transgenerational grief while rupturing it through wake work. In this sense, the condition of being Black is an ongoing process of mourning and awakening in which bearing witness is never fully personal or communal, but a combination of the two. My use of the terms "survival" and "witness" concerns the possibility of enacting them through writing as a means of wake work, since being in the wake of slavery means being born with the burden of survival of the past generations, and reappropriating the language that bears witness to this history of subjugation may result in an effective way of working through it. If language produces reality and is the measure of existence, then "word-work" (Morrison, "Nobel Lecture" n. pag.) is a form of wake work that, just like Sharpe's *aspiration*, functions as a praxis for imagining and "for keeping and putting breath back into the Black body in hostile weather"; when witnessing Black immanent and imminent death, fiction too performs a "hostile and lifesaving" (Sharpe 113) practice through which Black bodies, with their unmediated presence, insist upon their humanity and thus disrupt antiblackness. It is a political act (Li 633) akin to the call for recognition propelled by movements like Black Lives Matter under the slogan "I can't breathe." In Ward's writing, the same act is performed by using personal and fictional experience as modes of survival and witness to address public issues. Since the publication of *Where the Line*

Bleeds (2008), Ward acknowledged the need to "figure out how to [...] look squarely at what was happening to the young Black people I knew in the South, and to write honestly about that," so she worked to become an "Old Testament God," writing unsparing novels; no longer protected "from death, from drug addiction, from needlessly harsh sentences in jail for doing stupid, juvenile things" (*Men* 70), her characters exist in the wake, they have become real.

Writing as Wake Work

Ward has recently declared that her work is animated by concepts which are firmly and consciously political: "I'm always thinking about race, the legacy of the South, and the ways that Black people survive [...]. Because I'm a Black writer and because of the legacy and presence of racism and racist violence in this country, all my work engages with contemporary issues whether I like it or not" ("5 Questions" n. pag.). So far, she has explored a great deal of such contemporary issues (i.e. Hurricane Katrina, the crack epidemic, police brutality, the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow) by narrating them through the eyes and stories of the Black and poor of the South, so that her fiction can be understood as, borrowing from Paul Dawson's claims regarding the distinction between narrator and author in contemporary literature, "one mode of public discourse available to the writer alongside others" (53).

A native of DeLisle, Mississippi, a land which "feels weighted by a lot of history" (Kembrey, "Jesmyn Ward" n. pag.) and is drenched with the blood of racism, Ward has often said that her reason for becoming a writer was the death of her brother Joshua: she wanted to honor his memory by committing to something that would have meaning, which eventually led her to write about Black people from the rural South, "so that the culture that marginalized us for so long would see that our stories were as universal, our lives as fraught and lovely and important, as theirs" ("2011 National Book Award" n. pag.). This is what the three texts aforementioned accomplish, each in its peculiar way. The memoir *Men We Reaped* goes back and forth in time to trace the deaths of five young men in Ward's life,

within the space of only five years: an apparently inexplicable epidemic fueled by "the history of racism and economic inequality and lapsed public and personal responsibility [which] festered and turned sour and spread here" (Ward, *Men* 8). The novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is an odyssey by car among the dead and living ghosts of Mississippi, in which the elements of magical realism only make the gruesome reality more immediate and tangible. Finally, the article "On Witness and Respair" shares the grief for her husband's death just before the COVID-19 crisis spread all over the world and the murder of George Floyd led to unprecedented protests in America and abroad.

The underlying question linking her fictional and nonfictional narratives together deals with the meaning of being Black in the US, including Ward among the activists, scholars, and artists who have been re-defining Black identity by challenging the assumptions concerning the fabric of society and culture fostered by white America, just like Morrison did when she contended that "the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population [African Americans]" (*Playing in the Dark* 4). Indeed, the answers are many, though seldom reassuring (Alexander 197), to the point that Afropessimism has recently gone as far as to declare that Black people function as "the foil of Humanity. Humanity looked to me when it was unsure of itself. I let Humanity say, with a sigh of existential relief, 'At least we are not him'" (Wilderson 13). Similarly, Poet Claudia Rankine believes that "the condition of Black life is one of mourning,"[1] a belief that can be traced also in the actions and policies of movements like Black Lives Matter, as she further contends:

> The Black Lives Matter movement can be read as *an attempt to keep mourning an open dynamic in our culture because Black lives exist in a state of precariousness*. Mourning then bears both the vulnerability inherent in Black lives and the instability regarding a future for those lives. Unlike earlier Black-power movements that tried to fight or segregate for self-preservation, *Black Lives Matter aligns with the dead, continues the mourning, and refuses the forgetting in front of all of us*. If the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights movement made demands that altered the course of American lives and backed up those demands with the willingness to give up your life in service of your civil

> rights, with Black Lives Matter, a more internalized change is being asked for: *recognition*. (205; emphasis added)

The state of communal and continuous mourning, the struggle for recognition, the need for visibility as opposed to Blackness as absence – of color, of civil rights, of humanity[2] – which Rankine ascribes to Black Lives Matter, all mirror the social and psychological environment narrated by Ward. In such an environment, her characters, as their real-life counterparts, struggle not to believe they really are "worthless human being[s]" (Baldwin 16), as the white world sees them. As Ward writes towards the end of *Men We Reaped*, they live haunted by a darkness which hovers over them, mostly unacknowledged by society and, because of that, they consider themselves *savages* (249-50), a word which

> has a different meaning for us. For us it means that you're a fighter and that you're a survivor. And that you'll do what you need to do in order to survive. […] The way I wanted to use that term, especially in that part [of *Men We Reaped*], is to say that we are fighters and we are resourceful. Even in the face of this, of the losses that we experience, of this entire interconnected pressure after pressure after pressure. The pressure of racism, the pressure of the history of racism, of economic inequality, of a popular culture that constantly tells you that you're worth less. Even in the face of all that, we still survive and we still claim for ourselves a certain sense of dignity or humanity. (Hartnell 212-13)

The idea of being a fighter, a survivor, has accompanied Ward her whole life, from the moment she was born, premature and with health problems so serious that doctors were almost sure she was going to die (Ward, *Men* 42-45), to the time when what she calls the "epidemic" (8) that hit her family and her community spared her life but left her in a constant state of grief nonetheless. Survival implies a trauma, that is, a wound of the psyche which condemns those who suffer it "to be possessed by an image or an event" (Caruth, "Trauma" 4) which "in its repetitions might carry traces of old ancient sufferings as well as unanticipated futures" (Caruth, "After" 125). In Ward's case, it is her brother's death, but not only. As a Black author, not only must she deal with her personal rememory,[3] but she must also work with the postmemory[4] of African Americans, two factors

which inevitably exerted a strong impact on the development of her fiction too. Within the Black community, rememory and postmemory concern an inherited shared trauma, a wound which, as contemporary race issues show (Davis 121-34), apparently never heals and entails a combination of old and new modes of survival and witness, which is what Ward's defines as being "savages."

Living in the Wake

Ward's Mississippi is a place in which being Black means growing up faster, and often dying sooner and amid widespread indifference, as the deaths narrated in her fiction and nonfiction show: "by the numbers, by all the official records, here at the confluence of history, of racism, of poverty, and economic power, this is what our lives are worth: nothing" (Ward, *Men* 237). Another way to say it would be that "the means and modes of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain" (12), as Sharpe explains in her account of Black consciousness and the struggle for being in a society in which antiblackness is endemic and institutionalized.

Sharpe's analysis of Blackness dialogues with Afropessimism through Wilderson's concept of Blackness as a locus of abjection (12) and Saidiya Hartman's depiction of the afterlife of slavery (*Lose* 6), but ultimately departs from it in that being *in the wake* and the related concept of wake work posit a way out of a condition of social death (Patterson 38*).* Wake work entails a peculiar form of agency, capable of rupturing and subverting through its ability to imagine new instruments to deal with the afterlife of slavery. Through these metaphors, Sharpe wishes "to articulate a method of encountering a past that is not past" (13), to recognize Black immanent and imminent death and track it in the present – but not only. Her main interest concerns

> tracking the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially. [In] how we imagine ways of knowing that past, in excess of the fictions of the archive, [and] in the

> ways we recognize the many manifestations of that fiction and that excess, that past not yet past, in the present. (13)

Sharpe's words resonate with Ward's concept of savagery. Indeed, *Men We Reaped* shows how Ward's writing is grounded in her personal grief and on that of her community, that is, on being in the wake; therefore, it constitutes a powerful expression of that wake work which Sharpe sees as "a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives" (18; emphasis in original).

This imaginative commitment is shared by many African American artists and thinkers, as Ward's 2016 edited collection, *The Fire This Time*, displays. Here, in a society that produces Black as abjection, Ward and the other contributors assert Black existence and humanity and are aware of "how inextricably interwoven the past is in the present, how heavily that past bears on the future; [it is not possible to] talk about Black lives mattering or police brutality without reckoning with the very foundation of this country" ("Introduction" 9). Yet, Ward chooses to have hope, the hope she sees in the words and stories which unfold *in the wake* to trouble the water (9), to bring to the surface the worth of Black bodies, of Black lives, and their ability to survive. To borrow from the opening paragraph of Fred Moten's *In the Break*: "The history of Blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist. Blackness – the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that arranges every line – is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity" (1). That resistance, that sense of dignity and humanity which Ward wanted to convey through *Men We Reaped*, is apparent in her fiction too, as her characters helplessly play with the bad hand they have been dealt (Salam 10-11): when they try to earn a living in a hostile homeland as in *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008) or when that same homeland is about to be engulfed by Hurricane Katrina, looming over the pages of *Salvage the Bones*.

A particularly fitting example of a novel in which characters live in the wake and the narration unfolds as a wake work is *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. The story revolves around thirteen-year-old, mixed-race Jojo and the road trip from the Gulf to the Delta he takes with his little sister Kayla, his crack-addicted, unloving mother Leonie, and her white friend Misty. Jojo follows

Leonie unwillingly: he would rather stay home with his grandparents, Pop and Mam, than share with her the long ride to pick up his white father who has just been released from Parchman Farm.[5] Ward's writing displays a strong sense of place and deals with time and memory – all Southern Gothic elements – so that the road trip to Parchman is not only a physical journey to North Mississippi but also a Faulknerian journey towards a haunting past much like *As I Lay Dying* – which Ward herself has often cited, together with *Beloved*, among her influences (Elliott, "Ghosts" n. pag.). What Sinéad Moynihan notes regarding *Salvage the Bones* is true also for *Sing, Unburied, Sing*; here too, "Faulkner's text reverberates in Ward's through characterization, as well as through motifs (floods and storms; trees) and themes (sexuality and reproduction; maternity; rural poverty)" (552), even though Ward's dysfunctional family bears substantial differences from Faulkner's. In Ward's case, this is a multiracial, mainly-Black family and, as Adrienne Greene suggests, it is "eerily fitting that instead of traveling to bury a dead family member, as is the case in Faulkner's novel, Ward has her characters pick up Richie's ghost, adding his voice to their tumultuous dynamic" (n. pag.). The novel "aligns with the dead" (Rankine 205) in its being populated by ghost-like characters: the dead (Richie, Given, and the chorus of Black deaths in the background), the dying (Mam on her cancer deathbed), and the un-living (Leonie with her addictions and lack of affection for her children). The living struggle under the pressure of a reality they cannot escape and in which survival is possible only when walking side by side with death.

A first element of the wake which looms over the narration is Parchman Farm. The Mississippi State Prison reminds readers of how "US incarceration rates and carceral logics directly emerging from slavery and into the present continue to be the signs that make Black bodies"; Sharpe argues that the prison "repeats the logics, architectural and otherwise, of the slave ship" (Sharpe 75), thus drawing a direct comparison between the Atlantic Slave Trade and the US prison system. A similar comparison with an un-dead past is rendered by Ward through the character of Richie, the ghost of a Black boy who served at Parchman with Pop and, once dead, could not find his way out of the prison. He is doomed to be caged in there: each time he falls asleep he wakes up in a different era, but always in that same place in the Delta, as he recalls wondering:

> How could I know that after I died, Parchman would pull me from the sky? How could I imagine Parchman would pull me to it and refuse to let go? And how could I conceive that Parchman was past, present, and future all at once? That the history and sentiment that carved the place out of the wilderness would show me that time is a vast ocean, and that everything is happening at once?
>
> I was trapped [...]. Parchman had imprisoned me again. [...] I burrowed and slept and woke many times before I realized this was the nature of time. (Ward, *Sing* 186-87)

The circularity of time and imprisonment suffered by Richie equates the condition endured by the living, Leonie in particular, whose existence is shattered and haunted by her unresolved grief over her brother Given's murder, by her unhealthy relationship with Michael, and by her drug addiction. Her character is emblematic of how white society still produces mechanisms that function to "dis/figure Black maternity" (Sharpe 75): either unable or unwilling to be a mother, she has developed an equally unhealthy relationship with her children, so that they too seem to be condemned to a non-life *in the wake* like her. Instead – and it is here that Ward goes so far as to envision some kind of hope – they have turned to each other and to their grandparents for the love and affection they need. They are fighters, and survivors.

"I like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it's something I could look at straight" (Ward, *Sing* 1), Jojo states at the very beginning of the novel – a thought that sounds inadvertently ironic, since it refers to the fact that Pop is asking for his help to kill a goat. Eventually, death will become something even too familiar to him, and his initiation to Black adulthood will turn out to be equally marked by what he learns from the ghosts of the past (Elliott, "Ghosts" n. pag.) he meets along the way and by what he must endure from the present. He is just a boy, but old enough to be at risk of dying from being Black when a police officer stops their car and Leonie realizes that

> [i]t's easy to forget how young Jojo is until I see him standing next to the police officer. [...] But he's just a baby. And when he starts reaching in his

> pocket and the officer draws his gun on him, points it at his face, Jojo ain't nothing but a fat-kneed, bowlegged toddler. I should scream, but I can't. [...]
> I blink and I see the bullet cleaving the soft butter of him. I shake. When I open my eyes again, Jojo's still whole. Now on his knees, the gun pointing at his head.
> (Ward, *Sing* 163-64)

He survives his first time being questioned by the police (170), yet the incident affects him deeply. Having once been *in the wake* of a policeman's gun, it is difficult to dismiss the memory of it. "The image of the gun stays with me" (170), he says: "My wrists won't stop hurting. [...] It's like the cuffs cut all the way down to the bone. [...] Like my marrow could carry a bruise" (171-72). Page after page, Jojo's car ride becomes a journey towards consciousness, an awakening that increasingly centers on Black immanent and imminent death, as he listens to Richie's story or witnesses Mam's passing, when "time floods the room in a storm surge" (269).

The Language of Respair

Once time has started flooding, it cannot be stopped. Eventually, Jojo comes to understand what Mam meant when she said that even though she was about to die, "that don't mean I won't be here, Jojo. I'll be on the other side of the door. With everybody else that's gone before. [...] Because we don't walk no straight lines. It's all happening at once. All of it. We all here at once. My mama and daddy and they mamas and daddies" (Ward, *Sing* 236). At the end of his journey, Jojo learns that there are many ghosts who, just like Richie, could not find their way "beyond the waters" and are stuck, with their own stories and deaths, on a tree near the house. Only Jojo and Kayla hear them:

> They perch like birds, but look as people. They speak with their eyes: *He raped me and suffocated me until I died I put my hands up and he shot me eight times she locked me in the shed and starved me to death while I listened to my babies playing with her in the yard they came in my cell in the middle of the night and they hung me they found I could read and they dragged me out to the barn and gouged my eyes before*

> *they beat me still I was sick and he said I was an abomination and Jesus say suffer little children so let her go and he put me under the water and I couldn't breathe.* (*Sing* 282-83; emphasis in original)

These voices and the other unnatural narrators[6] populating the novel allow those who can hear them a kind of knowledge otherwise inaccessible, and tell readers "what *would* have been perceived by an omniscient narrator if such a perspective were possible" (206; emphasis in original). In this case, the impossible perspective has real-life implication since it performs – and in some way corresponds to – the condition of being in the wake, in all its unnatural reality. That is, these voices have crossed time and space to become the same voices heard in the streets of America and that Ward knows only too well. Among the ghosts on the tree, if readers are willing to listen, one may hear Eric Garner and George Floyd and many others begging – *I can't breathe*. The same three desperate words connect those killings with Ward's husband's death, and her assertion that "even in grief, I found myself commanded to amplify the voices of the dead that sing to me" ("On Witness and Respair" n. pag.) – a commitment to writing that surprised her in the midst of mourning – is again reminiscent of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

In other words, not only does Ward's style and themes position her within a lineage of the American literary tradition which intersects African American literature with Southern Gothic, but there is a thread which connects her fiction and nonfiction and shapes a narrative of witness exceeding the fictional world. This link between her narrative and authorial voice contributes to a powerful representation of the Black condition in the twenty-first century. Her "narrative authority," then, "operates via a continuum between narrative voice and extrafictional voice, and establishes a dialogue with public response"; by engaging her readers in the wake, her fiction positions itself as "a public statement which circulates in the same discursive formation as its author's fictional statements" (Dawson 236). Indeed, her use of the personal is a way to bear witness, through which the author expresses what Hartman calls "the willingness to make yourself a vehicle for these other stories" (qtd. in Saunders 5). As Sharpe too argues, to include the personal in one's writing means "to connect the social forces

on a specific, particular family's being in the wake to those of all Black people in the wake; to mourn and to illustrate the ways our individual lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery" (8).

In "On Witness and Respair," Ward's mourning too is both individual and collective. She recalls the words of a doctor when her husband died – "*the last sense to go is hearing. When someone is dying, they lose sight and smell and taste and touch. They even forget who they are. But in the end, they hear you*" (n. pag.; emphasis in original) – and share those same words with the protesters on the streets, with the Black people who die every day in the United States, and finally with everyone around the world who is partaking in their protest. "How revelatory that others witness our battles and stand up" (n. pag.), writes Ward, as if at last Black people are not dying in silence. The word "respair" in the title is an obsolete term which apparently meant "fresh hope, or recovery from despair," and, as a verb, "to have hope." Interestingly, in Ward's piece respair addresses a hope regained through a combination of artistic work and a sense of community encompassing both personal grief and social instances, thus involving her readers in undertaking the task of witnessing. Respair, in this context, implies an Heideggerian care through which Ward weaves together – through the act of writing – pandemic, Black protest, and her mourning. The sense of hearing is fundamental to this discourse, and it acts reciprocally among author, narrator, characters, and readers to create a shared narrative of resilience and respair. It happens when Jojo hears the ghosts on the tree and Kayla sings to them; when Ward collected from her community the pieces of memory that would compose *Men We Reaped*, and kept doing the same for her upcoming novel; when people from outside the US responded to the recent protests against police brutality by protesting them, too, a fact that caused Ward to *wake* from her grief and somehow experience "recovery from despair."

Within the landscape of trauma, so often haunted by silence, witness thus constitutes a locus of communication, for it requires not only a narration on the part of the traumatized but especially a listener (Laub 57-59), and this may well be the reason why Ward very often employs a polyphonic narrative voice – another feature she shares with Faulkner: to explore the complexity of

the relationship between teller and listener within Black history, where the borders between the two are often blurred, as well as to give voice to past and present modes of subjugation. By passing on to each other, in turn, the roles of tellers and listeners within the history of Blackness, her characters perform the subversive act of asserting their humanity in a context which denies them access to it. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the dynamics of survival and witness are rendered through three highly traumatized narrators – two living beings, Jojo and Leonie, and a ghost, Richie – and other characters – Pop and Mam – who narrate stories embedded within the main narrative. In *Men We Reaped*, the first-person narrator alternates the singular with the plural, to develop a communal voice able to do justice to a shared grief. Hence, even when it is not explicitly declared through the narrative voice, there is always a *we* (Black people) behind Ward's stories, which relates to both an oppressing *they/it* (representing systemic racism) and to a *you* that includes what we may call a reflexive readership (her community) and an external readership (non-Black people). In this way, Ward succeeds in her prime intention of bearing witness to the worth of her people, of telling those among her readers who may identify with her characters: "*you are worthy of witness*" (Ward, "I Was" n. pag.) – like Toni Morrison's novels did to her when she was young. Moreover, through a language that does not omit anything of the harshness and desolation of her characters' lives, she urges her external readership to acknowledge the need for recognition and witness claimed by Black people. Paradoxically, the more her characters fall victim to the bleakness of their existence, the better they serve the purpose of resisting the subjugation and dehumanization of Black bodies. Her writing, then, goes beyond the labels of personal, local, regional, ethnic literature: "You looked at me and at the people I love and write about – my poor, my Black; my Southern children, women, and men – and you saw yourself. You saw your grief, your love, your losses; your regrets, your joy, your hope" (Ward, "2017 National Book Award" n. pag.). Ultimately, in Ward's poetics, hope does not refer to a faith in an undefined better future, but it comes from sharing a consciousness that may "rupture the structural silences produced and facilitated by, and that produce and facilitate, Black social and physical death" (Sharpe 22).

Notes

[1] Rankine ascribes the sentence to a friend describing what it is like being the mother of a black son (198). Likewise, Ward recalls that she cried when, pregnant with her second child, she learnt that she was "going to bear a black boy into the world," since she immediately thought of her brother, and of the long list of loved ones who died too young: "My son had never taken a breath, and I was already mourning him" ("Raising" n. pag.).
[2] On blackness as "a locus of abjection" (Wilderson 12) and on how the legacy of slavery prevents black people from being considered political or even human subjects, see Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 64-65; Patterson 38-51; Wilderson 13-17.
[3] The term was coined by Morrison in *Beloved*, where Sethe explains it as follows: "Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. […] It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place [Sweet Home] is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm – every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there – you who never was there – if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you" (43-44).
[4] The term, coined by Hirsch, originally referred to the memory of the Holocaust and "characterizes the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of previous generations shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated" (22).
[5] The Mississippi State Penitentiary (Parchman Farm) is a maximum-security prison farm in the Delta region. It is the oldest prison of Mississippi and one of the most notorious in the South as regards racial violence.
[6] Unnatural narrators are those who could not exist in the actual world (i.e. because they violate physical or logical principles, or standard human limitations of knowledge). For studies on unnatural narratives, voices, and scenarios, see Alber et al. 114-115; 130.

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Paolo Simonetti

The Self in/and History: Historiographic Autofiction in Contemporary US Literature

History in/as Fiction

How far back does a novel have to be set to be considered "historical"? Is there a tipping point when memory becomes history?[1] In György Lukács's classic definition, "the historical novel has to demonstrate by artistic means that historical circumstances and characters existed in precisely such and such a way;" in other words, to be defined "historical" a novel should feature "the portrayal of the broad living basis of historical events in their intricacy and complexity, in their manifold interaction with acting individuals" (43). Linda Hutcheon expanded on Lukács's idea, defining historical fiction "as that which is modelled on historiography to the extent that it is motivated and made operative by a notion of history as a shaping force" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 113).

Notably, the relationship between history and fiction – or "time and narrative," as for the title of Paul Ricoeur's seminal study – has been a debated issue since the times of Aristotle. In his groundbreaking (and controversial) work, *Metahistory*, Hayden White argued that any historical work is "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing* them" (2, italics in the original). Thus, no matter its pretense of objectivity, any historical reconstruction is inevitably informed by the author's "metahistorical" strategy, and so emplotted as a work of fiction.[2] American novelist E. L. Doctorow put it differently: "Facts are the images of history, just as images are the data of fiction"; "history is a kind of fiction in which we live and hope to survive, and fiction is a kind of speculative history, perhaps a superhistory" (24, 25).

The issue has become particularly urgent in our post-truth, post-Trump, post-postmodernist era, where "contemporary US writers employ an authorial mode that is questioning and skeptical, anti-positivist and distrustful of so-called master narratives of history" (Maxey 3). As a result, readers are led to assess the boundaries between fact and fiction, individual experience and collective history, with as much certainty as possible. In 2005, White himself declared that "we are full in the midst of a new kind of historical novel, if novel it be and however anti-historical it may seem" ("Introduction: Historical Fiction" 152). What is at stake in current literary representations of past events is the evaluation of the contact zone between the subject's individual experience and a public historical narrative grounded (mostly) on documentary research and first-hand testimony. However, it seems that traditional definitions of historical fiction are no longer appropriate.

For one thing, if we consider the author's direct involvement in the past events as a determining criterion, we end up leaving out of historical fiction the whole field of postmemorial narratives. Marianne Hirsch defined postmemory as a form of memory implying an emotional connection to a past that has not been personally experienced, but that is "shaped by stories we had read and heard, conversations we had had, by fears and fantasies associated with persecution and danger" (*The Generation of Postmemory* 4). These experiences "*seem* to constitute memories in their own right" (5) but, once transposed into a narrative, they occupy a transitional ground between personal involvement, secondary testimony, and fictional reinvention, representing a bridge between "traditional" historical novels and autobiographical narratives.

In the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur deals extensively with "the problem of the interweaving reference between history and narrative fiction" (82), so that his work takes the form of "a long and difficult threeway conversation between history, literary criticism, and phenomenological philosophy [...], three partners who usually ignore one another" (83). In this essay, I am going to investigate a similar "threeway conversation" that has emerged in contemporary US literature between historical novels, postmemorial narratives, and autofictions.

In this regard, I will take as case studies two historical novels

belonging to a peculiar, hybrid subgenre that I would tentatively call "historiographic autofiction," William T. Vollmann's 1994 novel *The Rifles* (as representative of his *Seven Dreams* cycle, whose most recent volume came out in 2015) and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004). Both novels are set in a (real or reimagined) historical past and have to do with historiographic reconstruction, but each author also appears in his own novel as a fictionalized narrator/character. The aim of my research is to analyze what happens when an author posits a fictionalized alter ego in a historical context, providing a narrative account focalized in terms of a self-historizing perspective. While Vollmann reimagines the history of the American continent as composed of seven dreams dreamed by a fictional alter ego and experienced by other autofictional characters who interact and blend with historical personages, Roth transforms his childhood memories into a uchronic nightmare, imagining an alternate history for the US around a peculiar autofictional version of himself.

When autofictional strategies are applied to historical narratives (uchronic or otherwise), they apparently provide factual legitimacy to subjective events while paradoxically presenting them as overtly fictional. Putting the author's fictional self in a historical setting lends credibility to the narration and gives the mark of sincerity and authenticity to the text, bestowing it with testimonial value. At the same time, the work's evident fictionality deconstructs any actual claim of objectivity or truthfulness, stressing the inevitable manipulation and stratification of history while encouraging reflections on how past narratives influence one's identity in the act of shaping (and being shaped by) one's life story.[3]

Before discussing these novels, however, it is necessary to briefly consider the contemporary developments of the US historical novel to see how this genre has crossed paths with autofiction and postmemorial narratives. Linda Hutcheon famously defined postmodernist historical narratives as "historiographic metafiction" – "fiction that is at once metafictional *and* historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past" (*Historiographic Metafiction* 3). Authors like Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut, Toni Morrison and Robert Coover, among others, rewrote history in their novels either by imagining alternative or counterfactual versions of significant events, or by devising historical

narratives related from marginal, de-localized, fragmented, anachronistic, non-ethnocentric points of view. Their works denied the reader the relief of a linear plot, employing schizophrenic language, anachronistic details, and fragmented structures to cope with the traumatic consciousness of post-Holocaust, Cold War America.

Amy J. Elias used the term "metahistorical romance" to define "narrative that bears striking similarities to those produced by traumatized consciousness" and that, besides being non-linear and metafictional, "problematizes memory" and "presents competing versions of past events" (52). In these narratives, history is neither exclusively "past" nor necessarily involved in the present unfolding of events: it acquires a subliminal, private dimension by becoming a work in progress, a never-ending construction that characters must constantly negotiate through a complex interplay of memory and imagination. According to Elias, "the movement from realism to romance that characterized metahistorical fiction from the 1960s to the 1990s is [...] informed by post-Holocaust, feminist and postcolonial *reality*," and has much to do with "the traumatized human consciousness [that] blurs the boundaries between realism and romance, fabulation and the world. What should be real is indefinable, inexact, hallucinatory; what should be fiction (or at the least, the narrative of memory) becomes the vehicle to organize the disorder of reality" (204).

No wonder that after WWII trauma studies have emerged as a thriving discipline in the literary field, since "trauma, as a paradigm of the historical event, possesses an absolute materiality, and yet, as inevitably missed or incompletely experienced, remains absent and inaccessible" (Crosthwaite 1). As we move away from memory toward history, and especially "as history seeps into the novel, it becomes transformed into something else, into what might be called history-in-the-novel" (Howe 1539). We might be led to think that such a displacement implies an objectification of personal experiences into a coherent narrative – a passage from the precariousness of recollection and the unreliability of first-person testimony to a factual organization of events through the process of storytelling. On the contrary, the author's personal investment in any historical narrative emerges once again as a crucial issue, not only for an apt definition of the genre but as an important marker to channel the readers' expectations and reactions

towards a specific text. When an author presents him/herself as a direct witness of a past event or of its reconstruction, the reader's confidence is potentially increased, though the degree of objectivity in the narrative may seem to diminish.

This, in turn, may help to explain the recent proliferation of memoirs and autofictions in the Anglo-American market. In 2009, Ben Yagoda noted that "memoir has become the central form of the culture" (28). Books labeled and presented as (more or less) fictionalized memoirs have been flooding American bookstores since the Nineties, and a significant portion of them is composed by autofictions, a term coined by French writer Serge Doubrovsky to designate novels in which an author's alter ego appears as the main character (often as the narrator of the story) with his/her name and clearly recognizable autobiographical details. Marjorie Worthington has defined American autofiction as "a hybrid genre that constantly shifts between the referential and the fictional" and that "combines the clearly fictional with the seemingly accurate biographical history of its authors"(12).[4] In recent years, autofictional strategies have been employed in several fields, such as "the visual arts, cinema, theatre and online," though "literature is the dominant form" (Gibbons 120).[5]

In the light of what David Shields described as the contemporary "reality hunger," the rise of memoir and autofiction appears to satisfy the current need for historical authenticity and sincerity.[6] It seems that many readers feel the ever-increasing necessity of assessing what we could trustily call 'true facts' through stories told by reliable, eye-witness narrators who adopt points of view as unbiased as objectively possible. At the same time, as a reaction to postmodernist irony and self-reflexive detachment, a great number of writers and readers cherish above all subjectivity and empathy, because these are deemed essential to any discourse that claims to be sincere.

Yet, as Shields points out, "how can we enjoy memoirs, believing them to be true, when nothing, as everyone knows, is so unreliable as memory?" (25). This is the reason why it is helpful to look at contemporary historical narratives through the lens of Elias' metahistorical romance, acknowledging that historical reconstructions could stem from fragmented, post-traumatic consciousnesses. Worthington notes how "the conscious and ironic distance between author and author-character could be said to mirror the

out-of-body sensation of the many trauma victims experience as they feel separated from themselves. Thus the autofictional author-character itself can be viewed as a symptom of that dissociation" (137).

Finally, we should always bear in mind Hirsch's idea of postmemorial narratives as representing experiences remembered "only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which [the authors] grew up" ("An Interview" n. pag.): such "postmemories" threaten to overwhelm and somehow displace the authors' private memories and life stories, as well as their documentary reconstructions. In the long run, this brings us directly to the "historiographic autofictional" impulse felt by Vollmann and Roth to creatively make their authorial presence felt in their historical fiction, performing (one could also say "researching") their own selves in history while metafictionally inventing their own (life-)stories through diverse literary means.[7]

William T. Vollmann's *The Rifles* and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*

It is widely acknowledged that the historical novel has a long and distinguished tradition in the US, but so does autofiction.[8] When Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, he was driven by an "autobiographical impulse" to add the famous introductory chapter, "The Custom-House." Striving to devise a historical romance, "Hawthorne the Surveyor" struggles with his imaginative faculties before acknowledging that he cannot write it while working in the custom-house: "It was a folly, with the materiality of this daily life pressing so intrusively upon me, to attempt *to fling myself back into another age*" (28; emphasis added). It seems that to write a proper romance Hawthorne's autofictional character must keep the past insulated from the tedious, prosaic present of the custom-house, but the past (along with the "postmemory" of his ancestors) intrudes upon his imagination, frustrating his project but paradoxically giving him material for its introductory chapter.

140 years later, William T. Vollmann took Hawthorne's cue and launched on an ambitious literary project that probably represents the first sustained attempt at historiographic autofiction in the US. *Seven Dreams:*

A Book of North American Landscapes is meant to be a "Symbolic History" of the colonization of the North American continent "that lies in the grey zone between fiction and history" (*Expelled from Eden* 447). Vollmann's original project blends documentary sources and figments of the author's imagination, personal memories and cultural myths, so that each book oscillates between the historical novel, the nineteenth-century travel narrative, the reportage, the autobiography, and the ethnographic work. Most importantly, Vollmann adopts a multiple, unstable autofictional persona as narrator and/or protagonist of the stories, as if reluctant to gain a proper distance from his reconstruction. No wonder that in 1990, the year of the publication of the septology's first volume, *The Ice-Shirt*, Vollmann told Larry McCaffery (who had asked him a list of the "contemporary" authors he most admired) that "Hawthorne may be the best" (36).

In letters and interviews, Vollmann has variously presented his project as "a historical novel," "a work of history disguised as a novel," "a work of history," "an accurate work of history" (Turner 153, 154), "in no way [...] a factual history of the dispossession of American Indians," yet "erected upon a foundation of fact" (*Expelled from Eden* 448). True enough, some of these definitions were probably tailored to persuade publishers to print his books without cuts and with all the additional material (drawings, maps, chronologies, glossaries, etc.), as well as to obtain official statements from public authorities, interviews from local people, or travel grants from magazines and institutions. Still, he was particularly keen in describing his project as "an account of origins and metamorphoses which is often untrue based on the literal facts as we know them, but whose untruths further a deeper sense of truth" (Vollmann, *The Rifles* 377). From the frontispiece of each volume to the final lists of sources, the author makes it clear how meticulous his documentary research is.

Vollmann fashioned a mythical alter ego as a general narrator of the stories, William the Blind, an ageless storyteller who supposedly relates his historical dreams. Besides being a symbolic incarnation of the sightless poet and seer, William the Blind is immediately recognizable as the author's counterpart, his nickname alluding to Vollmann's bad eyesight, often remarked upon in his novels and interviews. Nor does the narrator's voice remain confined within the plot itself, since he features prominently

in the extremely rich paratextual apparatus: for instance, the last entry of *The Ice-Shirt*'s historical chronology states that in 1987 "William the Blind explores Iceland, Greenland and Baffin Island" (394), mirroring Vollmann's travels in that year. The narrator's blindness also indicates Vollmann's empathic willingness to see through the eyes of his characters, an attempt "to produce a plural, polyphonic voice, echoing multiple fictive self-portraits of the author in quest for a new incarnation" (Palleau-Papin 22). As time passed, William the Blind evolved into Vollmann's full-fledged doppelgänger, able to inherit his author's legacy and sign articles meant to chastise unflattering reviewers.

The Rifles – published in 1994 but chronologically intended to be the series' penultimate volume – is Vollmann's most original experiment in historiographic autofiction. Here the autofictional element triples, since William the Blind is flanked by Captain (Bill) Subzero, who besides being a second alter ego of the author, is also a contemporary projection, the "supernatural twin" (137), of Captain John Franklin (1786-1847), the British Arctic explorer who died of lead poisoning near King William Island during an expedition to find the Northwest Passage. The novel deals with Franklin's voyages, but it is also an investigation of Inuit life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a reportage on the contemporary situation of the local people, as well as a personal account of Vollmann's travels to the northern parts of Canada and to the Magnetic Pole, where he ran the risk of freezing to death "to get into Sir John Franklin's mind, and see what it would be like to be all alone, up in the Arctic" (Lukes 102).

In his novel, Vollmann adopts a multifaceted, unstable point of view that shifts continually according to the fluctuations of characters' voices and the subsequent oscillations of personal pronouns: the narrator often metafictionally addresses both his protagonist/writer Subzero – "You wanted to own alternative selves so that you could be both self and other" (Vollman, *The Rifles* 162) – and the reader: "Now you want to get to the point of it; you fail to see why we've unzipped each other's pants to embark on the Fourth Expedition but then regressed to the Second" (123). At other times, the narration switches to the historical novel's traditional third person, but this may happen in the middle of a sentence, especially while the narrator is discussing autobiographical details such as Subzero's two-

week stay at the Pole. In other parts, during a historical reconstruction, the narrator abruptly acknowledges his merging subjectivity: "Of course, Franklin himself, who is myself, never thought in these terms" (107). The result is a polyphonic, kaleidoscopic narrative moving back and forth in time and space, where history is "diffused" in the present and the authorial perspective is always slightly out-of-synch like an endless mirroring – a situation the narrator himself sums up as follows: "there were Franklin, Subzero, you, yours truly, me, myself and I" (134).

Vollmann's autofictional strategy stems from the novelist/historian's self-admitted desire to "get closest to these bygone people, by looking at some place that they would have looked at with their eyes" (Lukes 219). Among the "rules of writing" the author published in 1990, there is one that we could consider a manifesto of his fiction, and particularly of the *Seven Dreams* series:

> Unless we are much more interesting than we imagine we are, we should strive to feel not only about Self, but also about Other. [...] *Not* the Other as a negation or eclipse of the Self. Not even about the Other exclusive of Self, because that is but a trickster-egoist's way of worshipping Self secretly. We must treat Self and Other as equal partners. (*Expelled from Eden* 332)

Undoubtedly, William the Blind (1), Subzero (2), and Franklin (3) are "equal partners" in constructing the text of *The Rifles*, all of them contributing to the reinvention/reconstruction of the past from imagination/myth (1), experience/memory/research (2), and impersonation/performance (3). To find the much sought-after "passage" (not only between the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans, but also between the present and a bygone historical past), the writer must undergo a continuous negotiation between self and other, memory and history. As Vollmann stated in an interview, *The Rifles* "is not about me and it's not about places I've been" (Lukes 74). The autofictional character does not necessarily signal a narcissistic attitude, nor it represents an ideological attempt to reclaim a lost authority/authorship. On the contrary, to put several versions of himself in the narrative and to "diffuse" the past in the present, blending it with memories and feelings of the places visited, is the writer's act of respect for a factual truth that otherwise can be altogether unreachable, "a way of representing the weird,

flickering, simultaneous nature of perceptions in reality" (220). In fact, to the conscientious historical novelist "it seems disrespectful to just make things up" (102).

Though he concedes that William the Blind is "a bit more of a confused bumbler" than "William Vollmann," who admittedly is only "a semi-confused bumbler" (220),[9] the author states his rationale in an interview: "Not to appear at all would be disingenuous on my part" (Hemmingson 142). However, the narrator's inevitable unreliability is balanced by the thick documentary appendixes at the end of the books that include not only information about the historical characters but also the author's correspondence and interviews. As Vollmann states, "[i]t's so easy to be manipulated by the media, whose main goal isn't to provide historical accuracy but entertaining versions that will sell [...]. I want to encourage readers to understand what my versions were based on, and if they disagree, they can go and look up this stuff and decide for themselves" (8). In this sense, Vollmann's historiographic autofiction is also meant to empower the readers, allowing them to make an informed choice about the author's historical reconstruction and autonomously establish what (and whom) to trust.

If Vollmann considers not to put himself in his historical narratives disrespectful, Philip Roth has been accused by embittered critics of encumbering his works with his own presence. During his long and prolific career, he experimented on different literary genres, systematically trespassing the boundaries between fact and fiction and creating multiple versions of himself: he wrote a metafictional autobiography, a proper memoir about his father, several semi-autobiographical novels, an autofiction, historical novels based mostly on his recollections, semi-autobiographical counterfactual novels, and uchronias based on his childhood memories, such as *Nemesis*[10] and *The Plot Against America*. The latter also represents Roth's most intriguing contribution to historiographic autofiction.

In the book – "at once a dystopian novel, a historical novel, a *Bildungsroman*, postmodernist fiction and/or realist text" (Morley 140) – Roth provides an alternative history of the US during the 1940s, imagining that the nation remained neutral during WWII in consequence of pro-Nazi aviator Charles Lindbergh's election as 33rd president instead of

Franklin D. Roosevelt. The novel's autofictional dimension is activated by the narrator, "Philip Roth," who recalls his childhood through the eyes of his eight-year-old fictitious alter ego, as the author stated in an essay: "At the center of the story is a child, myself at seven, eight, and nine years of age. The story is narrated by me as an adult looking back some sixty years at the experience of that child's family during the Lindbergh presidency" (*Why Write?* 340).

The story alternates between the narrator's remembrance of his (fictional but plausible) childhood experiences in an alternative past and his adult self's reconstruction of a (likewise fictional but plausible) history. Like Vollmann, Roth is careful to add a lengthy final postscript stating that the book "is a work of fiction" and that the reader "interested in tracking where historical fact ends and historical imagining begins" can find here the documentary sources he used, along with a "true chronology of the major figures" and "some documentation" (*The Plot* 364). As evidence of Roth's historical rigorousness stands the Society of American Historians' Prize received by *The Plot Against America* for "the outstanding historical novel on an American theme for 2003-2004."

The usual gap between narrator and protagonist – between the consciousness of the boy who experiences the events and that of the adult self who is telling the story – is further complicated by the dual perspective offered by uchronia – where history as the narrator tells it overlaps with history as we remember it. In this case, we find a mediated account of the sort described by Hirsch as "a triangulated look with which we engage images of childhood vulnerability in the context of persecution and genocide" (*The Generation of Postmemory* 156). Thus, in writing the book Roth had to acknowledge a constant negotiation between memory, history, and imagination, as he stated in an interview:

> What if Lindbergh had become president? […] And then what would it have been like for us, I thought, us – my mother, my father, my brother and me, and our family? How could I use *my family exactly, an exact portrait*, and just have them behave as I think they would have behaved in that situation; and so that's what I did. Now, I really did think, what would my mother have done here? What would my father have done there? What would I have done? (Sykes n. pag.; emphasis added)

The Plot Against America features a threefold splitting of the authorial character, "three distinct Philip Roths: the historical Roth, who fulfills the role of implied author; the fictional projection of Roth, who narrates the novel from the present day; and the child Roth, who acts as the novel's protagonist" (Siegel 137). Yet these three authorial projections do not interfere with themselves nor with the historical characters (as it happens in Vollmann's novel), so that the short-circuit is only in the mind of the reader, who knows that events did not happen that way but is nonetheless forced by the "reality" of Roth's alter ego, as well as by the truthful information and details about his family, not to discredit the narrative completely.

Roth uses his peculiar version of historiographic autofiction to uncover the multitudinous desires, contradictions, possibilities, and potentialities of history, as his narrator states in the novel: "Turning the wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as 'History,' harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic" (*The Plot* 113-14). Roth's alter ego takes (implicit) responsibility for the historical distortions he created: "I was the one who had started it off – that devastation had been done by me" (337). Though he is ostensibly talking about his nocturnal escapade, "Roth" is also implicitly referring to the structure of his book, since besides being a naive child, he is also a projection of the *romancer* at work on his historical narrative.

Thus, Roth literally 'translates' a fictional version of himself as a child-romancer into an imaginary historical narrative that has much to do with contemporary America. In Roth's alternative past, the "ghosts" of the author's parents and relatives perform a function similar to the ghosts of Hawthorne's ancestors in "The Custom-House": they embody traces of unresolved traumas and uncomfortable memories – or better, postmemorial narratives and alternative possibilities that the nation's official history has willingly forgotten, relegating them in the realm of the "not likely" or "not possible." On the other hand, in *The Rifles*, Vollmann projects his present research and experiences, as well as his fictional alter ego, into the

nineteenth century of Sir John Franklin's explorations. In so doing, the *romancer* invades the historical narrative, becoming not only a historian in search of a manuscript (as in the traditional nineteenth-century literary device) but also a historical character who, in turn, interacts with (and impersonates) the (also autobiographical) narrator as well as the readers.

If it is true that "the appeal of biography or autobiography lies in the fact that suspension of disbelief is not necessary if the events being chronicled actually took place" (Worthington 158), then Vollmann and Roth's historiographic autofictions reinstate disbelief in a historical dimension that is too often taken for granted, showing how historical narratives can be at the same time subjective and objectively exact, accurately researched and imperfectly remembered, without necessarily being "untrue." Just as we, as readers, are continuously negotiating our emotional involvement with the inevitably artificial reality of a text, historiographic autofiction performs (and makes explicit) the constant negotiation between the author as a researcher/novelist and the character as an instable object of research/reinvention. Only through such a sustained effort can a writer hope to offer a historical narration from an honest, sincere, and informed point of view.

Notes

[1] To select which books to review, the *Historical Novel Review*'s editorial board came up in 2002 with a working definition for historical fiction: "A novel which is set fifty or more years in the past, and one in which the author is writing from research rather than personal experience" (Johnson 2). If this may seem arbitrary, one should consider that the judges of the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction, one of the most prestigious literary awards in the UK, use the threshold implicitly stated in the subtitle of Scott's *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since*, and consider "historical" a novel in which the majority of the storyline must have taken place at least 60 years before the publication. Definitions like these cannot be satisfactory, and the reviewers themselves occasionally break their own rules.

[2] For a discussion on skepticism, relativism, and tolerance in Hayden White's thought as related to Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile's works, see Ginzburg.

[3] Autofiction may also be useful to discuss the central position and the epistemological authority (and reliability) of the witness. For a thorough reflection on the issues raised by the proliferation of manifold testimonies that "come to participate in a collective memory – or collective memories – that vary in their form, function, and in the implicit or explicit

aims they set for themselves," see Wieviorka (xii).

[4] I find Worthington's definition more inclusive – and so more useful for the purpose of this study – than Frank Zipfel's, who defines autofiction as "a homodiegetic narrative that declares itself to be fiction [...] but actually relates events of the author's own life and identifies the author in the text by his or her real name" (36).

[5] Worthington has traced the rise of autofiction in American literature to "several different catalysts," such as "the increasing focus in literary modernism on techniques that attempt to portray the intricacies of human consciousness"; the "death of the author" debates that clash with the more recent "democratization of authorship made possible by the myriad new-media outlets"; the "authorial anxieties that stemmed from the literary gains made by women and writers of color"; the intensification of the attention to the potential fictionalization of real events advocated by New Journalism (5). Surely enough, a great boost to autofiction came from the Internet. In some cases, the author's construction of an autofictional alter ego becomes akin to a literary version of the doctored selfies on one's Instagram stories, so that "fans of a particular celebrity might possibly confront an autofictional text in much the same way they might a tabloid: they know at the outset that much of the information conveyed may be untrue, but they enjoy reading it anyway" (77).

[6] For the "new sincerity" trend in American fiction, see Kelly, Konstantinou, Pignagnoli, Simonetti ("Dopo la caduta").

[7] For a further analysis of how Hirsch's definition of postmemory might be extended to hybrid forms of autobiographical writing such as the fraudulent survivor's autobiography and the counterfactual memoir, see Simonetti ("Inventing Postmemory").

[8] We could even read the protagonist/narrator of the first work of American literature that was successful in Europe, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), as the author's autofictional persona.

[9] According to Lukács, Scott's historical novels have a "mediocre, prosaic hero as the central figure" who can provide "a neutral ground," "upon which the extreme, opposite social forces can be brought into a human relationship with one another" (34, 36, 37). One of the functions of Vollmann's "bumbler" hero is to empathize with the people he is writing about, while forging an intimate relationship with the reader through a confessional stance.

[10] *Nemesis* can be considered a uchronia because the devastating polio epidemic imagined by Roth did not take place in Newark in the summer of 1944 as described in the novel. In the course of the twentieth century, two relevant polio outbreaks happened in the United States, the first in 1916 and the second in 1952.

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"War Is Ninety Percent Myth": Post-postmodern Revisions of Vietnam in Denis Johnson's *Fiskadoro* and *Tree of Smoke*

We're on the cutting edge of reality itself.
Right where it turns into a dream.
(Denis Johnson, *Tree of Smoke*)

The critical debate concerning a change of paradigm in fiction after the exhaustion of post-modernism in the late 1980s is rich and multifaceted. Some scholars recognized that fiction underwent a conservative return to conventionally realist aesthetics.[1] In his *Post-Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* Jeffrey T. Nealon regards the change of paradigm as an expression of "an intensification and mutation within postmodernism" (ix), brought about by the emergence of the new economies where capital rests "in the orbit of symbolic exchange and information technologies" (20). Robert McLaughlin reads post-postmodernism neither as a break, nor as an intensification, but rather as a refocusing on some aspects that were neglected in postmodernism. McLaughlin acknowledges post-postmodern authors' aim at reconnecting with "something beyond representation, something extralinguistic, something real" ("Post-postmodernism" 213). He also points out that post-postmodern authors tend to spend less time exposing their own fiction's artificiality and restore – with varying degrees of transparency – the respect towards the suspension of disbelief of classical realism. Nonetheless, while post-postmodernism puts less effort in drawing attention to its own style as style, "it never represents an unproblematically knowable world or treats representation unproblematically" (219).

Post-postmodern authors do not reject their immediate predecessors' diagnosis concerning the contingency of truth and the self-referentiality of representation. On the contrary, their plots often revolve around characters discovering that their sense of reality is a fictitious construct, the result of a complex network of representations. Post-postmodernism also shares the same deconstructive attitude towards totalizing systems of knowledge and master narratives, exposing their nature as arbitrary constructions and stressing the impossibility to gain a stable knowledge. As far as issues regarding representation, master narratives and epistemology are concerned, McLaughlin argues that "[p]ost-postmodernism offers not a move away from this attitude but rather [...] a change of focus" (221). Where postmodernism denounced the uncertainty of epistemological systems, post-postmodernism takes it for granted, and considers it a starting point to ask constructive questions: What to do with it? How to live with the limits of knowledge? How to represent the real while acknowledging that representation is self-referential?

An emblematic example of this change of focus is represented by Denis Johnson's body of work. An attempt at labeling Johnson as a "post-postmodernist" author is partly unfair, given the uniqueness of his literary project, which pre-dates what are generally considered the manifestos of post-postmodernism, like David Foster Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram" (1993). Nevertheless, as I will argue, Johnson's work is certainly characterized by the post-postmodern attitude of both acknowledging the unknowability of truth beyond representation and seeking for a way to live constructively with the limits of knowledge. As we will see, in his work there is a sense that these same limits may even possess a redemptive quality, not devoid of spiritual connotations.

Johnson's work engages also with another salient feature of postmodernism: its apocalyptic penchant for ultimacy and finality. As John Barth maintains in his pivotal essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," postmodernism "reflects and deals with ultimacy, both technically and thematically" (67). Leaving aside the engagement with ultimacy on a technical level, from a thematic standpoint a "fascination with the new beginnings to be found in endings" (Burn 14) is certainly central in Denis Johnson's fiction, but it has, again, a different focus than postmodernism:

the stress is not on the collapse of a world (which often entails the collapse of a system of knowledge), but on how to live purposefully once the end of that world (and the collapse of that system) has already occurred.

In this article I am going to focus on two novels that are dominated by an unsettling sense of aftermath. Both novels deal with the preoccupation of how to live after apocalyptic events that are both collective and individual. I will discuss Johnson's sprawling Vietnam novel *Tree of Smoke* (2007) and connect it with one of his early works, the post-apocalyptic phantasmagoria *Fiskadoro* (1985). Denis Johnson's body of work is engineered so that each new novel expands on previously written novels. His novels are all linked together by the Balzacian technique of recurring characters, present also in other contemporary authors (Roberto Bolaño being a prominent example). This intertextual system of references prompts us to see his novels as various pieces of a unitary universe. From this standpoint, his body of work becomes a homogenous collective narrative of a decaying American empire whose destiny is the one imagined in *Fiskadoro*.

Johnson's second novel, *Fiskadoro* is a hallucinatory prophecy about the end of American history. The novel imagines that the decline of the US empire started with the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975, the conclusive episode of the Vietnam War. Everything that happened afterwards led to a nuclear holocaust that not only precipitated America into a Third World condition, but also erased its collective memory. The description of the fall of Saigon is the novel's only incursion into the past, focalized through the eyes of a British-Vietnamese teenage girl, Marie, who will later survive the nuclear holocaust and become the oldest person in *Fiskadoro*'s fallen world. *Fiskadoro*'s implication that the fall of Saigon marks the beginning of the decay of the US Empire haunts the Vietnam novel *Tree of Smoke*, which revolves around the historical event that, according to Johnson, marked the origin of the collapse. As we will see, both *Tree of Smoke* and *Fiskadoro* convey a conception of cultural memory as lacking the redemptive power attributed to it by most modernist writers, although not by all of them (William Faulkner constituting a notable exception). Memory reveals itself to be a self-referential interweaving of representations, an uncertain system of knowledge unable to provide a privileged access to truth or to a deeper meaning. On the contrary, both novels provocatively suggest that

an occasion of personal and collective renewal can be found in amnesia, and especially the oblivion of US imperialist history. The question Johnson asks his reader is the same pronounced by a marginal character in *Tree of Smoke*: "Why must we have any legacy at all?" (242).

As Timothy Melley rightly points out, in contemporary fiction amnesia has become "a metaphor for historiographical dilemmas – for the sense that it is no longer possible to ground historical narratives securely and that the failure to do so has led to dangerous forms of collective forgetting" (174-75). Amnesia symbolizes the crisis of historical referentiality that has been extensively diagnosed by French cultural critic and philosopher Jean Baudrillard. In his critical work, Baudrillard regarded the Vietnam war as the seminal moment that marks the passage of history into simulation, where meaning implodes through a global network of information. As he points out: "What sense did that war make, if not that its unfolding sealed *the end of history* in the culminating and decisive event of our age?" (66, emphasis added). *Tree of Smoke* can be read as a chronicle of the exact transition described by the French philosopher, when the boundaries between history, fiction and mythmaking imploded sealing the end of the possibility to ground any historical narrative.[2]

A pastiche of different genres (especially war novel and spy-story), *Tree of Smoke* is written in Johnson's habitual minimal style and with a linear chronological structure. It presents an intricate plot stretching from the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1963 to 1970, with an epilogue in 1983. The narration is fragmented, displaying selected slices of the experiences of a wide range of characters. The novel's espionage plots and subplots remain mainly opaque to the reader. As the author Norman Rush pointed out in an early review, the reader "sees these various projects in silhouette only" (n. pag.), and fully understands only that the majority of these missions end up truncated or aborted.

The novel's chief protagonist is William "Skip" Sands, a young CIA recruit from Kansas who is engaged in the Psychological Operations against the Vietcongs under the directions of his uncle, Francis Xavier Sands, nicknamed "The Colonel." A melancholy and inchoate individual who feels "central to nothing" (37) and has a scholarly background, Skip is initially imbued with patriotism and binary oppositions, hoping to follow

in the footsteps of his larger-than-life uncle. His certainties start to waver during an operation in Manila, when he becomes the unwitting accomplice of the assassination of a priest (and suspected gunrunner) named Carignan. He is then assigned the task of sorting and cross-referencing a massive amount of file cards assembled by the colonel during his career, holed up in a villa in the Vietnam jungle belonging to a deceased French doctor (Dr. Bouquet). Not only will the file cards prove to be useless, but Skip will also find out that the unnarrativized pieces of random information they contain, summed up with Dr. Bouquet's fragmented letters and diaries, fail to provide any knowledge or final meaning. In the absence of a structural narrative that conveys truth, these fragments of texts lead only to a state of permanent doubt. At some point Skip finds in Bouquet's letters a quotation from Cioran that aptly represents the condition of radical doubt where he is stuck: "This state of sterility in which we neither advance nor retreat, this peculiar marching-in-place, is precisely where doubt leads us, a state which resembles in many respects the 'dry places' of the mystics" (355).

While Skip's "state of sterility" is provoked by his discovery that the cards can never be cross-referenced in any way that may produce a coherent knowledge, the possibility to achieve such a coherence is further undermined by the Colonel's methods, which deliberately deploy the conflation between facts and mythology as a weapon. The Colonel is a disciple of the cold warrior (and counterinsurgency guru) Edward Lansdale, who "became famous for his ethnographic approach to intelligence" (Melley 130) and is rumored to have provided the model for Graham Greene's *The Quiet American.*[3] According to the legend surrounding the Colonel's past, "Lansdale had shaped his [the Colonel's] methods: trust the locals, learn their songs and stories, fight for their hearts and minds" (Johnson, *Tree* 449). The Colonel's policy is guided by the conviction that the key to a successful military strategy can be found in an understanding of the enemy's myths and folklore. As he pontificates: "War is ninety percent myth anyway, isn't it? In order to prosecute our own wars we raise them to the level of human sacrifice, don't we, and we constantly invoke our God. It's got to be about something bigger than dying, or we'd all turn deserter" (54). Starting from this assumption, the Colonel plots an operation involving an intelligence network which seeks "to create fictions and serve them to our policy-

makers in order to control the direction of government" (254). The name of the final step of this operation, "Tree of Smoke," is both a quotation from the biblical Book of Joel (445) and an evocation of the image of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The name therefore suggests that the final step of the operation deals with the American strategy of deterrence (the simulated threat of the nuclear weapon). According to Baudrillard, it was exactly deterrence that connoted the Vietnam war as the event that sealed the impossibility to distinguish between real and fictional threats (66). In the novel the conflation between fiction and reality also lies at the basis of another operation, "Project Labyrinth" (Johnson, *Tree* 344), which involves the exploitation of Vietnamese mythology to dissuade the Vietcongs from using their own underground tunnels. In the Colonel's own words: "This land is their myth. We penetrate this land, we penetrate their heart, their myth, their soul. That's real infiltration. And that's our mission: penetrating the myth of the land" (212). Skip is enrolled also in this operation, for which he is ordered "to extract an encyclopedia of mythological references from over seven hundred volumes of Vietnamese literature" (145).

As the plot unfolds, the distinction between fictions and facts blurs and collapses, together with other binary oppositions. The boundaries between the two fronts of US and Vietnam become also increasingly permeable, due to the proliferation of double agents, internal fights and a general imposition of American consumerism to the Vietnamese population. The impossibility to access any grounded reality gives way to a triumph of abstraction. As Skip admits to himself: "He'd come to war to see abstractions become realities. Instead he'd seen the reverse. Everything was abstract now" (357).

While the postmodern conflation between facts, simulation, and mythology characterizes the Vietnam war, also the memory of the antebellum past does not provide a privileged access to reality. On the contrary, it appears equally overburdened by legends and fictions. As the narration unfolds, Skip gradually comes to terms with the fact that the country he is fighting for – and the ideals it represents – exists only in his (unreliable) reminiscences: "He loved and fought for a memory. The world inheriting this memory had a right, he couldn't help seeing, to make its way

unbeholden to assassinated ideals" (330). Skip's memory of his homeland maintains the idealized aura of a childhood nostalgia, transfiguring his hometown, Clements, Kansas (where his widowed mother still lives), into a Wizard of Oz-esque mythical space. While Skip believes in the reality of the phantasmagoric America of his childhood, the news reaching him about the present reality of his country (namely, the deaths of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy in 1968) appear to him "improbable, fictitious" (329). As the news convey the impression that "the homeland from which he was exiled had sunk in the ocean of its future history" (329), Skip clings to the nostalgic illusion that the hometown of his childhood has remained untouched by historical change. His memory assumes the contours of out-of-time pastoral idyl: "Clements, Kansas, remained as it had been, of that he could be confident; to Clements, Kansas, only one summer could come, with its noisy locusts and blackbirds, and the drifting fragrances of baking and soap suds and mown alfalfa, and the brilliant actuality of childhood" (329-30). Skip's intention to remain as far away from Kansas as possible is nurtured by a desire to keep his hometown identical to that of his memories and his nostalgic idealization. In this respect it is meaningful that, when he goes back to the United States before his first mission in the Philippines, he keeps away from his hometown and from his mother. As he acknowledges: "Sure: war, intrigue, the fates – certainly, he'd face them. Just, please, not Mom. Not her laundry flapping in the sorrows of springtime. Not Clements, Kansas, with its historical license to be tiny, low, and square" (148).

Through Skip's contradictory relationship with his hometown, Johnson offers a parodic version of an important aspect characterizing of the crisis of historicity: the rise of a postmodern nostalgia, which has been analyzed extensively by Fredric Jameson. According to Jameson, postmodern nostalgia is the collective desire to appropriate an idealized past through aesthetic representation, emptying the signs of the past of their historical referents and approaching "the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image, and '1930s-ness' or '1950s-ness'" – in particular, the 1950s "remain the privileged lost object of desire" (19). By way of analogy, in order to remain a phantomatic object of desire, Clements, Kansas must remain a lost object. In order to

preserve his nostalgic memory from the changes of history, Skip chooses to remain as distant as possible from his home for the rest of his life: "Here, in Manila, [...] he couldn't get much farther away. But it wasn't far enough" (Johnson, *Tree* 148).

The need to keep the past alive through a mythology is also epitomized by the tale that Skip learns from a Vietnamese old woman at some point in the novel. The story revolves around a child whose father has left the family to fight in a war. Every night his mother holds him close to a lantern and shows him her shadow, pretending that the shadow is the missing father standing by the door. "Immediately the child was comforted by the shadow" (331). However, when the father returns from war, the child does not recognize him, still persuaded that the shadow is his real father: "Alone with his child, the man said, 'Come to me, I am your father.' But the child said, 'Daddy's not here now. Every night I say goodnight to Daddy. You're not Daddy.' As he heard these words, the soldier's love perished in his heart" (331). The tale goes on with a series of bleak events caused by this misrecognition, which eventually lead to the deaths of all the characters. What is at stake with this cautionary tale is the idea that the attempt to keep the past alive is inevitably overburdened by mythology, and that this mythology prevents us from recognizing the real possibilities of the present. At the same time, this wisdom is available in the form of myth. Therefore, while every system of knowledge proves to be blurred with mythology, mythology itself still seems to bear a connection with truth. As knowledge is available only through a plurality of narratives, the problem of *Tree of Smoke*'s characters therefore becomes not which narrative actually tells the truth, but which mythologies help living in the present (and which ones must be discarded).

An example of a character entrapped in a dysfunctional mythology of the past is provided by another main character in the novel, the Canadian lay missionary Kathy Jones. She meets Skip for the first time in the Philippines, where she initially mistakes him for her missing husband, a Seventh-Day Adventist pastor named Timothy. When the news of Timothy's death reaches her, she decides to remain in the South Pacific, eventually moving to Vietnam to volunteer in some lay organizations helping children without medical care. She becomes Skip's lover, although

they see each other on scattered occasions and carry on a mostly epistolary relationship. While Kathy's love affair with Skip can be read as a strategy to maintain a connection with her deceased husband (given the physical resemblance between the two men), her attempt to keep the past alive passes also through her increasing obsession with the book left by Timothy before his disappearance, containing "the dreadful essays of John Calvin and his doctrine of predestination, promising a Hell full of souls made expressly to be damned" (83). Far from being an expression of faith, Kathy's tormented surrendering to the Calvinist doctrine – defined as a "spiritual pornography" to which she returns "like a dog to her vomit" (83) – can be read as an attempt to maintain a connection with the past, which, nonetheless, shatters any belief in the possibility that her actions can change the inevitability of her predestined damnation. Strictly related to Puritanism, one of the core foundational myths of the American experience (although Kathy is Canadian), the Calvinist belief becomes the only master narrative that can explain the arbitrariness of suffering in what Kathy conceives as a "fallen world" (291). As Kathy sees that "survival was a breeze that touched some and not others" (241), she assumes that the same occurs with salvation and damnation. She writes to Skip: "I know that this is Hell, right here, planet Earth, and I know that you, me, and all of us were made by God only to be damned" (156). Again, what the past has to offer is not a key to understand the present, but the legacy of a mythological master narrative (Calvinism) that, in Kathy's case, does not convey meaning but despair. As she acknowledges: "I started reading Calvin, wrestling with Calvin, and I lost the fight and got dragged down into Calvin's despair. Calvin doesn't call it despair but it's despair all right" (156).

In this respect it is meaningful that the novel's epilogue, set in 1983 and separated from the rest of the novel by an ellipsis covering 13 years, closes with a hopeful note that is linked to Kathy Jones's ability to finally leave the past behind. Married again and living in Minneapolis, Kathy meets a friend at a restaurant and confesses about Timothy: "I have no memory of him" (602). When, during the same conversation, the past reaches her in the form of some delayed letters from Skip (who has been executed in Kuala Lumpur for smuggling guns), she realizes that her memory of Skip has also

become vague: "Skip she didn't remember nearly as well. More boy than man. He joked, he evaded, he dissembled, he lied, he gave you nothing to remember" (610). Towards the end of the novel Kathy is in an auditorium, attending an event where the children-refugees of American soldiers are being honored. While waiting for the event to begin, she briefly relives the memory of her survival from the evacuation from Saigon. Nonetheless, her attitude seems open to the future, as she is entrusted with the novel's enigmatic final words: "there are people in this audience with broken bones, others whose bones will break sooner or later, people who've ruined their health, worshipped their own lies, spat on their dreams, turned their backs on their true beliefs, yes, yes, and all will be saved. All will be saved. All will be saved" (614). The words that conclude the novel show that Kathy's moving forward from the past coincides with her getting rid of the Calvinist master narrative that in her case constituted the main device to keep the past alive. Having left the past behind, she is free to choose which narrative to project onto the future: "All will be saved," and not just the chosen ones. This belief comes out of thin air and is not grounded in any epiphanic event occurring in the course of the novel. It is worth noticing that the novel's final words are a nearly literal quotation from St. Paul's first letter to Timothy, which reads: "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved" (1 Timothy, 3-4). The name of Kathy's former husband, Timothy, may be read as a hint at the addressee of St. Paul's letter. It is an ironic reference, given that the belief in the eventual salvation of all stands squarely opposed to the Calvinist doctrine of predetermined damnation.

Given that the events that await humanity in Denis Johnson's narrative universe are the catastrophic ones narrated in *Fiskadoro*, the last words of *Tree of Smoke* are also colored by a dark ambiguity. Nevertheless, a comparison with the ending of *Fiskadoro* will provide a key to interpret the specific kind of salvation addressed by Johnson, as will be discussed later. For now, it is sufficient to point out that the ending of *Tree of Smoke* provides a paradigmatic example of the "change of focus" that McLaughlin attributes to post-postmodernism. While, as we have seen, Denis Johnson instills *Tree of Smoke* with Baudrillard's and Jameson's shared conception of postmodernism as the age of simulacra and simulations, it treats

this condition as a starting point to re-establish a quest for meaning and redemption. While it chronicles the end of history, the novel also explores how personal and collective renewals are possible on the basis of this same end. The idea that the end of history is the basis for a possible palingenesis is the point where *Tree of Smoke* finds its connection with the imaginary future of *Fiskadoro*. A comparison between the two novels is necessary to understand how Johnson's literary project engages with the idea that, as Timothy Parrish puts it, "postmodern history, no less than any understanding of history that precedes it, seeks its own transcendence" (267).

The 1985 novel *Fiskadoro* takes place some sixty years after a nuclear holocaust has destroyed the United States. The setting is the Florida Keys (all that remains of the country), and more specifically what used to be Key West and now has been renamed Twicetown (because two missiles landed there but did not explode). This survived zone of America is called the "Quarantine," insofar as, after the bomb fell, it remained quarantined both geographically and temporally. The Quarantine is both a transitional "time between civilizations" and "a place ignored by authority" (Johnson, *Fiskadoro* 12). The civilization preceding the Quarantine is America as we know it, while the second one refers to the Cuban rescuers that will put an end to the Quarantine (and who are never shown in the novel). One of them is the unnamed, apparently Muslim, narrator of the story. As already mentioned, collective memory of the previous civilization has been erased, and the few relics left, deprived of context, become misleading and emptied of meaning in the absence of a structural narrative that ties them together. The population of the Quarantine is both racially and linguistically creolized (they speak a mixture of English and Spanish). Moreover, the religion that has survived from the previous world is a syncretic system that puts "the god Quetzalcoatl, the god Bob Marley, the god Jesus" (3) on the same level. The Quarantine is also a pre-capitalist society where "whole islands were given over to the cultivation of rice, while sugar cane was a product only of patient neighborhood gardeners" (3). Therefore, what the novel implies is that the population survived from the nuclear holocaust is especially composed by the marginalized elements of the master narrative of American exceptionalism.

The novel's three main characters (and focalizers) are all multiracial. Mr. Cheung is a clarinet player and one of the few musicians left. He is obsessed with the reconstruction of the lost collective memory. Cheung's centenarian grandmother, known as Grandmother Wright, is the only living human being who remembers the previous civilization, although she is mute and only the reader has access to her memories. The novel's eponymous character, a thirteen-year-old black Latino fisherman's son named Fiskadoro (possibly a Christological reference, conflating the Spanish words *pescador*, meaning "fisherman," and *fisgador*, meaning "harpooner"), unsuccessfully studies clarinet with Mr. Cheung. The death at sea of his father ends the lessons; maddened by grief, Fiskadoro goes on a sort of visionary quest. He is abducted by a tribe of primitive swamp dwellers who will initiate him through a crude subincision ritual. The ritual leads to a drug-related loss of long-term memory. While the initiation ritual makes him "different from all other men" (193), it also prepares him for the civilization of the future. As the narrator underscores, he is "the one known to us best of all, the only one who was ready when we came" (12). As the novel makes explicit, Fiskadoro's short-term memory is what makes him fit for the next civilization, which preludes to a renewal of humanity.

Accordingly, *Fiskadoro* configures itself as a mythical-religious narrative belonging to the civilization following the Quarantine. It is, again, a parable conveying a provocative critique of the practice of history. The unidentified narrator takes it as a doctrinal postulate that thinking "about the past contributes nothing to the present endeavor, and in fact to concern ourselves too greatly with the past is a sin, because it distracts our mind from the real and current blessing showered down on us in every heartbeat out of the compassion and mercy and bounty of Allah" (12). Nevertheless, his or her very activity as narrator paradoxically demonstrates that the urge to tell the story of the past is still present in the next civilization.

In the novel the practice of history is represented by Mr. Cheung, who belongs to the Society for Science, a faction of five intellectuals who try to reconstruct the past civilization. They have only access to two salvaged books, Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and a children's book called *All About Dinosaurs*. As with Colonel Sands' fragmentary file cards in *Tree of Smoke*, gaining any meaning from these texts becomes an ineffectual

effort given the absence of a context structuring them into a knowledge. As Mr. Cheung admits to himself: "By what light was this fact called 'knowledge?' Wasn't it just one more inexplicable thing to mystify them, didn't it subtract from what they knew, rather than add to it?" (47). When the society trades a fishing boat for another salvaged book, which turns out to be the (really existing) essay *Nagasaki: The Forgotten Bomb* by Frank Chinnock (1969), they realize the futility of their enterprise. The book's horrific descriptions only return the characters to a traumatic moment that they can neither understand, nor transform into a lesson for what Jameson calls the "reorientation of our collective future" (18). What is at stake here is the characters' inability to use the past (or, better, the fragmented simulacrum of the past) as a compass for the future. With the exception of Hemingway's novel, the few texts left to the Society for Science (*All About Dinosaurs* and *Nagasaki*) can only be understood by the characters as mythical narratives that connect them with the possibility of their own extinction. In a class where they read the children's books on dinosaurs Mr. Cheung has an epileptic seizure. In that occasion he "saw the truth of his own extinction and it made him dizzy. They were ghosts in a rotten room" (Johnson, *Fiskadoro* 45). As Timothy Parrish points out, the members of the Society are "doomed to experience their death as a form of memory, instead of experiencing memory as a type of personal or cultural renewal" (237).

As *Fiskadoro*, like *Tree of Smoke*, provocatively denies any redemptive power to history and cultural memory, it nonetheless offers the reader an incursion into the past through Grandmother Wright (a.k.a. Marie)'s memories of the fall of Saigon, when she was 15 years old. Her father, a British importer living in Saigon, committed suicide few days before the conclusive event of the Vietnam war: "And it was on the day when her father took his life [. . .] that she marked the end of the world as having begun. As a matter of fact, however, only that small war, between the Americans and the Vietnamese Communists, was turning toward its end on the day of her father's death" (72). During her escape from Saigon, her helicopter – piloted by *Tree of Smoke*'s main character Nguyen Minh – crashed and she spent three days floating in the ocean, more dead than alive. She relives this memory at the end of the novel. In an effort to stay afloat, she experienced

a moment of pure present-tense-ness, where she was completely emptied of her ego: "By sunset she was only a baby, thinking nothing, absolutely adrift, [...] indistinguishable from what she saw, which was the gray sky that had no identity, interest, or thought" (220). It is in this condition that she is rescued by a boat. The narrator's meditation on this event contains the wisdom of the novel, which can be also useful to interpret *Tree of Smoke*'s puzzling final words ("all will be saved"). It contends that Marie was

> [s]aved not because she lasted, not because of anything she did, or determined in herself to do, because there was nothing left of her to determine anything; saved not because she hadn't given up, because she had, and in fact she possessed no memory of the second night, [...] saved because she was saved, saved because they threw down a rope, but she couldn't reach her hand up now to take hold of it; saved because a sailor jumped off the boat, his bare white feet dangling from the legs of khaki pants, and pulled her to the ladder; saved not because her hands reached out; saved because other hands than hers reached down and saved her. (221)

The narrator insists in not attributing to Marie the merit of her own survival because this is a central point in the novel. Marie's state while she tries to remain afloat can be understood as a condition of complete deconstruction. She lives moment by moment, unable to think about the past or the future, and there is "nothing left of her to determine anything" (221). She experiences an oceanic feeling where the boundaries between subject and object are overcome (she is "indistinguishable from what she saw, which was the gray sky that had no identity, interest, or thought"; 220). What Johnson suggests is that such a condition of total deconstruction of the self is not terminal: it leaves room for the present moment as well as for the materiality of existence. Also, in a conception that is in line with the tradition of Christian apophatic mysticism, this emptiness opens a space for a transcendent experience of salvation. She is not saved by knowledge, but by what is still unknown to her. It is according to this logic that, from a grammatical standpoint, in the phrase "she was saved" the agent of the action is missing. As Parrish points out, "[h]aving reached bottom, having been emptied of her ego, Marie is saved because she has become an empty vessel prepared to receive divine grace" (263). This episode of *Fiskadoro*

is helpful to explain the concept of salvation addressed in the final words of *Tree of Smoke*: "all will be saved" (again, grammatically the agent is missing). They will be saved because, in Denis Johnson's narrative, the breakdown of master narratives, the collapse of epistemological systems and the fragmentation of coherent identities ultimately lead to a purifying revelation, which is the prelude of a renewal. The focus is not on the celebration (or the mourning) of a system's collapse, but on an exploration of what to do with it. The exhaustion of a system does not hinder the possibility to create new narratives that can reorient a personal or collective future. On the contrary, it seems to be the starting point of such a process. Kathy's eventual belief in the salvation of all is not rooted in a lesson she learns from her experience, but it is a pragmatic choice. Similarly, Marie's casual rescue does not have a particular meaning to convey or lesson to teach (it is a matter of luck, not of skill) – still, it has a function. Therefore, Johnson's novels apply a change of focus to postmodernism because, while his novels acknowledge (and narrate) the uncertainty and unreliability of several systems of knowledge (especially history and memory), they also explore the functions that such limits may have. The point becomes not only deconstruction, but also reconstruction. The short-term memory represented in *Fiskadoro* is an extreme and provocative example not only of the possibility to live constructively with the uncertainty of knowledge, but even to thrive with it. At the same time, while both *Fiskadoro* and *Tree of Smoke* point out that history is oversaturated with fictions and simulacra, they also show that a rooting is still possible in the contact with the present moment, where the practice of history survives not as a tool to access the truth of the past, but as an expression of the human will to produce narratives that guide us in the world.

Notes

[1] See Robert Rebein's *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists: American Fiction After Postmodernism* (2001). Rabein's acknowledgment of "neorealism" as the successor to postmodernism is shared and extended by Neil Brooks' and Josh Toth's coedited volume *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism* (2007) and Toth's own *The Passing of Postmodernism: A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary* (2010).

[2] The concept of the "end of history" can also be understood as the impossibility to escape a single master narrative when rival narratives have been defeated and humankind reaches the Hegelian endpoint of ideological development. This is what Fukuyama pointed out in his famous 1992 essay *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Fukuyama argued that the end of the Cold War coincided with "the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism" and the "unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism" over its rivals. While Johnson's understanding of history is similarly teleological, it imagines a similar yet opposite process: the exhaustion of Western liberalism, the inception of which is represented by the fall of Saigon.
[3] The title of Graham Greene's novel is mentioned recurrently in *Tree of Smoke*, where it becomes an epithet defining Skip Sands (Johnson, *Tree* 363).

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Daniela Daniele

"*In a Tumbling Void*": DeLillo's Late Lyrical Prose

The Silence (2020) is the last novella in a series of six written by Don DeLillo for the new millennium: an era of trauma verging on the point of "Entropy" announced by Thomas Pynchon in his eponymous story (1960) based on the notion of depleted energy that both writers figuratively locate at the core of all obscure machinations. A few months before the paralyzing attacks of September 11, DeLillo inaugurated a new lyrical, laconic style also adopted in *The Silence*, the story of a total blackout that puts an end to all digital trafficking, bringing the city of New York to a standstill eerily prophetic of COVID-19. The lockdowns announced only one month after the publication of the book provoked a comparable arrest in time, making this fiction turn inward, as if to disclose "[t]he physics of time. Absolute time. Time's arrow. Time and space" (DeLillo, *The Silence* 105).

The abrupt syncope which turns all screens, TV sets, cell phones and computers blank spoils the reunion of five friends gathered in Midtown Manhattan to watch the football final. And since the Super Bowl cannot be broadcast, their conversations get instantly cleared of all the signals flowing from digital devices. As the apartment gets chilly for want of energy, a broken meditation on finitude and survival gets started, in a *mise-en-abyme* of the six novellas composed by the author in the current state of emergency. Their titles are dysphoric omens of the condition of trauma here discussed: *The Body Artist* (2001), *Cosmopolis* (2003), *Falling Man* (2007), *Point Omega* (2009), *Zero K* (2016), *The Silence* (2020). These short, allusive narratives constitute a step away from the sustained satire of the American technoculture provided by the author since *White Noise* (1985).

The spectacular attack on the Twin Towers determined an unprecedented paralysis of the public sphere that intensified the dematerialization of the social scene cohesively depicted in the jazzy New York of *Underworld* (1997). In its place, *Cosmopolis* follows the aimless speed of an abstract, white limousine in Manhattan mimicking the dislocating force of financial

capitalism responsible for the dispersal of the city crowds celebrated in *Underworld* (see Piccinato). As the urban community gets digitally removed from the stadium of the national scene, dissent is reduced to a "form of street theater" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 88), to an ephemeral, arty "protest against the future. They want to hold off the future. They want to normalize it, keep it from overwhelming the present" (90-91).

Such a post-traumatic dispersal of the broader social scene urged the writer to seek a more intimate, subatomic access to "the deep mind of the culture (DeLillo, "The Power of History" 62), posing issues of memory, authenticity and sustainability raised by the postmodern flow of disposable voices announced by the humanism of Joseph McElroy's brain in orbit (*Plus* 1976) and in the very title of his own short story "Human Moments in World War III" (1983). The actual breakthrough detectable in DeLillo's late representations of contemporary America is therefore both aesthetic and epistemic, and demands the emergence of a prose poetic form better equipped to shape the residual "human" voices able to disentangle the electronic webs which precariously hold together disembodied strangers online. Quite significantly, in *The Silence*, the conversation of a group of friends gathered in a Manhattan apartment occurs in a social void, turning a convivial occasion into a catatonic account of the old bonds and domestic feelings that survive when the drone of mass communication comes to a stop.

The apocalyptic power failure which prevents them from watching the show makes the tentative, broken language of the quotidian prevail on the social project of configuring a broader political unconscious (see Jameson), currently reduced to a cybernetic scenario whose entropic core is a domestic isolation intermittently broken by "noises floating in the air, the language of World War III" (DeLillo, *The Silence* 83). As all screens instantly go on the fritz, the two couples and the young man roughly sketched by the writer keep staring at a blank TV screen, giving vent to all sorts of paranoid conjectures, like the "dangling" soldier about to be recruited in Saul Bellow's 1944 novel. Their disjointed voices compose the luminous texture of a narrative suspended between poetry and drama: Diane envisions invisible wars fought with bacteriological agents by "[c]ertain countries. Once rabid proponents of nuclear arms, now speaking the language of living weaponry. Germs, genes,

spores, powders" (81). Their volatile counterforces are "hidden networks" operating in a "Deep Space," located "in some transrational warp" (28, 48) and "abandoned by science, technology, common sense" (29). And since in the darkness of the Deep Web "others can hear your thoughts" (3), the motif of the total blackout revives, as it occurs in John Carpenter's movie *Escape from L.A.* (1996), where a neo-primitivist, rebellious underground is ready to neutralize all the electronic devices on the planet. The young Martin Dekker invokes an "Internet arms race" (85) producing "[d]ata breaches," "cryptocurrencies" (85) against the "extraterrestrial" (27), "algorithmic governance" (26) of digital surveillance. These coded instructions, he claims, pulsate for a few seconds before all screens go blank, as spasms of a "language known only to drones" (93): the transnational Esperanto of software developers across the planet (25).

The main source of terror in DeLillo's dystopian apologue on power failure is, therefore, the diffused dread of silence (82) that paralyzes the panic-stricken audience suddenly deprived of its small, daily portion of infotainment. Martin identifies in that unprecedented arrest in time the premonition of his own "expiration date", and starts "thinking aloud, drawing inward" (84), in the attempt to move past that void in communication. His paranoid digressions break down into Beckettian stutters, and into a "babbling" (82) irresolution well illustrated by Albert Einstein's post-apocalyptic epigram: "I do not know with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones" (qtd. in *The Silence,* ix). As all digital flesh instantly vanishes in the material obscurity of the blackout, this counterpointed narrative shifts, like Thomas Pynchon's, from paranoia to silence, from the hothouse of speculations to the urban desert of a big city emptied out by the blackout. In this apocalyptic unrest, Diane's and her student's wordy logorrhea is balanced by the profound skepticism of the second couple in the story who envisions in their friends' place a space where they can simply "crash" after the crash landing they have miraculously survived.

Once confronted with the "theorem of the inertia of energy" (31) associated by her friends with the "fall of world civilization" (35), in her immediate, human concerns, poet Tessa Berens perceives their conjectures

as "a function of some automated process" (7), pragmatically turning to her body of poetry which resists abstractions:

> "[…] Is our normal experience simply being stilled? Are we witnessing a deviation in nature itself? A kind of virtual reality? [...]
> Is it natural at a time like this to be thinking and talking in philosophical terms as some of us have been doing? Or should we be practical? Food, shelter, friends, flush the toilet if we can? Tend to the simplest physical things. Touch, feel, bite, chew. The body has a mind of its own."
> (113)

Tessa is only the last one of the intradiegetic writers introduced by DeLillo in his fiction since *Mao II* (1991). Like the Italian American author, she is not WASP and speaks "a kind of splintered Haitian Creole" (112) elaborated in the "obscure, intimate, impressive" poetic lines jotted down in her inseparable notebook. They are built, like Grace Paley's (Daniele, "I Cannot Keep", 155-65), upon overheard phrases, in a spoken texture that perfectly encounters DeLillo's own literary variations on the American slang.

The sense of intimacy and frugality recovered by the author in the current age of trauma might be attributed to the new structure of feeling grown from the critique of the "mediatised consumer bubble" advocated by the "metamodernist" paradigm (Gibbons 83). But Tessa's convinced humanism reflects an anthropocene attitude that the Postmodern American writer has been coherently pursuing since the late 1950s. The author did not wait for the traumatic arrest in time brought about by the new millennium to claim a more affective, sensuous grip on an "artificial intelligence" which, as Tessa states, may eventually betray "who we are and how we live and think" (DeLillo, *The Silence* 68). DeLillo's parched, lo-fi meditation on mortality urges us to put aside any positivist notion of historical progress to access, instead, a more "permanent" sense of time (Daniele, "La storia in moviola" 122) through the enthralling, domestic sequences that currently shape his rhetoric of silence. In order to contrast the desultory pace of the shock economy and its recurrent manufactured traumas, DeLillo selects a number of unsettling, private moments in a dramatized, amphibious form of prose poetry which, since the mid-nineteenth century, has provided the

most suitable intergeneric model to capture the instabilities of modern times.[1]

In his well-known prescience, the catastrophe of September 11 found a compelling premonition in *White Noise*: the story of a middle-class couple oppressed by a toxic cloud of infidelity and pollution. This novel of adultery framed in an impending environmental disaster which requires periodical emergency protection drills satirically reframed the marital malaise which haunts John Irving's interiors of suburban discontent, and the moribund marriage lyricized by James Salter in the slow, magnetic cadences of *Light Years* (1975). This latter work, in particular, resonates in the volatile narrative fragments which compose *The Silence*, whose fractured, imagistic design equally relies upon a sequence of estranged snapshots, producing the alliterative, fluctuating pattern of interlocked, hallucinated scenes which recalls the luminous stylization of Salter's domesticity, transfixed in the routine of inexplicably enduring relations.

The mute conjugal dissatisfaction, the invisible cracks which suddenly break the hypnotic rituals of love and friendship return in the emotional intricacy of *The Silence*, achieving the chiseled, lyrical distillation that DeLillo has been mastering since the mourning meditations of *The Body Artist* and of *Falling Man*. Respectively based on a private loss and on the historical trauma of September 11, these suspended novellas provide a mesmeric assemblage of emergency states of mind, sketching out the uncharted path of a community transfixed by unuttered afflictions and mysterious conflicts. The crisp, imagistic fragments which compose this desultory prose reflect a collective apprehension and a post-traumatic proclivity for the understatement. The mute oppression of Salter's affluent homes and their impending break-ups reappear in the wry, domestic stillness of *The Silence*, visually inspired by the milky opalescence of Giorgio Morandi's artwork and by the slow pace of Michelangelo Antonioni's movies.

In a public talk given at the Roman Auditorium on October 22, 2016 and two years later at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, DeLillo identified in the toxic fluorescence of the North-Italian town depicted in *Deserto rosso* (1964) the main source of *White Noise*. Still, Antonioni's drama of conjugal distress and the slow, somber cadences of his mannered conversations prove even more effectively reproduced in

The Silence, as an off-screen chronicle of private exhaustion still haunted by the "white noise" of TV commercials and manufactured dreams. DeLillo's hybrid, media-conscious style hardly claims the return to a new "authenticity" in the new millennium since the catatonia adumbrated in his recent novellas is no other than the ultimate, entropic allegorization of the information overflow envisioned by Pynchon. Quite significantly, DeLillo's late lyrical prose illuminates private settings of post-traumatic confinement independent from any automatism dictated by the machine, in the recovery of a disconnected, Avant-garde style responding to the massive, cybernetic growth that as early as 1967 demanded a saturated, meandering postmodern form aptly named by John Barth "The Literature of Exhaustion."

The decline of civilization exorcised by the neo-capitalist notion of an uninterrupted economic growth has been the concern of postwar fiction writers who are currently detecting a diffused sentiment of mortality in the age of trauma.[2] This sense of finitude presides, in *The Silence*, the rituals of love and friendship mechanically reenacted in an America impaired by private and public dysfunctions and rendered by DeLillo in a clipped, absurdist style which constitutes a step away from the encompassing historical novels that have made of him the John Dos Passos of postmodern fiction. The ritualized failed encounter of the five friends vainly gathered for the Super Bowl offers, in *The Silence*, a compelling study of post-traumatic aphasia conveyed in a loose, desultory poetic prose that recalls the rhythmical variations on gossip and small talk experimented, between wars, by Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett. The rhythmical variations of their modernist lyrical plays return in the domestic fragments of *The Silence*, highlighting the involuntary lyricism of small talk in a conflation of Socratic dialogues, cathodic memories and digital communication.

The fractured, laconic speech of the five friends in a Manhattan apartment also continues in the present time the lyrical study of perception started by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, under the disruptive pressure of the World Wars. *The Silence* pays an explicit homage to the vocabulary of rupture of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), reproducing the vernacular phrase "Ere the sockson locked at the dure" (DeLillo, *The Silence* 105), which refers to taverns closed by servants holding a key "secure in the

proper mind slot, the word *preserve*" (105). DeLillo's late prose transfixed by post-traumatic stupor looks back to the exploration of the mind refined by modernist fiction writers, reactualizing the ghostly stillness of homes once animated by human speech and violently muted by death in wartime, as featured in the second part of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The random, hushed dialogues in *The Silence* capture a similar social void as all electronic devices become unserviceable and invisible conflicts seem to demand the absurdist aphasia of Beckett's drama.

The twenty-four disjointed scenes that compose DeLillo's last novella respond to the vast phenomenology of disaster of the new millennium by advocating a critical negotiation with technology freed of the manipulations, interferences and, more recently, of the interfacial processes of social engineering rendered by the author in the ranting, absurdist style of his televisionary plays *The Day Room* (1986) and *Valparaiso* (1999). In the farcical reality shows enacted in *Valparaiso*, the TV viewer on stage attempts a cheap escape from his unhappy marriage through a cathodic alter ego very close to the "optically formed duplicate" that, in *The Silence*, Martin discovers in his mirrored face which, as he says, "doesn't seem to be mine" (51-52, 50). The dreadful porosity of the electronic media also generates Tessa's suspicion that even the blackout could be no other than a computer-designed strategy to get people "digitally remastered" (88). The ability of manufactured realities to trigger human reactions even when all devices are out of service locates DeLillo's narrative focus beyond the self, into "[t]he artificial future. The neural interface" (68) whose grammar is still unfamiliar to the many.

Parataxis and sparse lyrical devices turn the accounted moment of social isolation and immobility into a domestic stillness representative of the social impoverishment of language and thought sternly dramatized by Beckett and Ionesco. The modern legacy of their dried-out absurdism is also detectable in DeLillo's little known one-minute play *The Rapture of the Athlete Assumed Into Heaven* (1990) which stigmatizes, in Beckett's succinct style, the exhausted communication which lies at the core of the voracious demand of digital and cathodic entertainment. As early as 1986, DeLillo's first televisionary play, *The Day Room*, inaugurated his staged satire of the society of the spectacle by featuring TV screens permanently

on and eventually replaced by a delirious actor ranting center stage in a straitjacket. Like that absurdist character, in *The Silence*, Diane's husband, Max Stinner, once deprived of the "infinite jest" of the Super Sunday,[3] keeps staring into a blank monitor as if still "consumed" by it, until he improvises a chronicle of the match, inclusive "of football dialect and commercial jargon" (99, 47).

In this verbal vacuum aggravated by the sudden blackout of electronic devices, both hosts and guests appear as inarticulate in their thoughts and speech as Beckett's alienated personae. Once unmonitored by remote controls, the most familiar gestures result into a series of disjointed actions: Diane watches her shoes find their way out independently from her feet ("They walked off without me"; 101), and Max forgets his daughters' names, holding his chair to make sure he is sitting (102). "It's us, barely" (70), is the alarmed comment of Tessa's husband, Jim Kripps, whose last name is emblematic of his funky terror. However, compared to the nonsense of DeLillo's televisionary plays (Daniele, "The Achromatic Room"), *The Silence* dramatizes an aphasia that strangely enough serves to recompose a distressed quotidian, illuminating the unexplored but still vital "mysteries at the middle of ordinary life" announced in another short play equally based on a sparse, domestic discourse. In this respect, the accounted situation of emergency and loss becomes a reservoir of unengineered, "human moments." Jim, who always reads the screen instructions though overwhelmed by fatigue ("He wanted to sleep but kept on looking"; DeLillo, *The Silence* 3) is finally induced by the blackout to look away and meet the eyes of his wife, who replies with a typical Woolfian staccato effect: "Are we afraid?" (17). Their private talk made up of "[h]alf sentences, bare words, repetitions [...] a kind of plainsong, monophonic, ritualistic," elliptically resurfaces "deep from his throat, the voice of the crowd [...] emerging from a broadcast level deep in his unconscious mind" (46).

DeLillo's post-traumatic recovery of private jargons and long-term relations also originates from his short theater productions. More specifically, the dazzling one-act play *The Mystery at the Middle of Ordinary Life* (2000) is a close study of domestic lingos developed in home retreats which the writer identifies with the basic condition for writing. This

ground-breaking, instant play aptly defined by Frank Lentricchia a "poignant allegory of the quotidian" ("Aristotle and /or DeLillo" 607), records the verbal exchange of a quintessential old couple caught in their daily ritual of passing pills and salad to each other. Their secluded intimacy assumes further meaning in the current COVID-19 crisis, and can be read as a renewed manifestation of the human ability to communicate in the most restrictive confinement.

To delve deeper into the author's lyrical rendition of trauma and silence, it can be argued that his first novella for the millennium, *The Body Artist*, offered the first inner chronicle of a severe arrest in time. Lauren's private mourning, conceived after the death of DeLillo's father, redirected his narrative focus from the vastly shattered, social scene to the spectral interiors filled, like the body artist's empty home, with the digital recordings of her lost partner, which permanently enters her creative interplay with electronic props like the answering machine that reproduces his voice. That ghostly, vocal persistence transfixes the desolation of Lauren's space, in an affective, humanized version of technoculture caught in the grip of new losses and anxieties. That first, estranged novella of domestic confinement was eerily published only six months before September 11 and inspired DeLillo's close study of a quotidian that inaugurated the introverted turn of his rhetoric of silence, shifting from the sensorial panopticon of information epitomized in *White Noise* to a spatialization of inner time already at play in Lauren's *Kammerspiel* and the concurrent electronic dispersal of the social body. As a result, her electronic set designs a space haunted by familiar voices dislocated "[s]omewhere within all those syllables, something secret, covert, intimate" (DeLillo, *The Silence* 86).

By tracking the entropic silence at the core of homely interiors saturated with statics and "white noise," after the completion of *Underworld*, DeLillo redirected his literary focus from the wide national scene of his historical novels to a subatomic perusal of domestic micro-events miraculously resurfaced in the impending historical trauma. This private idiom, cleared of all the metafictional intricacies mechanically associated with the postmodern novel, headed him toward a terser, essential discourse of silence which does not correspond to an absence of sounds but records the intimate and subterranean manifestations of "pure language" (51). The affective utterances

of this recovered "condition of silence" are made up of the predictable speech-acts and domestic formulas that define the soundscape of daily life. In its intermittency, this domestic idiom finds the trochaic rhythm of a heartbeat – "We talk, we listen, we eat, we drink, we watch" (22) – as if to show that, in the general impasse of the public stage, the core of existence relies on a bodily rhythm of survival and on its repetition of the few, frugal words that gradually serve to reanimate the scene of disaster.

The same tentative, vocal gestures broke the spell of the public stage in the beautiful entr'acte composed by Virginia Woolf in wartime, *Between the Acts* (1941), in her impassible record of a pageant intermission and of its slow recovery of a rigorously off-stage routine. In this interval the body reclaims its priorities, making all the spectators, as occurs in *The Silence*, resume their private tones hushed during the public spectacle. Their words float independent from the governance of syntax and grammar, according to a natural, undisciplined family lexicon made of predictable imperatives and homely feelings. In *The Silence*, the minimalism of these spontaneous utterances survive the challenge of the total blackout, sustained by an affective proximity that reveals unnoticed physical oddities and relational discontinuities. In this informal dialectic which finds no media coverage, Diane and Martin perceive the ineffable asymmetries between intellect and touch, being bound together by the eroticism of Diane's erudition, that her pragmatic husband is curiously impermeable to. All these peculiar and unsuspected human flaws starkly illuminate the abeyance of domestic space in which plot and action have no role.

Likewise, in the arrested mobility of a city where subways and elevators do not run, a heightened sense of physicality leads the way, making Martin distinctively perceive his cautious steps through the pitch darkness of Central Park. After their emergency landing caused by the power failure, even Tessa and Jim prepare to rely upon their feet to climb the eight floors to their friends' apartment. The rhythmical pace of their panting breath – "step by step, flight by flight" (110) – resonates in their minds, additionally invigorated by the athletic vitality of a woman jogger who "just kept running, looking straight ahead" (40). In this estranged meditation on the residual human resources left over in times of entropy, Tessa lyrically

envisions a new prospect of "home" in an intimate space which makes words hardly necessary, "being home, the place, finally, where they don't see each other, walk past each other, say *what* when the other speaks, aware only of a familiar shape asking noise somewhere nearby" (96). In these sheltered interiors finally cleared of statics and white noise, her new poem opens with the line "*In a tumbling void*" (96; emphasis in the original), pointing to the oxymoronic combination of stillness and turbulence which perfectly conveys the mixture of suspension and unrest of DeLillo's post-traumatic style, finally hinting at a viable notion of domesticity able to bypass human inadequacies and technical failures.

Unlike the "digital addicts" whom they married, creative minds like Tessa in *The Silence* and Lauren in *The Body Artist* do not "live inside their phones" and are never "mesmerized, consumed by the device" (99, 52). Like the author himself, Tessa cherishes the obsolete but enduring technology of her pen and notebook impermeable to the endless emendations of word processors. She shares DeLillo's cult for the original layouts which safely sit at the Ransom Center of the University of Texas at Austin next to the papers of Joyce and Beckett, revealing all possible variants: "I need to see it in my handwriting, perhaps twenty years from now, if I'm still alive, and find some missing element, something I don't see right now"; "It's a question of looking at the notes years from now and seeing the precision, the detail" (9, 13).

The British edition of *The Silence* mimics the typewritten format of the author's manuscript, inclusive of the unjustified margins, as if to reproduce the final draft submitted to his editor. This typewritten layout holds a special value for a writer who perceives himself as a humanist in a post-human world, ill-adjusted to the manipulative nature of mass communication and to the violation of privacy inaugurated by the military use of radars as flight control systems.

DeLillo did not wait for the millennium to claim a new humanism for our digital times, remaining firmly anchored to the formalist, lo-fi poetics which sustains his modernist vision of postmodern America.[4] In his critical response to the algorithmic proliferation of electronic codes, he cherishes the naked power of words, deliberately composed on a typewriter which needs no electric power and whose use is only challenged by the

short supply of ribbons which are currently becoming rare collectibles. Compared to the "single, sustained overtone" (14) of word processors, the writer's obstinate tapping on a sturdy Olympia makes the material sound of each letter distinctively audible as it finds its place on the page. *The Silence* partakes of the author's critique of technocracy by disclosing, in the time lapse provided by the blackout, the private lingos that countered the spectacular terrors of the public stage. Tessa's poetry equally relies on that private and casual lexicon of intimacy and friendship, divested of clichés and manufactured formulas: "Tessa begins to separate herself. [...] She thinks into herself. She sees herself. She is different from these people. She imagines taking off her clothes, nonerotically, to show them who she is" (91). Martin also gets to the naked core of his material self by learning, in the cybernetic void, the secret grammar of passions, in moments of self-recognition that offer the reader a survival kit in the current emergency and in those still to come.

In alternative to the deictic imperatives of the innumerable digital alerts, domestic imperatives – "'Look,' he said" (3) – vocally break the spell of trauma, in the form of quotidian speech-acts, whose function is phatic, that is, essentially aimed to keep a line of communication open. The ineffable exchange between the body artist and Mr. Tuttle is made of cryptic signals like Septimus Smith's preverbal slur in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), both being as unintelligible to intruders as intimate talk. Likewise, the chatter of the five friends babbling in front of a blank screen makes of *The Silence* a disorderly, convivial suite orchestrated to reveal the enduring, affective nature of familiar voices and authentic needs, which sound reassuring in their nonsense. The loose trajectory of DeLillo's lyrical narrative subtly explores the apparent inconsistency of the private lingos that, in moments of alarm, renew and ritualize invisible bonds and the enduring mystery of mutual recognition. What strikes us in the erratic, lyrical incantation of these late compositions is their ability to find a private strategy to capture the mind of a traumatized America which slowly reacts to a spectacular paralysis.

The domestic dialogues recorded in *The Silence* amplify the complicity of long-term relations resistant to contingency, as beautifully rendered by T. S. Eliot in "A Dedication to My Wife" (1955): "Of lovers whose bodies

smell of each other Who think the same thoughts without need of speech And babble the same speech without need of meaning" (216). A deep admirer of T.S. Eliot, DeLillo redesigns the hushed language of privacy as a human counterpoint to the computer-generated "[w]ords, sentences, numbers, distance to destination" (*The Silence* 3) that, in *Cosmopolis*, grimly correspond to the scrolling of stocks and shares of financial capitalism that so many lives depend upon. In *The Silence*, the idiom of mutual care counters that mechanical rhythm, as clarified in a rare intervention by the omniscient narrator: "And isn't it strange that certain individuals have seemed to accept the shutdown, the burnout? Is this something that they've always longed for, subliminally, subatomically?" (78).

Similar volatile interrogations intensify the paratactic, imagistic structure of this novella which, in times of technical dysfunction, recites the scant, enchanted syllables of an intimate lexicon. The ability of small talk to dispel plots and conspiracies makes of DeLillo's disjointed prose a language of silence which stars in medias res and proceeds with no story line, in a spatial reconfiguration of personal histories not meant to progress, but deeply absorbed in an affective communication which, in the perfect stillness of the blackout, serves to exorcise the algorithmic curvatures of profit and surveillance.

The unplugged reunion of the five friends represents a human pause from the digital trafficking of displacement and removal which makes Tessa urge her husband: "Close your eyes!" (11). Bewilderment, catharsis, sloth, homophonic variations on plane and computer crashes are the lyrical elements of this apologue on a friends' reunion hard to accomplish in times of trauma and terror. Its sparse intonations of intimate trust disperse the electric impulses and digital spurts that stir our digital activity in a myriad nervous, "bird-brained" vibes (84). The epigraphs in italics which open most sections in *The Silence* fracture the diegetic line into an archipelago of vocal clusters aimed to preserve friendly tones and confidential locutions from the impersonal tedium of pre-recorded messages. This volatile style, so close to the one adopted by Virginia Woolf in her posthumous *Between the Acts*, pushes the literary investigation of the modern mind into the unexplored layers of consciousness stirred in decades of post-human, digital consumption.

As his most recent fiction smoothly merges with lyrical drama, DeLillo tests the ability of the homo digitalis to cope with a bodily silence, in his blind obedience to the electronic urgency to "[f]ind a movie. Watch a movie" (8) that prompts him into impulsive action ("*This was the gambler's creed, his formal statement of belief*" 19; emphasis in the original). By contrast, the peculiar inflections of home-made idiolects like the children's glossolalia in *White Noise* and their playful distortions of TV messages are signs of human resistance to the machine, and elevate small and intimate talk to a literary status. Their involuntary, private versification finds a topographic hub at the Gotham poetry bookstore in Midtown Manhattan, where the literary tastes of the elegant Elise Schifrin in *Cosmopolis* and those of the Latina Tessa Berens in *The Silence* find a meeting ground. As aware as Tessa that "[w]hatever is out there, we are still people, the human slivers of a civilization" (90), DeLillo identifies in this late, imagistic texture a lyrical site where subjects and objects conflate in the Woolfian "luminous halo [...] surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (Woolf, "Modern Fiction" 150). These discursive epiphanies probe unviolated corners of human understanding, preserving the few words of care and wisdom which seem to matter: "The radiant name"; "The luminous figure. The Nazarene. Einstein" (DeLillo, *The Silence* 42, 53).

In this search for authentic moments of human interaction, DeLillo's prose poetry dwells in the gap between the body and the machine, indulging in the literary limbo epitomized by the flying couple on a plane which opens *The Silence* and resonates throughout the author's macrotext in a private allegorization of uncertainty and abeyance which, as early as in 1977, kept another Dantesque couple physically and emotionally suspended above ground in the opening scene of *Players* (1977). And since their absorbed, sacred silence was the concern of another traumatized poet, living in an era also shattered by bankruptcy and epidemics, I would here close my reflection on DeLillo's lyrical prose by evoking Edgar Allan Poe's own parable on "Silence," written in 1838. The title of its first edition is "Siope," achrostically pointing, like an embedded signature, to the encoded name of the poet himself (= "Is Poe"). And its subtitle – "A Fable. In the Manner of Psychological Autobiographists" – is even more intriguing in alluding to a modern fiction ready to delve into the individual psyche that

Stein, Woolf, Joyce, Beckett and, more recently, Frank O'Hara and Lyn Hejinian would further explore. In Poe's pioneering prose poem the locus of human conscience is the rock where the poet/thinker sits in pensive isolation, constantly teased by the devil who inflicts that condition of solitude upon him. In that musing pose (later cast in bronze by August Rodin in 1880), the poet endures all sorts of beastly noises and natural disasters, but when surrounded by total silence, he flees in despair. As Poe chooses the social network of the tribe, DeLillo skillfully builds upon chunks of free indirect speech and of domestic talk his own apologue on silence, unexpectedly finding in that state of radical disconnection new words for "home."

Notes

[1] I here refer to the modernist legacy of prose poetry defined by Mary Ann Caws and Michel Delville as a hybrid genre that unsettles the novelistic conventions and the reader's relation to urban life. The provisional quality of this emotionally charged, sketchy form adumbrates DeLillo's volatile domestic vignettes also led by "word, phrase and thought, rather than by story or representation" (5).

[2] In Jonathan Lethem's *The Arrest* all technology also grinds to a halt, demonstrating, in his immediate reply to *The Silence*, that the critical work of postmodern American fiction has always been, and still is, a joint venture.

[3] My clear allusion to David Foster Wallace's eponymous contemporary classic is not a casual one, since it is deeply indebted to *White Noise*, as duly acknowledged in a 1997 letter written to DeLillo, and currently part of his private correspondence at the Ransom Center of the University of Texas at Austin.

[4] Frank Lentricchia acutely defines his gifted friend the "last of the modernists, who takes for his critical object of aesthetic concern the postmodern situation" (*Introducing Don DeLillo* 14).

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Forum

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

Valerio Massimo De Angelis

Introduzione

Nel settembre del 2019, al Convegno internazionale dell'AISNA di Ragusa *Gate(d) Ways: Enclosures, Breaches and Mobilities Across US Boundaries and Beyond*, si è tenuta una tavola rotonda su *Frontiera/Frontiere: Il Mediterraneo come scenario globale*, che ha posto al centro del dibattito uno spazio geo-politico e culturale di norma marginale rispetto al "fuoco" dei campi di studio rappresentati nell'Associazione. Ma il riposizionamento di tale spazio nel cuore di un panorama mondiale caratterizzato da flussi migratori di dimensioni sempre più gigantesche e da una serie di risposte a livello nazionale e transnazionale che si contraddistinguono per l'adozione sempre più diffusa di misure di controllo e dissuasione, se non proprio di repressione e respingimento, sovente concretizzate nell'erezione di frontiere e confini materiali e immateriali, di per sé instaura una connessione immediata e profonda con la storia passata e presente (e futura) del Nord-America. Inoltre, com'è testimoniato anche dagli eventi più recenti, una parte consistente dei movimenti migratori che interessano l'area del Mediterraneo è stata innescata dalle conseguenze più o meno dirette degli interventi militari degli Stati Uniti (e più in generale dell'Occidente) in Nord Africa e in Medio Oriente: la politica dell'"esportazione della democrazia" oltre i confini degli USA o dell'Europa ha tra i suoi tanti, paradossali effetti a medio e lungo termine l'instaurazione di sistemi di chiusura delle frontiere nazionali e persino transnazionali al fine di arrestare i flussi di persone che fuggono dalle situazioni di crisi create dalle strategie statunitensi ed europee, e che vorrebbero partecipare a quel mondo di progresso e prosperità decantato come obiettivo finale del *nation building* su cui si fondano tutti i progetti umanitari di contrasto ai sistemi autoritari della politica estera occidentale: il fallimento di questi progetti si rispecchia e viene amplificato nel rifiuto del mondo euro-americano ad aprirsi all'accoglienza di chi ha creduto e crede in quel mito di democrazia e libertà, come se questo fosse

un sistema di valori esclusivo a cui si può accedere e di cui si può godere solo se si è già *all'interno* del sistema.

Prendendo spunto da quella tavola rotonda, che nel contributo di Tommaso Detti viene più volte richiamata ma che non è stato possibile riprodurre nel formato tradizionale dei Forum di *RSAJournal*, in questo numero iniziamo a pubblicare una serie di interventi che intendono riflettere appunto su questa complessa e contraddittoria interazione tra le frontiere che vengono poste in essere negli Stati Uniti e nel Mediterraneo, sui processi di superamento di tali barriere che comunque operano in entrambe le aree e che a loro volta le connettono, sulle teorizzazioni politiche e culturali che cercano di interpretare questa (nuova?) configurazione globale delle *borderlands*, sulle rappresentazioni artistiche e letterarie di dinamiche così difficili da inquadrare in una qualche stabile immagine. La dimensione "dilazionata" nel tempo del dibattito consentirà di aggiornare e riorientare il fuoco dell'indagine seguendo l'evoluzione sempre più frenetica di un contesto di cui è pressoché impossibile definire una volta per tutte i contorni e i profili – in una parola, i *confini*. I contributi saranno in italiano, per sottolineare l'attuale centralità del nostro Paese nella rete di interconnessioni che si estende su tutta la superficie del mondo ma che trova un suo fulcro fondamentale nel cuore del Mediterraneo, per quanto, come sottolinea Detti nel suo intervento, si tratti di una centralità che è forse più percepita che reale, e che è il prodotto di una sistematica campagna di drammatizzazione dei fenomeni migratori, rappresentati come "invasioni" pressoché impossibili da gestire. Scopo di questo "Forum a puntate" sarà pertanto non solo quello di indagare l'articolazione dei flussi migratori nel Mediterraneo e attraverso l'Atlantico (e le interrelazioni che li collegano), la posizione dell'Italia all'interno di questo panorama e la funzione degli USA e della loro politica internazionale come primo motore di molti di questi fenomeni, ma anche di mettere in discussione i sistemi dominanti di raffigurazione e concettualizzazione delle dinamiche migratorie, il cui scopo principale è di offrire una giustificazione razionale e persino etica a pratiche di chiusura ed esclusione – alla costruzione di muri e barriere, frontiere e confini.

Tommaso Detti

Da Sud a Nord? I fenomeni migratori

I concetti di frontiera e confine vengono spesso indicati come sinonimi e in effetti sono contigui. Come ha osservato Sandro Mezzadra, però, "il confine, fin dalla sua originaria accezione di solco tracciato nella terra, istituisce una linea di divisione a protezione di spazi politici, sociali e simbolici costituiti e consolidati"; la frontiera si riferisce invece a "uno 'spazio di transizione,' in cui forze e soggetti diversi entrano in relazione, si scontrano e si incontrano mettendo comunque in gioco (e modificando) la propria 'identità'" (82-83).

Hanno fatto dunque bene gli organizzatori della tavola rotonda *Frontiera/Frontiere: Il Mediterraneo come scenario globale*, che si è tenuta al convegno AISNA di Ragusa nel settembre del 2019, a optare per le frontiere, e ciò vale a maggior ragione per questo mio intervento. Tratterò infatti del problema delle migrazioni, di cui non a caso si è occupato Mezzadra nel libro che ho appena citato. Per inciso, com'è noto, negli ultimi tempi nel nostro Paese il problema migratorio è stato drammatizzato a dir poco oltre misura, parlando guarda caso di confini e non di frontiere, cosicché mi è sembrato opportuno tentare di riportarlo ai suoi termini reali. E poiché i promotori hanno detto che "Mediterraneo significa, prevalentemente (ma non solamente), Africa," è persino ovvio riferirsi alle coste meridionali di questo mare – Africa e Medio Oriente – da cui muovono movimenti migratori vòlti a raggiungere le costiere settentrionali e i Paesi europei. Da questo punto di vista il Mediterraneo e la sua storia non sono tanto quelli a tutto tondo magistralmente disegnati a suo tempo da Fernand Braudel, quanto quelli di un libro recente di David Abulafia, centrato sulle "persone che lo hanno solcato" e che talvolta, secondo David Bidussa, sono finite "nei suoi abissi". Come ha scritto Salvatore Bono, insomma, "il Mediterraneo diviene allora una frontiera dell'Europa, anzi ormai la sola frontiera segnata dal contatto con 'altri', una frontiera fonte di problemi e di preoccupazioni,

persino segnata da uno scontro, aperto o potenziale, fra civiltà e culture differenti" (249).

Ciò detto, visto che la tavola rotonda faceva riferimento "all'attuale geopolitica mediterranea," ho pensato che fosse preferibile non risalire troppo indietro nel tempo, concentrandomi sull'ultimo trentennio e in particolare sul periodo fra il 1990 e il 2017. Sono infatti queste le date a cui si riferiscono le statistiche migratorie più complete delle Nazioni Unite, che ho utilizzato per il mio intervento.[1] Con una sola avvertenza preliminare: mentre i dati di 30 anni fa possono essere considerati senz'altro attendibili, quelli più recenti lo sono meno perché le leggi di contrasto all'immigrazione vigenti in tanti Paesi sviluppati stimolano la clandestinità, che com'è ovvio sfugge alle rilevazioni e si riduce soltanto a distanza di tempo. Non a caso tutte le stime sono state via via corrette al rialzo.

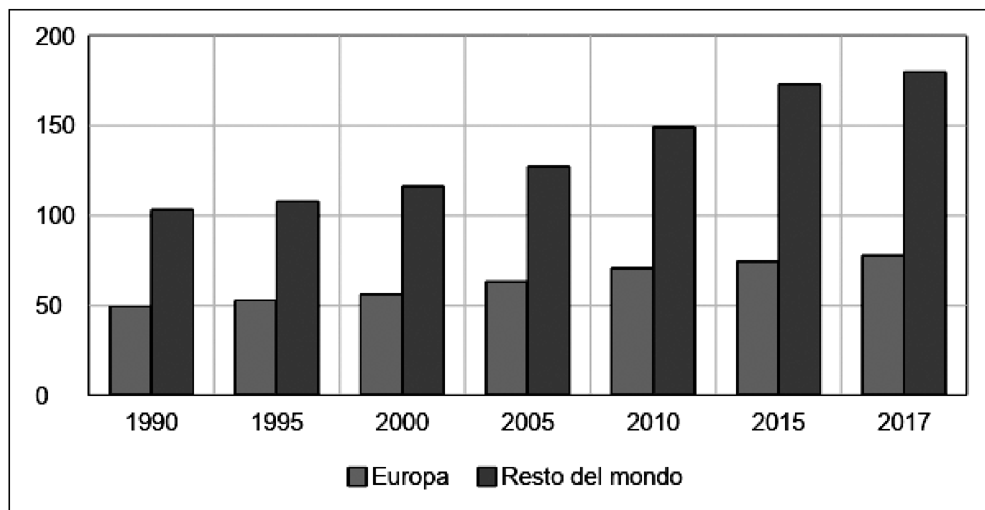

Figura 1 – Migranti in Europa e nel resto del mondo, 1990-2017 (dati in milioni).

La Figura 1 mostra che in Europa il numero dei migranti è cresciuto meno che nel resto del mondo. L'Europa è infatti salita da 49 a 78 milioni con un incremento del 58%, mentre il resto è passato da 103 a 179 milioni con un incremento del 74%. Benché in cifre assolute si tratti di crescite a dir poco rilevanti, tuttavia questi dati non sono tali da suscitare l'allarme che pure ci ha circondato. Anche la popolazione è infatti aumentata ed è in rapporto ad essa che deve essere valutato l'impatto dei fenomeni migratori. Così facendo, in effetti, dal 1990 al 2017 i dati del resto del mondo passano soltanto dal 2,2 al 2,6% della popolazione. Quello di partenza dell'Europa è molto più alto (6,8), ma se sale di più – e lo fa fino al 10,5% – è perché gli abitanti del vecchio continente sono cresciuti meno. La quota dell'Italia, ad ogni modo, è rimasta stabile al 2,9%.

La prima peculiarità che deve essere evidenziata delle migrazioni di questo periodo, come anche di quelle degli anni precedenti dal 1945 in poi, è costituita dal fatto che le donne sono state sempre attorno al 47-48% dei migranti nel resto del mondo e in Europa al 51-52%. È una differenza fondamentale rispetto ai flussi migratori fra Otto e Novecento, segno evidente dei progressi maturati nel campo dell'emancipazione femminile. Non va peraltro trascurato il fatto che in molti Paesi africani (come la Nigeria) l'espatrio delle donne è condizionato da organizzazioni criminali, che le obbligano a prostituirsi in Paesi stranieri. Sempre rispetto alle migrazioni del periodo fra Otto e Novecento, in questa sede è inutile ricordare che allora l'Europa era soprattutto un continente da cui si partiva.

In questi 27 anni gli immigrati in Europa sono scesi dal 32,3 al 30,2% del *migrant stock* globale, dunque con un incremento medio annuo inferiore. Non tutti, peraltro, provenivano e provengono da altri continenti. Al contrario, come si vede nella Figura 2, i movimenti cosiddetti "intraeuropei" si sono sempre mantenuti oltre il 50% del totale, mentre la somma di quelli asiatici e africani si è aggirata fra il 36 e il 39%.

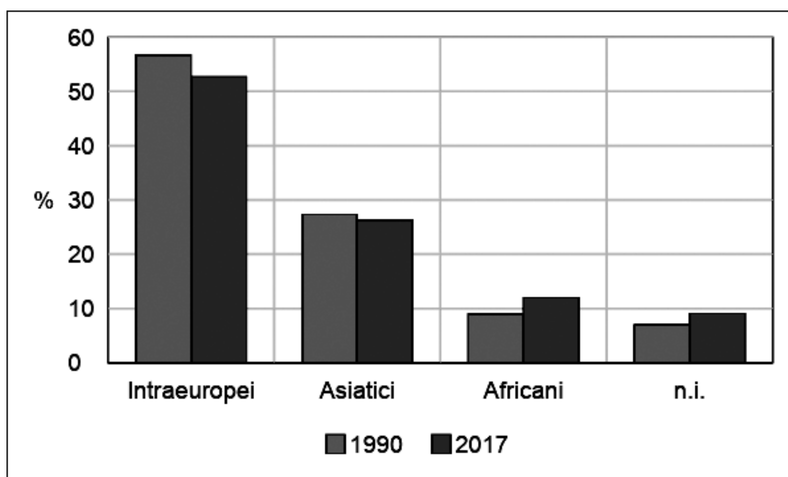

Figura 2 – Migranti in Europa per provenienza, 1990-2017.

È dunque il caso, in primo luogo, di vedere quali siano state le provenienze dei migranti intraeuropei, che nel periodo considerato sono passati da 15,6 a 22,3 milioni. La Figura 3 (che solo per puro caso somiglia un po' alla precedente) mostra che com'era prevedibile più del 50% si è mosso dai Paesi dell'Europa orientale, Federazione russa in testa, seguita dall'Ucraina e dalla Bielorussia. Il 22-23% ha invece abbandonato quelli meridionali, al cui interno l'Italia ha sempre avuto il maggior numero di espatri, seguita dal Portogallo e – nel 2017 – dalla Bosnia Erzegovina.

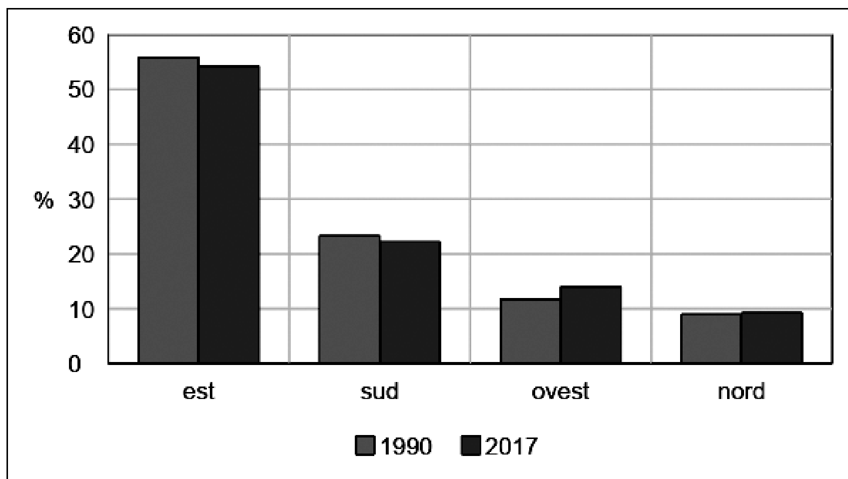

Figura 3 – Migranti intraeuropei per provenienza, 1990-2017, dati %.

Ciò detto, prima di passare all'Africa concentriamoci adesso sui migranti provenienti dall'Asia. In quest'ambito quelli dal Medio Oriente (da cui ho escluso l'Egitto, che pure di solito vi è compreso) hanno oscillato fra il 22% e il 23% del totale. La Turchia ha però coperto da sola il 71% dei migranti mediorientali nel 1990 e ancora oltre il 58% nel 2017. Senza entrare nel merito degli accordi sottoscritti dall'Unione Europea con questo Paese per bloccare le rotte balcaniche, con particolare riferimento alla Siria in preda alla guerra civile, mi limito a far presente che, come mostra la Figura 4, la Turchia e le cinque ex repubbliche sovietiche dell'Asia centrale coprivano da sole nel 1990 oltre il 55% delle migrazioni asiatiche, e nel 2017 oltre il 47%.

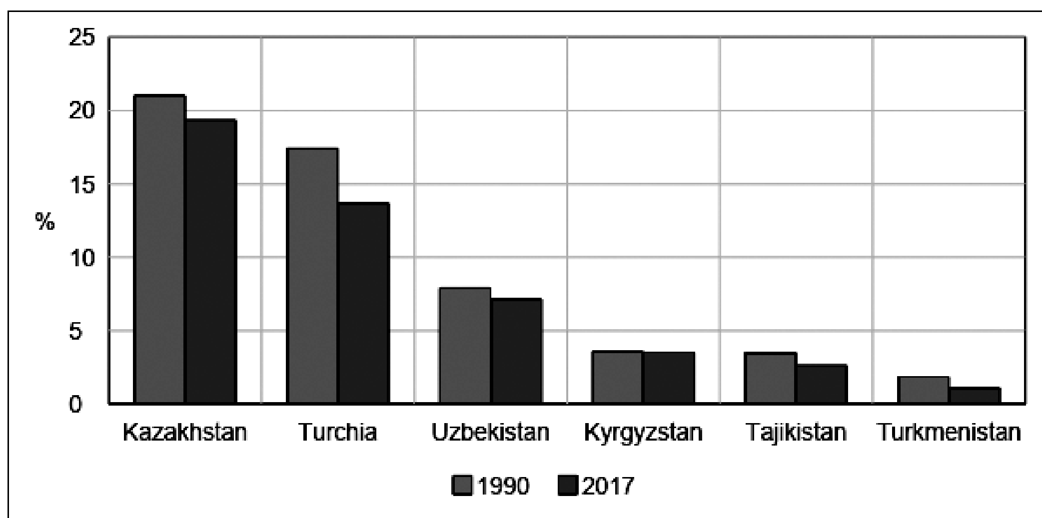

Figura 4 – Migranti da alcuni Paesi orientali in % sul totale dell'Asia.

In questo caso c'è da chiedersi se i flussi migratori da tali Paesi non siano da attribuire in primo luogo alla natura dei sistemi politici che da più o meno tempo vi dominano, gran parte dei quali sono stati classificati da un'agenzia autorevole (il Center for Systemic Peace) come "autocrazie" o quanto meno come regimi che scontano deficit democratici molto seri, senza contare alcuni conflitti etnici e religiosi che vi erano presenti.

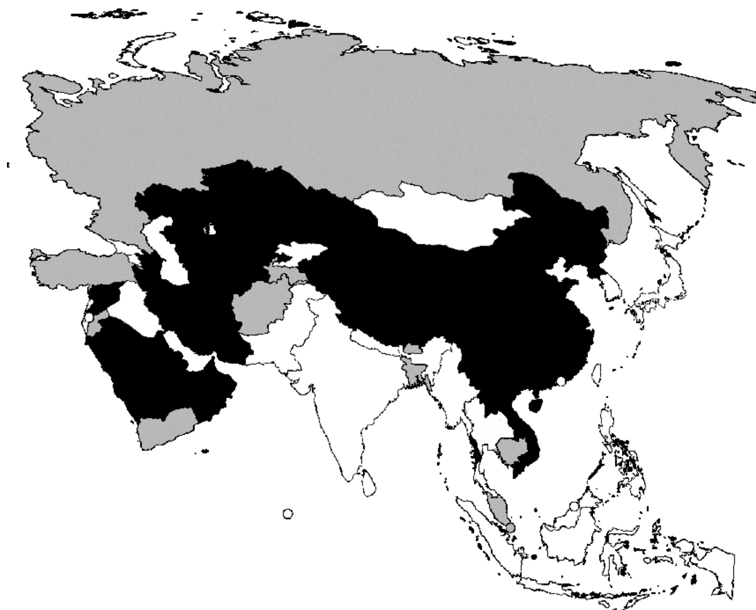

Figura 5 – "Autocrazie" e "sistemi misti" in Asia (grigio scuro = "autocrazie"; grigio chiaro = "sistemi misti").

Per il resto, colpisce che nella classifica degli otto Paesi asiatici i quali hanno fatto registrare i maggiori incrementi nel numero dei migranti dal 1990 al 2017 soltanto l'Iraq fosse coinvolto in una guerra. Quanto agli altri, il Bahrain, il Kuwait, l'Oman e il Qatar sono classificati come "autocrazie", mentre il Brunei Darussalam, gli Emirati Arabi Uniti e il Nepal hanno fatto registrare seri problemi nel rispetto dei diritti umani.

Venendo infine all'Africa, da dove fra il 1990 e il 2017 il numero dei migranti è più che raddoppiato, balza agli occhi in primo luogo il fatto che le relative percentuali sono rimaste ferme allo 0,7-0,8% della popolazione. Quest'ultima è infatti cresciuta più o meno nella stessa misura e la cosa non sorprende perché in gran parte di quel continente la transizione demografica si è avviata solo sul finire del XX secolo, è tuttora in corso e produce un forte aumento della popolazione. In effetti nell'Africa del 2015

i tassi di natalità erano ancora sopra il 35‰, mentre nel resto del mondo stavano dappertutto sotto il 18‰. Fra gli effetti di queste dinamiche c'è il fatto che sempre nel 2015 in Africa le persone sotto i 30 anni superavano il 68% (oltre il doppio dell'Europa), laddove in Asia e in America Latina si oscillava intorno al 50%.

Degli otto Paesi africani che hanno avuto maggiori incrementi nel numero dei migranti dal 1990 al 2017 uno è classificato come "autocrazia", l'Eritrea, mentre il Burundi e la Somalia risultano "sistemi misti", in un contesto in cui come si vede dalla Figura 6 questi prevalgono. Altri quattro (ancora il Burundi e la Somalia, nonché il Sudan del Sud e il Sudan) erano invece coinvolti in guerre o in importanti fenomeni di violenza civile o etnica al loro interno (Detti 7-23, Marshall figg. 7, 8.).[2]

Figura 6 – "Autocrazie" e "sistemi misti" in Africa (grigio scuro = "autocrazie"; grigio chiaro = "sistemi misti").

Oltre a ciò, soltanto tre (il solito Burundi, il Sudan e lo Zimbabwe) hanno fatto registrare negli ultimi anni percentuali significative di persone sotto la soglia della povertà, che cioè vivono con meno di 2 dollari al giorno. La cosa peraltro non sorprende perché difficilmente i più poveri hanno la possibilità di migrare, benché l'Africa subsahariana sia l'area del mondo più vulnerabile dal punto di vista climatico e sia interessata da un processo di desertificazione. Ciò non toglie che, come prevedibile, in generale i mutamenti in atto nell'ecosistema abbiano acquisito un ruolo non trascurabile come fattori delle emigrazioni.

Ma a questo punto è il caso di vedere in quale misura tra i migranti arrivati in Europa vi fossero dei rifugiati, nonché dei richiedenti asilo. Anche se sono cose risapute, forse non è male ricordare le definizioni che ne dà l'UNHCR, l'agenzia delle Nazioni Unite ad essi dedicata. Rifugiato è chi è stato costretto a fuggire dal suo Paese a causa di guerre, oppure di persecuzioni e violenze per motivi di razza, religione, nazionalità, opinioni politiche o appartenenza a un determinato gruppo sociale. Quanto ai richiedenti asilo, sono coloro la cui domanda è in attesa di essere esaminata. Trattare di queste figure per il 1990 non avrebbe però molto senso perché i rifugiati di cui è nota la provenienza sono appena il 13,2% del totale e in quell'anno non sono neppure registrati i dati dei richiedenti asilo. Non resta perciò che limitarsi ad analizzare rapidamente la situazione del 2017, benché anche allora i rifugiati ammontino appena al 3,3% dei migranti e i richiedenti asilo all'1,3.

La stragrande maggioranza dei rifugiati proveniva come prevedibile dall'Asia e dall'Africa, dove infatti si era combattuto l'87% delle guerre.

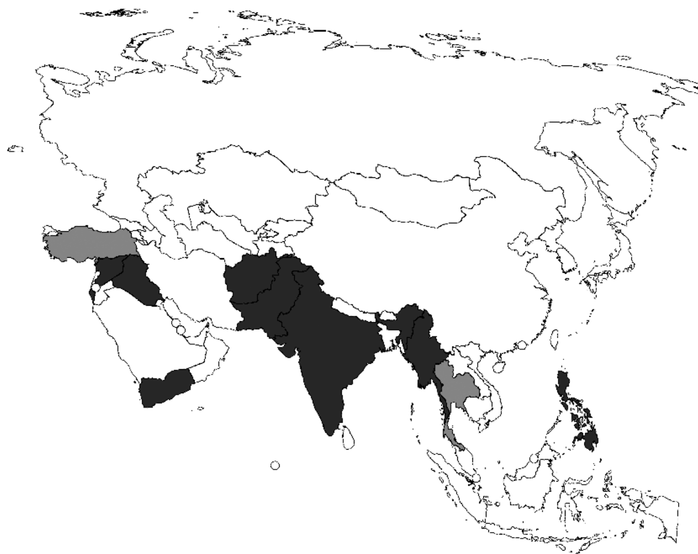

Figura 7 – Paesi asiatici coinvolti in guerre e violenze nel 2017
(grigio scuro = guerre civili ed etniche; grigio chiaro = violenze civili ed etniche).

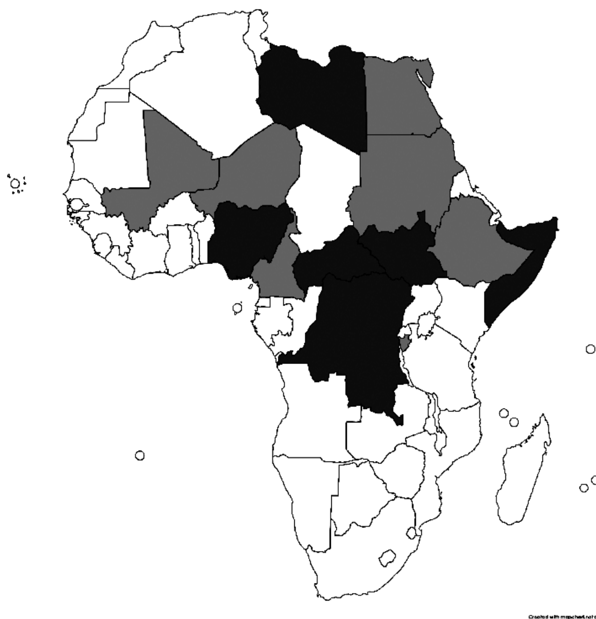

Figura 8 – Paesi africani convolti in guerre e violenze nel 2017
(grigio scuro = guerre civili ed etniche; grigio chiaro = violenze civili ed etniche)

Non a caso in Asia il 74% proveniva da Paesi con conflitti in corso, a partire dalla Siria, dall'Afghanistan e dall'Iraq. Ma anche in luoghi non interessati da guerre, dall'Iran alla Turchia, dalla Cina al Bangladesh e al Vietnam, si sono registrate più o meno pesanti violazioni dei diritti umani. Meno consistente risulta la percentuale degli africani venuti da Paesi coinvolti in conflitti, ma in compenso il 54% dei rifugiati proveniva da Stati caratterizzati da violazioni dei diritti umani. Da questo punto di vista ai rifugiati asiatici e africani andrebbero peraltro aggiunti almeno quelli originari di Paesi dell'Europa orientale, a partire dall'Ucraina e dalla Russia, dalla Serbia, dalla Croazia e dalla Bosnia. Quanto infine ai richiedenti asilo, il 47% proveniva dall'Asia (Afghanistan, Siria e Iraq in testa) e il 31% dall'Africa, a partire dalla Nigeria e dall'Eritrea. Dagli stessi

Paesi dell'est europeo segnalati per i rifugiati provenivano infine anche numerosi *asylum seekers*.

Come concludere? Lo farei con un rapido riferimento alla situazione italiana. Come ho accennato all'inizio, infatti, questa è stata molto drammatizzata, ma i dati non giustificano l'enfasi con cui il problema dei confini è stato sottolineato, né le misure che sono state assunte per contrastare l'immigrazione dal Sud del Mediterraneo. Non sto dicendo che nel nostro Paese i migranti non siano aumentati: sono infatti passati da 1.400.000 persone nel 1990 a 5.900.000 nel 2017: dal 2,5 al 9,7% della popolazione. Il fatto è, però, che già nel 1990 il 42,6% degli arrivi proveniva da altri Paesi europei e questo dato è salito nel 2017 al 54,2%. Le percentuali dei migranti asiatici sono invece rimaste attorno al 14-15% del totale, mentre le persone venute dall'Africa sono addirittura scese dal 29,7% del 1990 al 18,4 del 2017. Se poi guardiamo ai singoli Paesi, nel 1990 il Marocco occupava sì la prima posizione, ma a seguirlo erano la Germania e la Macedonia, che precedevano la Tunisia e la Francia. Quale fosse poi la classifica del 2017 si può vedere dalla Figura 9, dove sono raffigurate le percentuali dei sei Paesi da cui proveniva nel 2017 il maggior numero di migranti. In cifre assolute, la Romania superava di poco il milione di arrivi, l'Albania ne contava 456.000, il Marocco 433.000 ecc. E davvero non c'è bisogno di alcun commento, dato che tre quarti dei migranti venuti da questi sei Paesi in realtà erano europei.

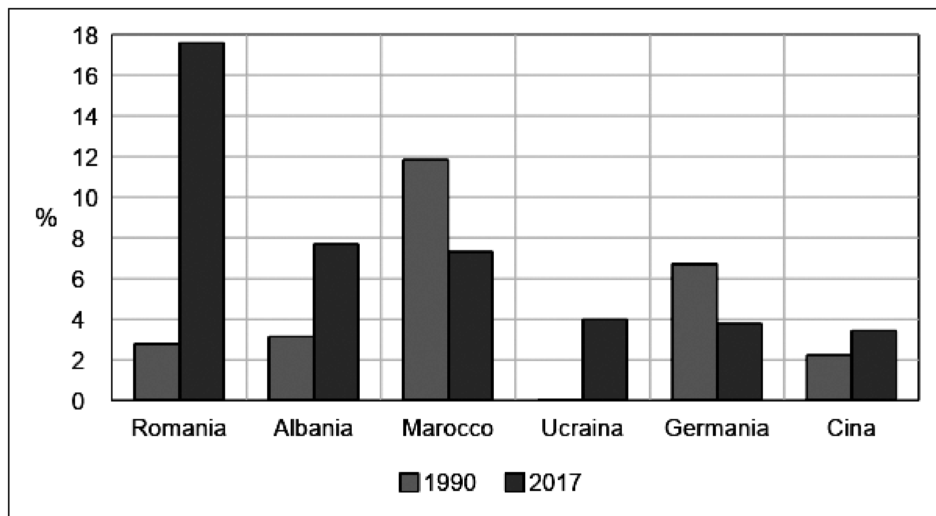

Figura 9 – I sei Paesi da cui proveniva nel 2017 il maggior numero di migranti arrivati in Italia.

Note

[1] L'*International Migrant Stock: The 2017 Revision* dell'ONU precisa che "the estimates are based on official statistics on the foreign-born or the foreign population" (United Nation n. pag.).

[2] Com'è noto esistono criteri diversi per definire le guerre. Qui ho scelto di optare per quelli del Center for Systemic Peace di Vienna (dal cui sito web – http://www.systemicpeace.org – sono tratte le figure di questo contributo), che le chiama "major episodes of political violence," cioè conflitti che "involve at least 500 'directly-related' fatalities and reach a level of intensity in which political violence is both systematic and sustained (a base rate of 100 'directly-related deaths per annum')" (Marshall n. pag.).

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Articles

Mirella Vallone

Listening in Khaled Mattawa's *Zodiac of Echoes*

Zodiac of Echoes (2003), Khaled Mattawa's second poetry collection, opens with the poem "Echo & Elixir 1" which presents a speaker violently assailed by a physical and emotional sense of dislocation, one that positions him "somewhere" between memory and oblivion, and makes him unable to resonate within himself and with the world: "City without words. Night without night. / Somewhere I remember / these clothes are not my clothes. / These bones are not my bones. / I forget and remember again. / Ships in the harbor which is the sea / which is the journey / that awakens a light inside my chest" (1).

Zodiac of Echoes is a meditation on diaspora, the complex dynamics of living between cultures and on the related themes of loss, grief, memory, and identity. These issues are articulated by the speakers of the poems calling forth all the senses, but most of all listening – as a form of self-reflection, as drawing near other sounding bodies whose resonances both penetrate and envelope the listener, and enable him to listen to resonances of meaning yet to emerge. It is the privileged means through which the diasporic subjectivities of the poems try to find their "place" in the world.

The title of the collection itself highlights the acoustic element with its reference to the reverberations of sound, and it stands out as a call to listen. In a note at the end of the book, Mattawa explains that he found information on the Zodiac of Echoes in *A Concise Treatise on the Laws of the Stars* by Mana Ibn Shaqlouf (1156-1201), a North African scholar who was a judge in both the Maliki and Hanafi traditions, and who eventually became interested in astrology and postulated the existence of alternative astrological systems that differ both from the Greek-Egyptian horoscope system, known in the West, and the Indian one. The Zodiac of Echoes is a system of divination based on a single galaxy of five planets that

rotate around a speckled sun, named Matahat Al-Amal (the labyrinth of yearnings). According to this tradition, the speckles on the sun are prayers unable to advance higher into the heavens, but cling to the sun that attracts them like a magnet. Since the whole zodiac is in constant motion, and this sun constantly spins about its orbit, some prayers become detached. Unable to resume their original ascent to the highest tiers, the prayers spin about the zodiac filling it with their echoes. It is the mingled sounds of these unanswerable prayers that give the name to this zodiac. Like this zodiac too, Mattawa's collection *Zodiac of Echoes* resounds with voices and yearning, and is at the same time permeated with a feeling of being entrapped and dislocated, as the following verses from "Echo & Elixir 7" tellingly express: "It is not why /[…]/ I feel that somewhere else / in the infinite bent below the horizon / better things are happening, / events and lives that pertain to me" (83).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the acoustic element in *Zodiac of Echoes*, in particular its relation to diasporic subjectivity, faith, and translation starting from the premises of the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in *À L'Écoute* (2002) / *Listening* (2007). Nancy's starting point is the challenging question if philosophy, given the supremacy of the visual paradigm in Western thought, is capable of listening: "Isn't the philosopher someone who always hears, but who cannot listen, or who, more precisely, neutralizes listening within himself, so that he can philosophize?" (1) In a movement against the dominant mode of scientific thought based on visual conceptualization, Nancy explores what it means "to exist according to listening, for it and through it, what part of experience and truth is put into play" (5). In other words, he evaluates the possibility of an ontology and epistemology based on listening "as a mode of attending to the resonances that penetrate, reverberate between, compose and decompose, self and world, the psychic and the bodily, the intellectual and the sensual" (Janus 185).

It is not a question of reversing the traditional sensual hierarchy, that is, of replacing conceptual thought, based on vision, with sensual perception limited to audition, because listening, for Nancy, is "the sense that touches upon and stimulates at once all bodily senses, as well as that other sense-making faculty that has been variously called 'mind,' 'spirit,' or soul'" (Janus

189). According to the French philosopher, to be listening will always mean to be straining toward or finding access to the self: "not, it should be emphasized, a relationship to 'me' (the supposedly given subject), or to the 'self' of the other (the speaker, the musician, also supposedly given, with his subjectivity), but to the *relationship in self*, so to speak, as it forms a 'self' or a 'to itself' in general, and if something like that ever does reach the end of its formation" (12). For this reason, listening is by no means a metaphor of gaining access to the I, but the reality of this access. Since sound essentially arrives and expands, or is deferred and transferred, the sonorous present is the result of space-time. To listen, therefore, is "to enter that spatiality by which, at the same time, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me, as well as toward me; it is through such opening that a 'self' can take place" (14).

Zodiac of Echoes is this space/time where the diasporic subjectivity of the poems lends an ear to the reverberations between the I and the world in a process of ongoing definition and redefinition of the self. In the critical discourse on diaspora, as well as in diasporic literature, the main focus has been on spatiality, the affective and social experience of space, and on the impact of the processes of space production; space has been used to articulate issues of cultural memory, personal identity, national belonging, class, ethnicity and race. In *Zodiac of Echoes* Mattawa favors the acoustic dimension (and the sensorial one in general) to pursue the same objectives. While the speakers of the poems search for their identities and place in the world immersing themselves in an acoustic dimension, the readers likewise, in many cases unable to access the spatial-temporal nexus of the poems, are not asked to look for a path on the map of the poem but to listen to their interior resonances, to become themselves resonant subjects, that "intensive spacing of a rebound that does not end in any return to self without immediately relaunching, as an echo, a call to that same self" (Nancy 21). Like Nancy, Mattawa seems to consider resonance as "a foundation, as the first or last profundity of 'sense' itself" (6).

Khaled Mattawa is a poet, translator, and essayist. Born in Libya and emigrated to the United States at the age of 14 in 1979, he has spent his life fostering a cultural mediation between the Arab and the Western world and has received many awards for his engagement.[1] His recent collection

of essays on contemporary American poetry, *How Long Have You Been with Us?*, also sheds light on his development as a translator and a poet. Here one realizes that right from the start of his experience in the United States, listening has become a way of transcending alienation, and his quest for an interior resonance is the means whereby to find his cultural position. Translating emerges as a vehicle to overcome his sense of otherness. As he states in the essay "Identity, Power, and a Prayer to Repatriation": "I was a foreigner and knew that alterity would stay with me for some time. I felt that foreignness when I first read Walt Whitman. His America just did not speak to me then. I needed something in English but that was also in my 'language.' Translating Arab poets offered me a chance to experiment with sensibilities similar to mine (using familiar images, symbols, and motifs) in English" (*How Long*, 25-26).

The negotiation of differences involved in the act of translation allows for the emotional and intellectual passage and exchange needed to bridge cultural divides. Translation, which is always an experience of exile, has been the way Mattawa learned to come to terms with his exile. As the psychoanalyst Paul-Laurent Assoun has argued, translating is mourning an initial imaginary identity as well as one of arrival and learning to live in the transit. Likewise, Janine Altounian contends that translating implies approving the violent breach of exile; the exiled not only has to mourn the field of his initial investments but, in order not to lose them completely, must take charge of the sorrow just as excruciating of reinvesting clandestinely, like a *traitor*, the primary signifiers in the words and in the values of the second language.

Translation, while helped Mattawa to overcome alienation, taught him to look at poetry from inside, providing a path towards his poetic activity. Immersed in linguistic, cultural, and emotional echoes and resonances coming from different authors and languages, Mattawa started to write poems, urged by "a sense of political grievance, anger at feeling trapped, along with a desire to preserve something which was about to be lost"; he was writing in English, but was aware that his sensitivity was "rooted in a vision that needed to be translated" (26).

Zodiac of Echoes encompasses all these reverberations, creating an acoustic structure from which a self can emerge.

The echo of travel

The strongest echo of the collection, of which all others are in a sense a reflection, is "the echo of travel" (*Zodiac of Echoes* 83) that surrounds the speaker, with its inner and outer resonances, producing a diasporic subjectivity and impacting on his way *to live* space and time. It is the representation of an internal distance – "the distance the body must travel to speak to itself" (*Amorisco*, 2) – and, at the same time, a halo enveloping him, signaling his foreignness – "So one enters a room alone./ People there and they see the dust/ and they hear the echo of travel. /[…]/ They see windstorms and sandstorms,/ ghost towns and custom shacks" (83).

To cope with the loss of the homeland, the family, and the native language, the diasporic subject uses memory to create attachment patterns through time and space, weaving threads of continuity. As Edward Said has argued, for an exile "habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus, both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally" (186). The poems of *Zodiac of Echoes* present a mixture of overlapping places, times, faces, and voices that echo each other forming a complex pattern. The copresence of "here" and "there" is articulated with an antiteleological temporality. As James Clifford has argued, in diaspora linear history is broken, "the present constantly shadowed by a past that is also a desired, but obstructed, future: a renewed, painful yearning" (318). This feeling pervades numerous poems, and it is well expressed by the lyrical I of "Echo & Elixir 7" who lives the present as "a blockade on / the intersection of the future and the past" (*Zodiac of Echoes* 83).

In her study of the spatio-temporal dimension of diaspora Esther Pereen, employing Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, views diaspora as a dwelling-in-dischronotopicality. She underlines how in diaspora the affective associations or memories attributed to the lost time-space of the home mingle with the often contrastive affective associations and memories of the time-space of displacement. This double interpellation occasions the production of multiple systems of norms and values for diasporas, and the consequent effort of negotiation. The chronotope emphasizes that spatial

displacement is always also temporal displacement: "In diaspora, the homeland is not only *distant*; it is also *past* or *passed*, left behind in space and in time" (72), and as such it is not recoverable by a simple return to a location on the map.

This feeling is expressed by the speaker of "Echo & Elixir 3," whose absence from the native land still echoes when he returns home: "People do not ask how long you've been away, / but what have you brought? / and being away is all you bring" (13). Nonetheless returning home allows him to reconcile body and soul and achieve an adherence with the world, via sensual perceptions, that previously could only be imagined or desired: "And the life in the hands you shake, / the poetry in the sand more than the poetry in poetry" (13). The poem ends in highlighting the role of the imagination for the emotional survival of the diasporic subject: "Let me tell you a story now. / You see a city in the clouds/ and give it a woman's name, /always a woman's name. / Let me tell you about my loved one's hair. / You take a blade of grass/ and for a second/ you are a citizen of its taste" (13).

The poem in the collection whose texture most overlaps with a vibrational space in which the speaker, as a listening subject, attends to resonances of perception and sense yet to emerge, is "Rain Song." It is the recreation in memory of multiple soundscapes that echo each other through the musicality of rain. "Rain Song" is after Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab's poem of the same title. One of the major representatives of contemporary Arabic poetry, Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab wrote "Rain Song" when he was exiled in Kuwait, imbuing it with loss, pain, and hope, and composing it around the symbolism of rain. Mattawa's "Rain Song" is also a meditation on loss and grief, as well as an attempt to find comfort in faith and make sense of them.

Natural sounds (often anthropomorphized) and human voices commingle, propagate and reverberate, penetrate and envelope, in a recreation in memory that moves through times and spaces. The beginning of the poem overlaps with the attack of an acoustic event (the sound of the rain and the music on the radio) opening the temporality of listening and making the speaker/listening subject draw towards the resonance of a possible sense, triggering in his memory the evocation of multiple soundscapes. The first memory is a childhood one: the rain on a morning

ride to school, his father driving, his eyes fixed on a world of credit and debt; on the radio, "devotion to / the lifter of harm from those who despair, knower of secrets with the knowledge of certainty" (9). The faith of those days is invoked in the present to relieve "the solitude of a man walking in the rain," the grief of a woman whose chest is "a sponge rain soaks with despair" (11).

Other childhood memories are evoked in a crescendo of sounds: children rising early in the morning, their songs like "the oars that broke in the first shadows /of dawn" (10-11). The sea is invoked to listen to "prayers on parched lips," while in the noise caused by the rain (the creaking ruts, the whistling pipes) "the chant of a thousand wailers" (11) resounds. The musicality of the verses drags us just like the liquid element of the rain into a dramatic crescendo that culminates in a flashflood storm in Nebraska where "darkness rushes / its black ambulance / shepherding dread" and "the self is lost" (10). On the one hand the opening of this listening space through memory is a way for the speaker to represent his grief, vulnerability, and loss, to find expression for them, and to draw towards the emerging of a sense that would make possible coming to terms with them. But, at the same time, it is also an attempt to recover an access to the self, via vibrations and reverberations with the world.

While rain is the natural element that unifies the places and times of the poem and is invoked in the end as a protection ("Bless me now pouring / rain as the world I know / leaves me"; 12), the sea signals a distance that can only be crossed by surrendering to a higher entity: "I pray because / there is no shelter from floating / on a sea of distances" (10). The causal link between prayer and distance in the quoted verses brings us to the correlation between diaspora and religion. As Seán McLoughlin has pointed out, although religions have a significant place in the history of diaspora and transnationalism, starting from "the prototypical Babylonian exile of the Jews and their desire to return to Zion" (125), the study of religions has been slow to acknowledge the significant role of religion in contemporary migration. And for their part diaspora and transnational studies have paid less theoretical attention to religion than to the other closely related notions of ethnicity, race, nation, and hybridity. Starting from the 1970s, scholars of diaspora and religion have emphasized the

complex continuities and transformations of religions when they adapt to new contexts. They have focused on what happens to their specific content in certain circumstances, and how religious traditions are transformed in new contexts.[2]

In *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (2006) Thomas A. Tweed, drawing from his research on a Cuban Catholic shrine in Miami, has conceptualized religion from the perspective of movement and place, defining religions as "confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries" (54). Religions can be understood as always-contested and ever-changing maps that orient devotees as they move spatially and temporally. Studying the religious life of transnational migrants, Tweed has analyzed how the disorientation of migration affects people's attempts "to map, construct, and inhabit worlds of meaning" (Tweed 1997, 93). In this regard he has identified three types of spiritual cartographies: "*locative*, in which religion is associated with a homeland where the group now resides; *supralocative*, which names the inclination in later generations of some diasporic peoples to diminish or deny the significance of both homeland and the adopted land in their religious life; and *translocative*, which refers to the tendency among many first- and second-generation migrants to symbolically move between homeland and new land" (94-95).

As far as Islam in the West is concerned, many scholars have studied the impact of deterritorialization and deculturation on Muslims, noticing an "objectification" of Islam (Eickelman and Piscatori).[3] No longer lived as an integral part of a practice and culture, Islam becomes an object of reflection, a self-contained system that its believers can describe, characterize, and distinguish from other belief systems: "Hence the recurrent question: What is Islam? The answer has to be individual, not so much in terms of elaborating new theoretical answers but in terms of self-appropriation of the answer" (Roy, 38) On the other hand, a common feature of "the return of the religious" involving Christianity and Islam is the internalization of religion under the category of faith; intellectual and theological debates give way to the expression of a personal relation to faith, deity, and knowledge. As Jocelyn Cesari has noted in her study of Islam in the West

and the emergence of "a new Muslim minority," young Muslims exercise new levels of individual choice in the course of religious observances and experience religion first and foremost as a matter of spirituality and personal ethics.

In *Zodiac of Echoes* religion is not tied to places of worship or to rituals, but is expressed as faith, as a personal, intimate relationship, based on attending to resonances of sense, and as such it can be found as a subtext in many poems. On the other hand, if we consider the title of the collection, we find the suggestion of reading the poems as prayers. "Genealogy of Fire", a homage of the poet to his family female members, can be read as a prayer fueled by the fear of losing his loved ones. The voices of his mother, sister, and niece are evoked in portions of recalled conversations that emerge like "arabesques of water" (52). The feared loss is expressed in terms of a soundscape that will no longer reverberate their voices: "and if she were, and if they were / to disappear like fog at sunrise / on crowded roads or dead gardens / and if her voice, and if their voices / were to be swallowed by the sounds of forests or shifting dunes, / how will I console the world?" (53). These lines are punctuated by verses from the Qu'ran which insert another Voice into the poem, one the speaker can listen to for sense and comfort. Sometimes the words of the unanswerable prayers of the zodiac express just a "homing desire" (Brah 180), that is a desire for home and belonging, for familiarity, continuity, and safety which is set against the lived experience of loss and exclusion.

The acoustic element, in expanding and withdrawing, stimulates profound experiences of presence and absence, an aspect analyzed by psychoanalysts interested in the musical dimension of the analytic encounter and in the relationship between music and psychoanalysis.[4] Mauro Mancia and Antonio Di Benedetto have argued that music reawakens, in a sense, archaic experiences of object relation and loss. The temporality of the musical experience involves fragmentation of emotions, an unending series of "melancholic states" overcome and transformed by memory. While a work in the visual arts has an autonomous existence that lasts in time, evoking in the viewer a sense of eternity, the music listener is engaged in a subtle and incessant elaboration of mourning. At the same time acoustic stimuli amplify perceptive faculties, making mind work on

the representation of the invisible. In Mattawa's poems the recreation of soundscapes as space-time for the speakers to immerse themselves in and be enveloped by has this double function: by evoking absent presences they create the illusion of continuity while working through grief and loss, and concomitantly constitute the space-time for the ongoing definition and redefinition of the self. The poem "Cricket Mountain" provides another example of this through the evocation of a childhood memory permeated by a dreamlike dimension. The speaker is with his father, who is driving at night away from the city, the car's lights off. They cross a bridge and stop by a channel that carries "sea water to the salt field" (48). In the surrounding silence only the sound of crickets is audible; it "crawls like a creature wanting to be noticed, yet is quick to withdraw… Soon there is nothing in the world but the crickets' hum, an ordered machinery, a vibrating zone" (48). The speaker and his father are enveloped by the sound of crickets, and part of the vibrating zone, yet the sound is immediately defined as "a shroud": "You feel the air shiver around you, the sound wrapping you like a shroud" (48), lending a dramatic connotation to this outer and inner landscape and marking the distance of the speaker/listener from the world of the living. The fact that the poem ends with questions concerning identity – "Who was I then, and who was my father? / And what was the city that tangled us in its muddy streets?" (48) – indicates how the evocation of that memory is necessary to re-positioning the self in the present. In the physical and emotional disorientation of diaspora, in fact, home and identity are continually contested and reframed. The act of remembering is always contextual, a continuous process of recalling, interpreting, and reconstructing the past in terms of the present and in the light of an anticipated future. What is remembered of a prior home evolves in constant dialogue with new memories of other places and changing circumstances (Stock, 24). Physical places and remembered and imagined spaces commingle in a constant search for identity that emerges as a momentary positionality that is always already becoming.

"Cricket Mountain" can also be read as an act of translation as Bella Brodzki conceives it. The author of *Can These Bones Live? Translation, Survival, and Cultural Memory*, in embracing the metaphorical power of translation as travel between times, has argued that excavating or

unearthing burial sites or ruins in order to reconstruct traces of the physical and textual past in a new context is also a mode of translation, just as resurrecting a memory or interpreting a dream are acts of translation: "the original, also inaccessible, is no longer an original per se; it is a pretext whose identity has been redefined" (4). Following this interpretation, we can read the whole collection as an act of translation, that is, the place where, and the instrument through which Mattawa reclaims forms of human aliveness that the effects of the diasporic experience, so well expressed by the opening verses of the collection, have foreclosed to him.

In this sense the last lines of the collection are significant, also in relation to the opening ones. They describe the speaker's return home, albeit in his imagination, as a complete adherence, a total dissolving of distances and borders, a merging of I and you, and a reconquered ability to resonate with himself and the world: "This is how I carry myself / back to you. Under / porch lights you'll find / me tenuous as stardust / as I reach for the mist / of your breath to anchor me, / for the rub of your touch/ to render me mortal and resonant" (109). As Sara Ahmed has argued, the lived experience of being-at-home involves subjects being enveloped in a space which is not simply outside them: being-at-home suggests that "the subject and space leak into each other, inhabit each other" (89). It is like inhabiting a second skin, a skin which does not simply contain the homely subject, but which allows the subject to be touched and to touch the world.

Mattawa's actual return home is described in the essay "Identity, Power, and a Prayer for Repatriation," in which the poet acknowledges that translation has so much imbued his life that it has become for him "a kind of existential state, a form of identity"; as it helped him to find his way into American culture, so it was the means through which he "began to seek [his] return, [his] place at home" (*How Long* 27). The latter, in fact, is reconquered through listening, in that intensive spacing of rebound between sound and sense, Arab and English, that goes beyond sense as meaning, and makes of the poet "a resonant body" (Nancy, 8) opened to a simultaneous listening to a self and to a world that are both in resonance:

> At home in Libya after many years of living away, and in the enigmatic state of arrival, I spent my first day in the banal world of funeral wakes, where

> customary words such as *'Azzana wahid* are exchanged among the attendees. *'Azzana wahid*. The phrase is repeated a thousand times, its meaning buried in the automatic perception of ritualized utterance where heartfelt sentiment dies. *'Azzana wahid* means "our grief is one." Our… grief… is… one… During the noisy nonchalant gatherings of my father's funeral in Libya, only in translation, in my English, did the words "our grief is one" mean anything to me. I culled that solace from mouths that did not mean to touch me so deeply, and it was translation that allowed me to enter like an endoscope lens into the mourners' hearts to retrieve the comfort I needed […]. That effort in reading the words beyond the words people said, the quiet probing of what my countrymen were trying to really tell me and my need to translate them, was how I began to seek my return, my place at home. (*How Long* 27)

Notes

[1] Khaled Mattawa has published several collections of poetry, including *Fugitive Atlas* (2020), *Mare Nostrum* (2019), *Tocqueville* (2010), *Amorisco* (2008), and *Ismailia Eclipse* (1995). He has translated numerous volumes of contemporary Arabic poetry, including Adonis's *Concerto al-Quds* (2017), *Shepherd of Solitude: Selected Poems of Amjad Nasser* (2009), and *Miracle Maker: Selected Poems of Fadhil Al-Azzawi* (2004). He is the recipient of numerous awards including the Academy of American Poets Fellowship Prize, the PEN Award for Poetry in Translation, and a MacArthur Fellowship.

[2] For a survey of how the field of "diaspora religion" has evolved and developed within comparative religion, the history of religion and religious studies, see McLoughlin 2005.

[3] According to Eickelman and Piscatori three facets of objectification are noteworthy. First, distinctive to the modern era is that discourse and debate about Muslim tradition involves people on a massive scale. It also necessarily involves an awareness of other Muslim and non-Muslim traditions. A second facet is that authoritative religious discourse, once the monopoly of religious scholars who have mastered recognized religious texts, is replaced by direct and broader access to the printed word. More and more Muslims take it upon themselves to interpret the textual sources, classical or modern, of Islam. Third, objectification reconfigures the symbolic production of Muslim politics. The state, the ulama, and the "new" religious intellectuals all compete to gain ascendancy as the arbiters of Islamic practice.

[4] Scholarship on music and psychoanalysis has worked on the musical dimension of the analytical encounter referring to a conception of music as a language

sui generis, whose symbolic structure is isomorphic with that of our emotional and affective world. This dimension facilitates the transferential metaphor, beyond the content of narrative, of affective, emotional, and cognitive (traumatic) experiences of the patient which have shaped the implicit model of the patient's mind.

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Angela Santese

Narrating the Nuclear Armageddon: The Atomic Menace in the US Popular Culture of the 1980s

1. Introduction

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the development of nuclear technology profoundly shaped not only the politics, the international system, but also the culture and mindset of the so-called "atomic age." The revolutionary discovery of nuclear fission sparked new fears of what seemed to be an unstoppable technological development: after the bombing of Japan left tangible evidence of atomic destruction, some segments of public opinion started to reject the proliferation and use of nuclear weapons. This opposition to the buildup of nuclear arsenals and the criticism of the dangers inherent in their very existence manifested itself both through the emergence of antinuclear movements that developed in different waves and in different areas of the world but also in the cultural output of the post-World-War-II era.[1]

The beginning of the 1980s was characterized by growing bipolar tensions: starting in 1979, the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union deteriorated, and it seemed that détente and the arms control process were at a standstill. The Reagan administration's massive military build-up, determined anti-Soviet rhetoric, abandonment of détente, and loose talk about the possibility of waging (and winning) a limited nuclear war fueled the perception of an imminent nuclear danger, creating a favorable political climate for the re-emergence of the antinuclear mobilization which had experienced a rapid ebb after 1963. The fear of nuclear war thus reinforced the emerging antinuclear movement, which during the Reagan administration not only grew, but was able to foster a new national conversation on nuclear policies and disarmament issues transcending the small circles of politicians, diplomats and military

experts and involving a wider general audience. As emphasized by Paul Boyer, the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign (NWFC), the organization through which the US antinuclear movement became a mass phenomenon, "emerged as the political manifestation of [the] fear" of nuclear war and its potentially destructive consequences for humankind and the environment, pressuring the Reagan administration on the nuclear issue and producing an extensive public debate on the peril posed by nuclear technology (Santese, *Ronald Reagan* 1; Boyer, *Fallout* xv).

During the 1980s, the idea that a nuclear war could materialize led not only to an unprecedented antinuclear mobilization in the US and Europe and to a public conversation on these themes, but also to a series of cultural initiatives designed to alert the public and politicians to the atomic menace.2 In this political and social context, key cultural moments can be detected in the book *Fate of the Earth,* in the initiatives that revolved around the Nuclear Winter Scenario, and in the made-for-TV movie *The Day After.*

Starting with an analysis of these works and the public debate they created, this essay makes three points. During the 1980s, the cultural production about the nuclear menace was not limited to the irrationality and immorality of MAD and the generic peril to human life. Rather, some works started to highlight the environmental consequences of a nuclear exchange and the resulting extinction of humankind. These works indeed were based on scientific data, which was made possible by the development of the science of ecology and the spread of a new environmental sensitivity in the second half of the twentieth century. Second, although the cultural production about the nuclear menace started before the 1980s, only with the third wave of the antinuclear movement, did it reach a wide audience, not necessarily specialized on scientific, military and diplomatic issues. This was due not only to the development of new communication technologies but above all to the fact that the mass antinuclear mobilization of this decade had sensitized public opinion to the nuclear danger. Finally, this cultural production was subject to a broader public debate than in the past wave of the no-nukes mobilization, and, in some cases, it became the ground for a political confrontation between the US government and the antinuclear movement. Indeed, during Reagan's tenure the vast galaxy

of American antinuclear organizations, and the NWFC in particular, succeeded, much more effectively than during previous antinuclear mobilizations, in exploiting the fear of an atomic confrontation to fuel a public debate on the effects of nuclear war and the strategic doctrines associated with it (Santese, *Ronald Reagan* 496-520).3

2. The Double Nature of Atomic Power

The development of nuclear technology deeply influenced the public imagination and the cultural output of the post-WWII era. The cultural impact of an invention as revolutionary as the atomic bomb was particularly profound in the United States. Since its inception this technology had two sides. There was the so-called "sunny side" of the atom, the possibility of developing a large-scale civilian nuclear industry to produce cheap electricity, or in the words of the Atomic Energy Commission Chairman Lewis Strauss, "electrical energy too cheap to meter" ("Abundant Power from Atom Seen" 5). The second one, the atom's "dark and scaring side," related to its military applications and the development of atomic arsenals with a previously unimagined destructive power.

Faith in nuclear technology led to the production of books, novels and films that illustrated the positive potential of this revolutionary discovery, and minimized and obscured its destructive side. These works fueled the so-called "culture of atomic consensus" (Henriksen xv) and were useful for the governmental effort aimed at, as underlined by Paul Boyer, the exaltation of the future benefits that could be derived from nuclear energy and the playing down of the threat posed by nuclear arsenals to human survival (Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* 100, 351).4 A relevant example of this kind of cultural production is *The Walt Disney Story of Our Friend the Atom,* published in 1956 and adapted into an episode of the *Disneyland television series* the following year. Intended to explain how nuclear science began and how a huge scientific effort had discovered the energy produced by the atom, the illustrated book, produced with the collaboration of the German scientist Heinz Haber, described atomic technology as a generative force, not a destructive one.[5] Using lines of argument similar to those of

the above mentioned illustrated book, after the revised *Atomic Energy Act* of 1954, the US government, through the Atomic Energy Commission, engaged in "aggressive promotion of the benefit of the peaceful atom" in hopes of staving off public criticism of nuclear power plants, and it worked on "transcending rather than augmenting nuclear technology's military image" (Smith 239, 237). As emphasized by Spencer Weart, the strategy of US public officials, beside emphasizing the peaceful applications of the atom, was also based on the exploitation of the "nuclear fear" in order to influence public opinion, and this approach proved to be effective at least for the first fifteen years of the atomic age. In particular the scenario of a possible Soviet attack was useful to contain the anxiety associated with the same existence of the US nuclear arsenal, although in the end the fear of nuclear technology was redirected towards the civilian production of nuclear energy, which was thus subjected to more stringent constraints than the military application of nuclear technology.6 The strategy to promote peaceful atomic applications in order to eclipse or forestall criticism of the military worked until the beginning of the 1960s when the new counter-cultural movements, in conjunction with the developing antinuclear protest movements, began to criticize nuclear technology, particularly the nuclear arms race. The contradictory nature of atomic technology thus had an impact on cultural production, bringing about what Margot Henriksen has described as "the culture of [atomic] dissent," one that "revised its perceptions of the past that had given rise to this atomic age system of power, exposing the immorality and the insanity of a system with such a potential for annihilation" (xxii, xxv). The culture of atomic dissent emerged in opposition to "the culture of atomic consensus" that "adapted to the bomb by stressing the American tradition of optimism and its secure belief in progress and technology," helped by governmental efforts (xxv).

The most famous example of this developing culture of atomic dissent is Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr Strangelove,* an explicit critique of the deterrence system and the MAD theory. The 1964 film "suggests that the entire arms race and broader standoff between the superpowers are intrinsically insane even if political and military leaders – unlike the caricatures in the film – are nominally 'reasonable'. No degree of retail sanity, the satire implies, can ultimately disguise the wholesale madness at its core" (Mausbach

12). Sidney Lumet's *Fail Safe*, also released in 1964, focused on another terrifying scenario: how a breakdown of communication systems could trigger a nuclear war. The dangers posed by the civil nuclear industry were not critiqued until 1979 in the movie *The China Syndrome*, which described a cover-up of an incident that could have produced a core meltdown at a nuclear power plant outside Los Angeles. The movie thus questioned not only the safety standard of nuclear reactors but also the honesty of the utilities producing commercial nuclear power. Coincidentally, *The China Syndrome* was released only 12 days before the accident at the nuclear reactor at Three Mile Island, in Pennsylvania, the most serious accident in the history of US commercial nuclear power.7

3. Science and Fiction

Hence, although the narrative of atomic catastrophe appeared well before the 1980s, it was only during this decade that such fictional accounts became more detailed in their description of the consequences of a nuclear Armageddon. While the movies above underlined the danger posed by nuclear technology, whether civilian or military, they did not offer a detailed account of nuclear radiation's effect on humans or the environment. In the 1980s, building on scientific data and models, books and films described in detail the adverse consequences of radiation on both the environment and human beings, and provided a realistic description of the biological and climatic consequences of a nuclear war.

The most successful attempt to make the consequences of a nuclear war realistic and comprehensible was by Jonathan Schell. Relying on the scientific data of *The Effects of Nuclear War*, a report published in 1979 by the Office of Technology Assessment of the Congress, Schell published a series of articles in 1982 in *The New Yorker* that vividly described the consequences of a total nuclear war which, had it occurred, would have caused the extinction of humankind. His work was later published as the bestselling book *Fate of the Earth.* As Alan Winkler observes, the first part of Schell's series, "A Republic of Insects and Grass,"

> was a graphic prediction of what the nation might become following a nuclear war. In terms a layman could understand, Schell began with the basic principles of radiation and summarized the fundamental effect of a blast. He spoke as well of ancillary results and described the impact of fallout and electromagnetic pulse, which could wipe out all communication. He argued that the destruction of the ozone layer in the atmosphere could cause devastating climatic change. (190)

Fate of the Earth, with its realistic and clear narration of the effects of a nuclear war, was hugely successful – it "became the focus of church sermons and community meeting around the country and helped create a diffuse but still real public sense that something needed to be done" (192). Schell's writings made the public aware of issues that up to then had been the monopoly of a small group of politicians, bureaucrats, and defense experts.

In 1983, other educational productions joined the *Fate of the Earth*: scientist Carl Sagan began to inform the public about the so-called "nuclear winter theory" or "nuclear winter scenario"*,* and the TV movie *The Day After* was broadcast. Although neither was designed as an explicit propaganda manifesto for the antinuclear movement, they triggered a debate analogous to that produced by *Fate of the Earth* and brought a heightened sense of the nuclear threat to millions of Americans. The public debate around these works was due also to the fact that for at least two years the United States had been swept by a cross-party and cross-class antinuclear mobilization, capable not only of exerting pressure on the nuclear stance of the Reagan Administration but also of immediately catalyzing the attention of public opinion and the media.

The result of studies conducted by Richard Turco, Owen Toon, Thomas P. Ackerman, James B. Pollack and Carl Sagan, the nuclear winter theory was first made public at a scientific conference in Cambridge in April 1983 and then published in the journal *Science*. The research team, known by the acronym "TTAPS," studied the biological and climatic effects of a hypothetical nuclear conflict. They concluded that even if a nuclear war was limited to the northern hemisphere, the soot and dust produced by the burning of the cities would obscure the sun, darken the earth's surface, and lower global temperatures enough to cause a nuclear winter that would make human life impossible. The TTAPS group pledged to

make media appearances to publicize not just their conclusions, but what they considered to be the fundamental strategic and political implications. Indeed, as Carl Sagan wrote in an essay in *Foreign Affairs*, "the inevitable conclusion" was that we had to "reduce global nuclear arsenals below the level likely to cause the type of climate catastrophe and the resulting devastation expected by new studies" (259); such a reduction would have left only "a small fraction of the current global strategic arsenals" in place (292).8 The nuclear winter concept attracted widespread media coverage and had a deep impact on public opinion. As Wilfred Mausbach writes, "while the visual image of an overwhelming mushroom cloud had already evoked the vision of man's extermination of his species by means of his own technology, it was the concept of nuclear winter that gave 'concrete substance to that image'" (31). In the context of its battle against the antinuclear movement and as the latter was proving capable of influencing American public opinion on the issue of nuclear war, the Reagan Administration took the nuclear winter scenario seriously, setting up a program to examine it, while Congress approved numerous bills asking the Pentagon to develop "a comprehensive study of nuclear winter and its potential effect on defense strategy and doctrine" (Mausbach 33).

Even though the nuclear winter theory was contested by some members of the scientific community, it was extremely well disseminated, and it deepened the debate about the nuclear peril that the antinuclear movement had started. TTAPS's efforts to communicate their results outside the scientific community and their realistic depiction of the effect of nuclear war found fertile ground in a public opinion already sensitized to the antinuclear and environmental issues by the mobilization of the previous years. After all, in the 1970s, environmental concern mounted around the world, leading to "the emergence of global-scale environmental anxieties and awareness" and the birth of the modern environmental movement (McNeill 263).

4. *The Day After* and Its Political Fallout

The debate over the nuclear winter theory fed into the controversy set off by the ABC broadcast on November 20, 1983 of the made-for-TV film *The Day After.* Directed by Nicholas Mayer, the film depicted the aftermath of total nuclear war and its effect on a group of Americans in the city of Lawrence, Kansas. The choice of Lawrence underscored the fact that, in the eventuality of a nuclear war, not even small cities would be safe, because the two superpowers had enough nuclear missiles to guarantee no place would be spared from the effects of nuclear fallout. While the Reagan administration, through the Nuclear Arms Control Information Policy Group (NACIPIG), was busy trying to counter the NWFC's influence on public opinion and regain control of the debate on nuclear arms negotiations, it became very concerned about the film's possible political fallout.

Even before the scheduled broadcast, *The Day After* became a battlefield between the Reagan Administration and the NWFC. President Reagan saw a preview on October 10, 1983, while at Camp David for Columbus Day. He wrote in his personal journal that the movie

> has Lawrence Kansas wiped out in a nuclear war with Russia. It is powerfully done – all 7 mil. worth. It's very effective & left me greatly depressed [...]. Whether it will be of help to the 'anti nukes' or not, I can't say. My own reaction was one of our having to do all we can to have a deterrent & to see there is never a nuclear war. (Reagan 186)

David Gergen, White House Director of Communications, was particularly worried about the potential effect of the broadcast on public opinion. Indeed, according to a White House memorandum, while "the film's producers, director, etc. at ABC deny the film is a political statement" this perception is "unavoidable," "if for no other reasons than timing. It airs on November 20th (postponed from May 1983) not long before the first Pershing II missiles are deployed in West Germany and about the same time widespread demonstrations against the missiles are expected to be organized in Europe" (Muskett n. pag.). Moreover, the White House

was also worried about how clearly the film demonstrated the uselessness of civil defense plans and ineffectiveness of governmental efforts to aid a population suffering from radiation poisoning, which together suggested that no planning could deal with the unimaginable consequences of nuclear war. Antinuclear groups, meanwhile, saw the film as an opportunity for public education, one that would build their constituency. Antinuclear movement documents reported that *The Day After*

> graphically shows many of the major short and long terms effects of nuclear weapons. [...] It shows the effect of blast, heat and radiation as well as firestorms: people vaporized instantly, a young boy blinded by looking at the flash, buildings exploding and collapsing, an entire city burning to ashes, fallout travelling on the wind, the progress of radiation poisoning – bruises, hair loss, weakness – taking its toll on initial survivors. It shows the devastating scenario survivors face – dead animals, barren fields, fallen buildings. (*The Day After*: Beyond Imagination" n. pag.)

The film also displayed the way the electromagnetic pulse disabled all electronic devices, the medical community's inability to respond to the emergency, the total destruction of physical surroundings, the complete social disintegration, and the absence of governmental assistance. According to antinuclear activists, given its realistic depiction of nuclear war, "its impact on the public is expected to be significant. People will be shocked, depressed, devastated. Many will, for the first time, become receptive to information about halting and reversing the arms race. There's no question that *The Day After* will be the main topic of conversation at Thanksgiving dinners across the country" ("SANE and the Freeze" n. pag.). SANE, a big antinuclear group, and the same NWFC even organized viewing groups across the country to provide places for people to watch the film together – and to exploit the occasion for communication and recruitment.

Considering this, the Administration feared that the film would create an emotional reaction in the public and lead to nuclear panic. As Bruce Chapman noted in a memorandum for David Gergen, "[p]eople are going to want to talk out the feelings of despair with which *The Day After* leaves one. The greatest danger in the film is the uses to which the 'No Nukes'

people – including the film's producers and actors – will put it afterwards. Teach-ins in church basements and media echo effects will heighten the political fallout for us" (Chapman n. pag.). To deal with the political fallout, talking points, prepared by the White House, instructed public officials to stress that "the film is powerful and graphic in presenting the horrors of a nuclear holocaust, but it leaves unanswered the central question: how we prevent this catastrophe from ever happening?" ("White House Talking Points" n. pag.). The answer to that, of course, was the Reagan Administration policy of deterrence and arms control. The White House also organized a roundtable on ABC featuring Robert McNamara, General Brent Scowcroft, conservative commentator William F. Buckley, philosopher and holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, Henry Kissinger, Carl Sagan, and then Secretary of State George Shultz, which was broadcast immediately following *The Day After*. The aim was to reassure the public. As Reagan wrote in his personal journal, "George [Shultz] is going on ABC right after its big Nuclear bomb film Sunday night. We know it's 'anti-nuke' propaganda, but we're going to take it over & say it shows why we must keep doing on what we're doing" (199).

Commenting on the movie's unprecedented advance publicity, *The Washington Post* wrote that "administration officials are worried that the film will heighten fears that President Reagan's nuclear arms policies, such as the current deployment of nuclear missiles in Europe, are dangerous"9; but *The Post* added that "the White House is awfully dumb, however, to be whipping up a counterattack against this program. There is no better way to seem implicitly to validate the doubts many people have about Ronald Reagan's nuclear proclivities" (Perl 37) Moreover, according to some press rumors, the battle between the administration and the ABC network had begun even before Reagan saw the film in advance. Nicholas Mayer, the director of the movie, while denying that he was the victim of pressure from the television network, told *The Los Angeles Tim*es that he would not believe in the actual airing of the film until he saw it projected on the screens whereas *Nuclear Times,* a magazine of the antinuclear movement, went so far as to write that the Pentagon had tried to persuade the writers to change the script before the film was even shot.[10]

It is impossible to know if *The Day After* was "the most powerful

television program in history", as claimed by Rep. Edward Markey (D-MA), an outspoken opponent of the nuclear arms race, but, according to *The New York Times*, it was certainly viewed by a huge audience (Corry n. pag.). According to *The Wall Street Journal,* about 100 million viewers watched part or all of it, "making the nuclear-war movie one of the most-watched television programs ever" (Landro 16). With its large audience, the efforts of antinuclear groups to use it as an opportunity for education and recruitment and, paradoxically, the White House's campaign against it, *The Day After* transformed itself from a TV movie into a political phenomenon and it helped to further broaden the debate on nuclear issues that was sweeping the country and which had been favored by the large support enjoyed by the antinuclear movement.

5. Conclusion

While movies or books about the nuclear menace appeared with the emergence of the "culture of atomic dissent", only during the 1980s did they depict the nuclear Armageddon in terms of an environmental catastrophe. These works, based on scientific data, described in a realistic and graphic way the biological and climatic effects of a nuclear confrontation, addressing a public opinion sympathetic to ecological issues because of the spread of a new environmental awareness. Although cultural production about the nuclear menace started in conjunction with the second wave of the antinuclear movement, it reached a wide audience only in the 1980s, when it fostered a true national conversation over the dangers of nuclear war. Indeed, while in the past, issues concerning nuclear doctrine, the nuclear arms race and nuclear war had been the prerogative of a small group of diplomats, military and politicians, during Reagan's tenure, with the formation of a popular no-nukes front, these issues reached a broader audience and were discussed outside narrow elites. The enlargement and in some ways the democratization of the debate on the nuclear issue and, more generally, the formation of a new antinuclear culture, in the context of which the above discussed cultural works are placed, was the product of a series of factors that emerged only during the

1980s. Mass antinuclear mobilization, Reagan's apparent unwillingness to reduce nuclear stockpiles, and growing bipolar tensions, ensured that the fear of nuclear war and its devastating consequences on humankind led to a wide debate over the effect of a nuclear war, not only reaching a broader audience but shaping a new antinuclear culture that has become deeply rooted in American public consciousness.

Notes

[1] Lawrence S. Wittner refers to three waves of the antinuclear movement: the first wave developed inside the international scientific community, during the design of the atomic bomb and ended in 1953; the second wave begun in 1954, following the radioactive contamination of the Lucky Dragon boat, and ended after the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963; the third wave started in 1977-1979, reaching its climax after Reagan's inauguration and ending in 1987 with the signing of the INF Treaty. See Wittner *One World or None*, *Resisting the Bomb*, and *Toward Nuclear Abolition*.

[2] On the antinuclear mobilization of the 1980s see Harvey; Wittner *One World or None*, *Resisting the Bomb*, and *Toward Nuclear Abolition*; Meyer; Solo.

[3] During the 1980s in the US the antinuclear movement was so popular and much more effective from the political point of view if compared to the previous upsurge of no-nukes criticism to the point that the Reagan Administration felt the need to create the Nuclear Arms Control Information Policy Group (NACIPIG). This latter was an *ad hoc* interdepartmental group formed in order to counter the NWFC's in□uence on public opinion and regain control of the debate on nuclear arms negotiations. On this see Santese *La pace atomica*.

[4] On the cultural reverberation of atomic technology see also Boyer *A Historian Re□ects;* Masco; Nadel; Zeman and Amundson.

[5] See Haber.

[6] See Weart *Nuclear Fear* and *The Rise of Nuclear Fear*. On the mobilization against nuclear facilities in the US and more generally on the attitude of public opinion on nuclear energy see Santese "The Rise of Environmentalist Movements"; E. Smith, *Energy*; Graetz; Wellock; Wills.

[7] On the near meltdown of Harrisburg, see Walsh; Walker; Del Pero.

[8] On the nuclear winter theory see Badash and "The Winter After the Bomb."

[9] See also Friedman.

[10] See Sharbutt; Dudley.

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Fabiola Mazzola

Detecting the "Specters" of Chicano/a Past in Lucha Corpi's *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*

Introduction

Since its first affirmation at the end of the nineteen century, the detective genre has been highly debated: on the one hand it represented a very popular genre, but on the other hand it has always been considered 'inferior', receiving scant academic attention. Nevertheless, during the 1960s and 1970s, hard-boiled fiction got a phenomenal boost in the American cultural frame, receiving increasing recognition from both a wider audience and critics. It became one of the means through which multicultural writers could explore society and deal with issues such as gender and ethnicity.

The aim of the present article is to show how detective fiction has been rethought from both a multicultural and postfeminist perspective, to give voice to those deprived of it, through an analysis of Lucha Corpi's first detective novel, *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* (1992), and her heroine, detective Gloria Damasco, in which the past and the history of the Chicano/a Movement re-emerges overwhelmingly, in Derrida's words, as a *specter* to resume its fights after an unforgettable disillusion.

I

Amazing, how a lifetime of feelings, actions, and memories
could be compressed into a book, like ashes into a small burial urn.
(Lucha Corpi, *Black Widow's Wardrobe*)

At the beginning of the 1970s, in the United States, the hard-boiled detective fiction – inaugurated almost fifty years earlier by Raymond

Chandler and Dashiell Hammett – became a subject of renewed interest, especially among feminist writers and critics. Women authors, such as Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton among others, successfully tried to overcome the stereotypes of the white-man detective, introducing in their novels heroines who are strong, independent, self-reliant, and sexually uninhibited. Furthermore, the detective genre is better explored by numerous writers belonging to the so-called "ethnic minorities." The aim is to "subject to critique dominant cultural and legalistic conceptions of crime and injustice and to forward new conceptions informed by an historical perspective of the racial experience in the US" (Libretti 61). This is precisely the case with Chicano/a writers.

The term "Chicano/a" refers to Mexican-American people – mainly belonging to the second generation of Mexican immigrants in the US – who during the 1960-70s associated themselves with unprecedented social and cultural anti-racist demonstrations. The Chicano Movement became part and parcel of the larger fight for Civil Rights, in which the African American Movement and many other minority groups took part. The epicenter of the Chicano outburst was the UC Berkeley, but the insurrections soon spread all over the country, also conjoining with anti-Vietnam War protests and involving more radical Chicano groups, such as the Brown Berets.[1]

The most symbolic event in the history of the Chicano Movement took place on 29 August 1970 along Whittier Boulevard up to Laguna Park in Los Angeles: it was the Chicano National Moratorium, a march which, conceived as a peaceful demonstration, gathered about thirty thousand Chicano/a and non-Chicano/a people against social repression and the tragic consequences of the Vietnam War (especially due to the high number of deaths among ethnic soldiers who were the first ones to be sacrificed at the war front). However, the march ended in bloodshed because of the violent intervention of the police forces: participants were brutally repressed and some of them, such as Chicano journalist Rubén Salazar, even lost their lives in the attempt to defend their human rights.

The first Chicano authors who approached detective fiction as a means to investigate society and denounce social and cultural injustice, like the one perpetrated during the march, were Rudolfo Anaya, Michael Nava

and Rolando Hinojosa, whose novels became the best-selling Chicano works of all time, even though they were still circulating mostly within the community itself. Nevertheless, women scholars soon realized that Chicano literature "was almost exclusively focused on male experience, and the central role of the family and community in many early Chicano texts left unexamined the gendered aspects of those very structures" (De Soto 45). Therefore, notwithstanding all the limitations imposed by the Movement itself, Chicanas raised their voices from both a social and cultural perspective. As a matter of fact, Chicana feminism was accused of tearing apart the Movement from within, promoting assimilation to (racist) white feminism and jeopardizing all the fights and values that the Movement had struggled to affirm. Besides, Chicana feminism was also considered as a threat to the heart of the Chicano community which was the traditional family: they were called *traidoras*, and even *vendidas*.

In other words, the Movement was based on a strict moral code, still linked to patriarchal values which reproduced from within the same kind of oppressive and repressive external system they were trying to break down. Therefore, in order to overthrow this standardized structure from both a social and a literary point of view, the most outstanding and well-known voices of the time – such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga who started this feminist wave in the 1980s – were joined by women writers who decided to approach detective fiction to deal with themes related to both ethnicity and gender issues. Besides, it is worth mentioning that all the above constitutes also an opportunity to give academic dignity to detective fiction itself. In short, the revival is triple in that Chicano authors try to give a voice back to the community, as the victim of social oppression, to women, oppressed by a strict patriarchal structure, and to the detective genre, as part of the constitution of a new multicultural literary canon.

This is the context in which Chicana writer Lucha Corpi, "a feminist writer steeped in the Chicano/a activism of the 1960s and 1970s" (Rodríguez 55), was educated and conceived her works. Besides her early collections of poems, it is worth mentioning her first novel, *Delia's Song* (1989), which presents relevant autobiographical references and a first exploration of themes such as the past and the history of the Chicano Movement, Chicana feminism, and the affirmation of individual identity, which will become

central especially in the ensuing detective novels. In *Delia's Song*, in fact, Delia Treviño is a young woman who walks away from her male chauvinist family in order to find her path and to study at Berkeley University, where she will face a very hard situation, confronting with a strict hierarchical system in which she will try to claim her voice both as a woman and a writer, as well as a Chicana activist in the early stages of the Movement.

II

> *We were carrying a layer of dry sweat, teargas and dust on us like a second skin and our souls were burdened with the sediment of the frustration and anger that results from a confrontation with violence.*
> (Lucha Corpi, *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*)

However, it is with her first detective novel, *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* (1992)[2] and her heroine, detective Gloria Damasco, that Lucha Corpi explores more deeply the causes of the general disillusionment about the Movement, a social failure that starts with the crucial episode of the violent outcome of the Chicano Moratorium March. As a matter of fact, the novel is imbued with history since the epigraph, the *corrido* "Garbanzo Beret" written by bilingual poet José Montoya. More precisely, "the rhetoric and the form of the epigraph set up reader expectations associated with the nationalist struggles of the Chicano/a Movement" (Rodríguez 59):

> Por la calle Whittier La Raza marchaba
> En protesta del gobierno.
> Con puños alzados, unidos gritaban
> Que viva el poder del Chicano.
>
> El Parque Lagunas parecía una fiesta
> Un fiesta de colores.
> Quien iba a pensar que esa tarde de amores
> Se convirtiera en horrores.
>
> ***

> Down Whittier La Raza marched
> To protest against the government.
> Fists raised, in one voice
> They all chanted: Power to the Chicano!
>
> Laguna Park looked like a fairground,
> A celebration of color
> Who would have thought that afternoon
> Of love would later turn to horror.
> (qtd. in Corpi, *Eulogy* 9)

The contraposition between the picnic (almost edenic-like) atmosphere of the March and its outcome emerges also from Gloria's words. In fact, in the opening of the novel it is possible to witness that at the beginning "organizers and other participants shared a feeling of accomplishment and optimism: the impressive gathering seemed to make palpable the Chicano movement goals of unity and pride" (Oropeza 145), but soon enough the event turned into a bloody clash during which people, both adults and children, among shards of glass and rubble, were injured or even killed:

> With our baskets of food, and our children, our poets, musicians, leaders and heroes, we had to celebrate our culture and reaffirm our rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly as Americans of Mexican descent.
> In our idealism, Luisa and I, and others like us, hoped that the police would appreciate our efforts to keep the demonstration peaceful and would help us maintain order with dignity, surely, we thought, they would realize that we would not needlessly risk the lives of our very old and our very young. How foolish we had been.
> (Corpi, *Eulogy* 17-18)

In fact, as already anticipated above, as soon as "few of the marchers became disorderly, they were subdued by police officers in a brutal manner" (18), transforming a "sunny Saturday" into a nightmare "that would be remembered as the National Chicano Moratorium, one of the most violent days in the history of California" (17). Marchers were forced to flee while "hearing the screams and cries of adults and children as they ran from the

gas and the shattering of storewindows" (17). From both inside and outside the Chicano community, the march was the first signal of an evident failure and consequent decline of the Movement, an event that will irremediably affect Chicano consciousness.

It is in the middle of this "bloody riot" (18) that Gloria Damasco, together with her friend Luisa, unexpectedly finds the dead body of a little boy abandoned in the middle of the street. Indeed, the novel is about the murder of a four-year-old child, Michael David Cisneros Jr., followed by the killing of a fifteen-year-old Chicano boy, Mando, who is the only one who has witnessed the former crime. She is deeply shocked by both the murders and the outcome of the protest, but – after some unexpected events and the failure of the police investigation – she decides to return to her family in Oakland where she goes on with her life. Eighteen years later – finally free from her family bonds – she is overwhelmed by the memory of those deaths and becomes, with the help of P.I. Justin Escobar, an *amateur* detective who finally finds the murderers and achieves justice. As Gloria Damasco comes closer to the truth, she finds herself struggling more and more against a double, sometimes triple, discrimination as regards: *race*, because of her ethnic origins; *gender*, as a woman who tries to claim her own independence; and *social class*, as a consequence of both the former and the latter. Therefore, "the intersection of ethnicity and gender" (Fischer-Hornung and Mueller 13) inevitably fosters a multilayered reflection of the novel.

The investigation of the crimes is parallel to a larger social exploration: the individual body of the victim – in particular, Michael David's body that has been brutally tortured – becomes the metaphor of a larger collective body, the community itself, which has been and still is likewise politically, socially and culturally violated. Consequently, in *Eulogy* two levels of crime are presented: the actual murder of the child and the one against the ethnic community to which the author belongs. Finding the truth about the former is an essential step towards the resolution of the latter.

In *Eulogy*, however, Corpi analyzes all the events retrospectively, as the investigation is reopened only in 1988. Gloria is helped by both LA police detective Matthew Kenyon, whose death allows her to receive all the police files about the case that had piled up before being dismissed, and Chicano

private detective Justin Escobar. Gloria is now ready to investigate but what she doesn't know yet is that, if she really wants to unveil the truth, her main task is to *detect history*: she has to go back in place and time not only to convict the culprits but also to face a past that has been repressed and resume a conflict that hasn't yet been solved. More precisely, Gloria realizes that:

> One cannot have done with history and that it will continue to erupt in and from the present such that the political models of the past developed to understand experience and resist the conditions of existence defining the experience must not be forgotten. Such a narrative of detection does not only *not* repress history, it calls attention to and continually calls up history. (Libretti 72)

Therefore, going back to Los Angeles, Gloria understands that if every trace of a past crime has been more or less intentionally concealed, then there will never be a concrete possibility to legitimately claim justice:

> Not having been to East LA since the Moratorium March in 1970, I decided to drive through the old barrio. As expected it has changed in some ways. In other instances, is seems as if things have stood still. Except for the fact that the Silver Dollar Café is now only a bar, and a plaque with Rubén Salazar's name is displayed somewhere around Laguna Park, there is little to remind people of the events that at the time we thought would shape our political future in California. (Corpi, *Eulogy* 130)

This is truth about both the murders and the social oppression: there is a moral obligation to remember. Thus, Gloria becomes "the executor of this legacy" (Corpi, *Cactus Blood* 76) of memory, in that not only does shepreserve the past, but also reconstructs it, and that also means to "bear directly on the (re)construction of [Chicano] identity" (Rodríguez 56), which has been lost contextually with the decline of the Movement.

In *Eulogy* the re-appropriation of the past is not an anachronistic attempt to make it live again in the present, nor is it the expression of a will to re-create an idyllic society. Rather, it is the possibility to re-write history from a postmodernist perspective, against a background of very different social and cultural conditions: in fact, it is a past that is gone but that can still

return in a different form. In order to better understand this mechanism of returning to and recalling the past in the present, the novel can be read and interpreted, from a Derridian point of view, through the concept of *specter*.

The specter, or ghost, is an immaterial thing that is there in the moment of its apparition but that at the same time recalls something that no longer exists and that will never return as it was. In Derrida's words, the specter is "a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. [...] there is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reapparition of the departed" (Derrida 5). It is a *non-present presence*: it is there only in its absence. In fact, in *Eulogy*, the ghost refers to a moment of the Chicano history that is dead but still burns in the heart of those who lived it and still believe in its lasting values.

Besides, Derrida's specter, as is well known, is a deconstructive concept breaking the traditional dichotomies of "the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present" (Gordon 24). Its presence entails the perception that something – either positively or negatively – suddenly re-emerges and *haunts* the present; related to the novel, this is the cause of a double re-emergence: the Chicano/a Movement, with its fights, history and culture, and the truth about the murders.

In *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* another important implication of the concept of ghost emerges, that is the question of repetition: "a specter is always a *revenant* [and] one cannot control its comings and goings" (Derrida 11). On the one hand, Gloria is gifted with a powerful ability, *clairvoyance,* that allows her to see into both the past and the future. In fact, on the one hand, she has the moral obligation to "investigate," but on the other hand she is gifted with the ability and capability to do it: this gift "takes a certain kind of talent, a great gift to see how the past will become the future" (Corpi, *Cactus Blood* 94). As a matter of fact, Gloria is initially unable to control her mojo, it is more like a *dark gift* (see Ramírez) that she refuses because she cannot control it. As her words reveal: "Something over which I didn't seem to have any control was working in me or around me" (Corpi, *Eulogy* 29): it seems that "Gloria is not completely at ease with this gift, this awareness, this way of coming to knowledge" (Bickford 100).

However, as the investigation goes on, she becomes more aware of her power and clairvoyance ends up being the key to the resolution of the

case. The way she uses visions and dreams to solve the case, apparently in contrast with the logical and scientific assumptions of the detecting process, can be seen in the frame of poststructuralist and deconstructive theories, according to which there is no such thing as an absolute, directly and objectively accessible truth. Consequently, it is possible to acknowledge that reality must be submitted to a process of interpretation, which is enacted by the detective fiction epistemology itself. As a matter of fact, Lucha Corpi seems to demonstrate that "truths are contextual": "Theorists point out that objectivity is virtually impossible: the knowledges we acquire and produce are filtered through our own social locations, histories, and national narratives whether we are conscious of those filters or not" (Bickford 97, 99).

Gloria Damasco's investigation embodies the impossibility of finding an objective truth and of applying an infallible scientific method. Therefore, "she moves beyond the polarization of rationality and emotionality to consider still another path to knowledge: intuition and psychic knowledge"; this allows her to construct alternative "ways of creating knowledge [and] a reconsideration of Western epistemologies" (99). As during a psychoanalytical session, Gloria explores the darkest sides of her being and, simultaneously, she explores all the contradictions of the past. Reliving the past is like reliving a trauma which is connected to both the unnatural end of a child's life and the decay of the ideals of a community. This makes her perceive that the past is still there and it is still possible to achieve justice. In order to do so, she needs to go back to that past, both ideally and physically, moving again to LA, talking to all the people involved, studying the documents she has on the case, but especially acting as if she were travelling back in time, recalling all the events that led to the crime and to its discovery. A mechanism similar to that related to psychoanalysis is enacted: in order to cope with a trauma, it is necessary to relive it over and over again.

One way to understand this process is precisely the explicit connection between detective fiction and psychoanalysis. As Colin Davis points out, both detective fiction and psychoanalysis rose in the late nineteenth century and "it is now almost commonplace to compare the detective and the psychoanalyst. Both search out the relevant clues that point to a hidden

truth" (294). Gloria, in fact, as a detective resembles a therapist because she uses her abilities as a key to collect, put together, and interpret all the pieces of evidence, so that the truth and all that has been concealed can eventually come out again. Interestingly, Gloria was formerly a speech therapist and she has expertise in traumas that affect the use of language. We can only cope with trauma and evil if we are able to articulate them: this is exactly what fiction, and especially detective fiction, does. More precisely, "the reconstructive core of detective fiction [is the] restatement of the past in the language of the present [...], which provides it with new meaning and coherence" (Hutter 200). But it is not an easy job. Gloria almost panics when the crucial moment arrives: while she is about to reveal the murderer's identity, "the words were pouring out of her mouth" (Corpi, *Eulogy* 162) as a flow that cannot be interrupted and that promptly erupts as a latent truth from the bottom of her unconscious.

The question of language is crucial in *Eulogy* since literature and story-telling are the main means through which trauma is analyzed from a social and cultural point of view, and used as a starting point in the process of both individual and collective healing. The story-telling reveals "past exclusions telling new stories, correcting the official records" (Gordon 20) and, as becomes evident in Lucha Corpi's work, literature can make the trauma emerge as "a history of repeated gaps and ruptures" (Schönfelder 27). The return of the trauma is a topical theme in the novel under many respects. In addition to this, the detective fiction epistemology allows, especially when written by multicultural writers, to enact a process of revision and investigation of the past aimed at re-writing and re-telling a story and a history that has been written and told from a standardized dominant western perspective. This is exactly what Lucha Corpi does in her novels: as Carmen Flys-Junquera points out, in order to enhance Chicano/a history, "Lucha Corpi appropriates the American hard-boiled detective tradition with the purpose of transgressing a number of its conventions as a deliberate aesthetic strategy to portray alternative worldviews to the dominant Anglo-American one" (117), which is responsible for Chicano/a long cultural and social repression.

In other words, it allows the exploration of "issues of guilt, the relations between victims and perpetrators, as well as the ethical complexities of

narrating and sharing trauma" (Schönfelder 38). In this respect, Lucha Corpi demonstrates that trauma can both divide and reunite: it divides as was the case with Chicano/a activists, but it also reunites, both in the present, through shared grief, and in the future, in the possibility of restoring both the Cisneros family and Chicano/a activism by punishing the culprits and achieving justice.

In this web, the role of the detective is to make sense of the meaningless and to give order to an incoherent world. Where reality seems to be "out of joint" (Derrida 22), Gloria's task is to gather all the fragments to restore temporal and historical linearity, "to set right a time that walks crook," to make it right again, and therefore to achieve justice; in short, Gloria has "to do justice, to put things back in order, to put history, the world, the age, the time *upright*, on the right path, [...] following the law (le droit)" (23). Indeed, one might say that in *Eulogy*, no less than in *Hamlet*, the specters of the past reappear "under the name or in the name of justice" (27).

However, Gloria's "desire to make sense of things" (Corpi, *Eulogy* 71), and "to restore the order" (181) is impossible to completely fulfill. That's because, on the one hand, she is aware that "goodness, like justice, [is] only a relative notion, depending on who interpreted or administered it" (61). On the other hand, she cannot give Michael David back to his family, nor can she reanimate the Chicano/a fight as it was: under no circumstances can things be again what they were. As Libretti points out, in the novel "the restoration of innocence is reversed" (71). As a matter of fact, at the end of the novel, Lucha Corpi seems to reverse the guilt: while the Chicano/a community was the innocent side throughout the story, the neat opposition between good and evil is questioned when we learn that the murderer of the child is not only a Chicano, but he is actually part of little Michael's family. As Benjamin claims, "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (256): this is exactly what Corpi seems to demonstrate. More precisely, in Viet Thanh Nguyen's words, in order to actually make justice, we need "an art that celebrates the humanity of all sides and acknowledges the inhumanity of all sides, including our own. We need an art that enacts powerful memory, an art that speaks truth to power even when our side exercises and abuses that power" (267).

In conclusion, the writer expresses the will to expose the *humanity* and *inhumanity* of both sides when she shows the good side of American institutions, embodied by detective Kenyon, and unveiling Chicano contradictions and evils by identifying not one but two Chicano murderers, the one who killed the child and the other one who killed Mando, the only witness of the crime.

III

> *"State of the art," said Kenyon, trying to be humorous. "Just for Chicano women."*
> *"I think I better start your education right now. You have to say Chicanas with an 'a' when you talk about us women. Got it?"*
> (Lucha Corpi, *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*)

As mentioned above, in *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* "it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (Butler 3). Therefore, analyzing the Chicano/a past inevitably means to explore at the same time the feminist implications of the Movement and the way in which these fights affect Gloria's individualization, as both an ethnic and a woman detective. During the 1970s, feminism was strongly hindered by the Movement, and as Corpi underlines "Chicano nationalism and feminism didn't walk hand in hand before or during the summer of 1970" (*Eulogy* 66). However, Chicanas managed to resist claiming a double will: on the one hand, they wanted to subvert the internal machismo, and on the other hand they needed to speak up against a (white) feminism still concentrated on "sexual politics and reductive accounts of female victimhood" (Butler 3). Actually, what happened was that white women "could no more claim to be or to represent women in general than white men could represent humanity as a whole. No women was simply a woman. 'Different' women raised their voices" (Bhavnani and Coulson 74).

The multicultural feminist afterthought was a direct consequence of

the fights for the Civil Rights Movements of those years. Women realized that they no longer felt themselves represented by a feminism that was not inclusive of their own cultural, ethnic and class differences. Consequently, a "shift in direction and emphasis within feminism, with the emergence of postfeminism" (Brooks 5) became necessary:

> Postfeminism as understood from this perspective is about the conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference. It is fundamentally about, not a depoliticisation of feminism, but a political shift in feminism's conceptual and theoretical agenda. [It] expresses the intersection of feminism with postmodernism, poststructuralism and post-colonialism, and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks. (4)

In fact, in *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*, as the investigation goes on, not only does Gloria unveil the contradictions of Chicano history, but she also discover a new self. Therefore the readers find themselves intrigued by both the resolution of the crime and the (re)construction of Gloria's identity. As Lucha Corpi writes "as in a dream, Gloria felt herself floating" (*Eulogy* 188) because her identity is multiple, fluid and it is the result of an ongoing transformation.

During this long and non-linear process, Gloria finds herself wondering if she is a Chicana first of all, or 'just' a woman. Actually, it is impossible to split her personality, since both ethnicity and gender are fundamental in the process of claiming her own individuality. In *Eulogy*, being a woman *and* Chicana could mean to be in a position of double subordination in the face of a kind of both masculine and socio-political authority. When she calls the police department to notify Michael David's death, she has trouble in denouncing the event not just because she, as a woman, may be judged to be overreacting, but especially because a "Spanish surname always meant a delay of at least an hour in emergencies" (21).

When detective Matthew Kenyon finally arrives on the crime scene, Gloria is incapable of trusting him and, as the inquiry proceeds, Gloria's feelings towards him oscillate from resentment – as he embodies the same institution that has repressed and killed the marchers – to admiration. This is particularly evident in the novel, as Gloria herself points out: "During

the last two and a half days I had resented Matthew Kenyon, then admired him. I had confided in him to distrust him later. Now I was beginning to trust him again" (73).

Gloria's desire to assert herself over the authority is soon expressed through a throbbing anger. This is clear when she confesses: "I was angry at myself for letting him, a man *and* a cop, have that kind of authority over me. Why was I allowing him that power?" (99). If, on the one hand, Kenyon's character is soon rehabilitated – if not as the one who solves the case, but as both a man *and* a good cop – on the other hand, it takes a long struggle to finally impose herself over that kind of authority.

The first information we know about Gloria in the novel is that she is a mother. As a matter of fact, the first image that Michael David's body on the pavement makes her think of is her daughter's safe body at home, asleep in her cradle, under the care of her husband, Darío. Here a reversal is taking place: while Darío is at home, embodying a kind of feminine role in a domestic environment, Gloria is always portrayed in open and public spaces, associated with "ideas of progress, change and masculinity" (McDowell 14) and which will be her main setting throughout the novel, even when she is taking care of her daughter. In addition to this, she is travelling all the time, back and to different places in both time and space, demonstrating that her identity is fluid and hybrid, ready to move from one status to another, inhabiting "a borderland [that] is a vague and undetermined place [in] a constant state of transition" (Anzaldúa 3).

Therefore, if at the beginning of the novel Gloria is essentially a mother and a wife, dropping off the case when her husband asks her to do so, eighteen years later she is 'another' woman. Furthermore, it is not 1970 anymore. When her husband dies and her daughter moves to go to the university, Gloria is finally free from her family bonds and her relation to Justin Escobar is far from being a reproduction of a subordinating structure. Somehow, the opposite is true: Justin is highly feminized as he is recognizable mainly for "his curly hair, his oval face, his small bright eyes and well-shaped mouth" (Corpi, *Eulogy* 137) and, in a crucial scene, while Gloria is working on the case, he is cooking in the kitchen, in his "cozy and [clean] and organized" (156) apartment.

By the ending of the novel, Gloria's individualization is not completed.

She is still in the middle of a journey that involves her throughout the five novels of the series. The first signal of a catharsis arrives throughout the following novels, when her friend Luisa dies, she finally gets her detecting license and manages to cope with all what remains of her past life. In that moment she is devastated but feels herself like a new bud and only when she sees herself under a new light can she look forward, both professionally and personally. Only then, can she: see Justin from a different perspective to later marry him in *Cactus Blood* (1995), as "without looking back, he walked out of the kitchen" (187); resume the roots of her land through the myth of La Malinche in *Black Widow's Wardrobe* (1999); leaving her job to her fellow woman detective, Dora Saldaña, to work on herself disappearing for a little while in *Crimson Moon* (2005); finally get back, almost eighteen years later than her first literary apparition, in *Death at Solstice* (2009) to help an abused woman to escape from her violent husband.

Conclusions

In *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*, the return *of* and *to* the past is necessary to resume the struggle against the lasting internal colonization of Mexican American people and of all other ethnic communities in the US, which is being perpetrated by capitalism, liberalism and new forms of colonialism and their affirmation at a global level. This has to do with the re-emergence of a social, political, and cultural reality that has been repressed from a racial, historical as well as literary point of view. Moreover, the introduction of a woman detective makes necessary also a reflection on gender implications, underlining the importance of giving voice not just to an ethnic community but also to a doubly repressed reality from a social and gender point of view.

In short, two solutions are needed: to face the repressed and make it *remembered,* make it live again to *haunt* the present, and restore Chicano (but especially Chicana) activism, adjusting it to new circumstances. Notwithstanding the awareness that nothing will ever be the same, there is still hope and the need to gather, remember, and tell the stories of both little Michael David and the Chicano/a fights, not at the moment of their

death but in the prime of their lives, maybe in order to start a *new* life. In one Derridian word, there is an urge to *conjure*:

> "conjuration" […] designates two things at once […]. On the one hand, the conspiracy […] of those who promise solemnly, sometimes secretly, by swearing together an oath[,] to struggle against a superior power. […] On the other hand, the magical incantation destined to *evoke*, to bring forth with the voice, to *convoke* a charm or a spirit. (Derrida 50)

The urge to conjure is evident also in the moment in which we witness Gloria's double flourishing: she is not just constructing her own individuality, but she is the epicenter of a new community gathering around her, a community in which gender awareness is very high. Throughout the novel, in fact, Gloria is surrounded by numerous strong women, whose help is fundamental to the resolution of the case. Therefore, the return of and to the past is exactly what she needs to raise a collective (woman) voice again.

Notes

[1] The term "Brown Berets" refers to a group of Chicano insurgents who promoted a more radical, sometimes violent, response to US political and social oppression against Chicanos/as, as well as other ethnic communities. The label evoked the Black Panthers and their actions were based on a Marxist ideology. However, the adjective "brown" wanted to challenge the black and white dichotomy on which American history was mainly founded, while the noun "berets" was a reference to the particular headgear they wore.

[2] *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* is a sensational novel which inaugurates the Gloria Damasco's Mysteries Series, after the name of its heroine, made up of four more novels: *Cactus Blood* (2005), *Black Widow's Wardrobe* (1999), *Crimson Moon* (2005, in which detective Gloria Damasco is temporarily substituted by her former fellow detectives Dora Saldaña and Justin Escobar) and *Death at Solstice* (2009).

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L’inedito

Leonardo Buonomo

An Unpublished Poem by Pasquale Verdicchio

Not surprisingly for an author who has long felt an affinity for the figure of the nomad, Pasquale Verdicchio is hard to pin down in terms of national identity, cultural allegiance, literary style, and primary area of interest. A reasonably close approximation of his multifaceted self and work would be to call him an Italian-born, North American poet, essayist and academic, as well as a cultural and environmental activist. Born in Naples, Verdicchio emigrated to Canada with his family when he was a teenager. In the 1980s he moved to the United States, settling in Southern California where he has taught Italian literature, environmental literature, cultural studies, writing and film at the University of California, San Diego, since 1986 (he is retiring this year). Although Southern California has long been his home, Verdicchio has always maintained very close ties with Canada (especially the city of Vancouver where his extended family is based) and Italy, where he has visited and lived for lengthy periods of time.

One of the founders of the Association of Italian Canadian Writers, Verdicchio published his first poetry collection, the aptly titled *Moving Landscape*, in 1985. His subsequent collections include *A Critical Geography*, *Nomadic Trajectory*, *The Posthumous Poet: A Suite for Pier Paolo Pasolini*, *Approaches to Absence*, *The House Is Past*, and *This Nothing's Place*. His essays have provided a provocative stand on issues ranging from the Italian diaspora (*Bound by Distance*), to the representation of Italians and Italian Americans in American popular culture (*Devils in Paradise*), and Italian photographic culture (*Looters, Photographers, and Thieves*). Intimately related to both his poetry and critical writing is also Verdicchio's work as a translator, which has given him the opportunity to explore in depth and create an English voice for such Italian poets as Antonio Porta, Giorgio Caproni, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Alda Merini, and Andrea Zanzotto (whom Verdicchio has acknowledged as a major influence on his own poetry). In

addition, he has translated, annotated, and written an introduction for a new edition of Antonio Gramsci's seminal *The Southern Question*.

What, in addition to his composite background, has made Verdicchio's literary persona and production difficult to categorize is his consistent and deliberate avoidance of the nostalgic mode as well as the absence of easily recognizable "ethnic" tropes and signs in his poetry. At the same time, however, having chosen English as his vehicle of expression (it could just as easily have been his mother tongue), Verdicchio has repeatedly challenged its syntactical rules and expanded its vocabulary by cross-pollinating it, as it were, with Italian sounds and forms. To rephrase freely a famous passage from a letter Henry James wrote to his brother William (213), one might say that Verdicchio writes in such a way that it would be impossible for an outsider to say whether he is an Italian writing about North America (and the experience of being an Italian there) or a North American writing about Italy (and the experience of being a North American in Italy).

If there is a constant in Verdicchio's poetry, it is the idea and sense of movement, not so much from one place to another, as between places. As Antonio D'Alfonso has noted, the titles of Verdicchio's poetry collections are telling – *Moving Landscape*, *A Critical Geography*, *Nomadic Trajectory*, *Approaches to Absence*, *This Nothing's Place* – in that they speak to his fascination for "drifting, shuffling, relocation" (14). Indeed, in his early verse (as, for example, in "Branta canadensis," from *Nomadic Trajectory*), even when distant echoes of the experience of moving to a different country resonate in his lines, they are rarefied and surprisingly unencumbered by sentiment.

Unwilling to identify definitively with one of the geographical and cultural spaces that have shaped him, Verdicchio has often sung the condition of estrangement, not only through his choice of themes and diction, but also at the formal level, especially in the first part of his production. This experimental phase, marked by pronounced fragmentation, ellipsis, unorthodox placing of lines and words on the page (as if to turn the reader into a fellow roamer), culminated with the 1994 collection *Approaches to Absence*. Since then, Verdicchio appears to have moved towards a more personal, at times even confessional tone, as can be seen in the unpublished poem "Sense of Support" (presented below), in which a desire for contact

and knowledge assumes a plaintive note. This shift was already noticeable in his latest published volume to date, *This Nothing's Place* (the evocative title is derived from Canadian writer and painter Emily Carr's 1941 book *Klee Wick*). As I have noted elsewhere, after "exploring for many years the resources of language (or *languages*, given his enrichment of English with Italian words and syntax), Verdicchio arrived at a place where he could work simply, blending together everything he had learned" (177).

To some extent, vicissitudes of life forced his hand. Nowhere is this more evident than in the poignant section he devoted to his then recently deceased father. There, in addition to revisiting his relationship with his father (a kinship which, in maturity, could be read indelibly on his own face) as well as with his own place of birth, the poet tells of the paradoxical predicament in which he found himself when he discovered that, due to bureaucratic entanglements, he had temporarily lost his Italian citizenship. That made him, for all intents and purposes, a foreigner in his native country, but one with a quintessentially Italian name that belied his status. As Kenneth Scambray has pointed out, Verdicchio's "confusing and bizarre quest to reclaim his Italian citizenship [...] is an appropriate metaphor for the uncertainty and instability that defines the modern immigrant experience" (122).

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Pasquale Verdicchio

Sense of support

Hold my hand
I have waited for you
to learn to grasp
the sense of support.
Walk ahead
I have waited for you
to guide me toward
a more direct manner
to know the world.
Let me look
in your eyes
I have waited for
your gaze to keep
memory from fading.
I have waited
and waited,
learned patience,
learned that dreams
can reveal
what language
can only hint at,
and in your broken syntax
I hear my own story told.

Abstracts

Abtracts

Cinzia Schiavini, Questioning the Borders of Contemporary US Fiction: H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*, 9/11 and the American Novel

This essay investigates the margins of twentieth-century American novel in the light of the increasingly deterritorialized status of US culture and literature – a literature whose borders need to be reconfigured not only in terms of reception, but of creation as well. In particular, the essay focuses on the Pakistani-born author H.M. Naqvi and his first novel, *Home Boy* (2009) – part immigrant narrative, part *Bildungsroman*, part 9/11 novel. Rooting *Home Boy* deep in the American grain and at the same time investigating the construction of Otherness through the protagonist's "inoutsider" status and perspective, Naqvi explores the potential and the limits of what can be considered as "performative Americaness," defined not by genealogic or geographical belonging, but by cultural and literary affiliations in the politically and socially unstable scenario of the post-national world.

Cristina Iuli, Extinction, Rememory and the Deadly Work of Capitalism in Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*

Valeria Luiselli's 2019 novel, *Lost Children Archive*, attends to the inherited repressions, silences, and erasures around the official chronicling of the current migrant and refugee crisis at the Southwestern border between the US and Mexico by developing in a very original narrative format a literary space of personal "re-memory" that encompasses that specific crisis and extends to the geopolitical history of the United States. In the novel, fictional and non-fictional references shape an American landscape that appears as the space of both unfinished colonization and incomplete representation. The novel's project is to make the disappearances it traces readable, by evoking them first and by re-enacting them later, in its twin sections delivered by two different narrators. In inscribing absences from the present and from the past, the novel both delivers several narratives of "lost" children, lost people, lost sounds, lost landscapes and lost species,

and interrogates our conceptual preparedness for the prospect of extinction and for the dis-imagination of the future. It does so historically by linking colonial violence to capitalism's expansion, and formally by highlighting the affective and archival power of writing vis-à-vis digital narrative and the quantification of information.

Ian Jayne, Queer Realities: Disidentification, Utopic Realism, and Contemporary American Fiction

In the wake of James Wood's 2001 decrial of a supposedly "hysterical" realism, critics have debated the continuation and possibilities of post-postmodern realism. During the same two decades, theorists have considered queer lives in relation to normativity, futurity, and possibility. I bridge these twinned inquiries by turning to José Esteban Muñoz's concepts of disidentification and the queer utopia as a way to elucidate the workings four critically-acclaimed novels: André Aciman's 2007 *Call Me by Your Name*, Hanya Yanagihara's 2015 *A Little Life*, Brandon Taylor's 2020 *Real Life*, and Sam Lansky's 2020 *Broken People*. These novels oscillate between the "real" and the "utopic," a persistent negotiation which playfully collapses temporal, spatial, and affective dimensions as vectors of realism. From Aciman's neo-melodramatic, first-person narration of American expatriates in northern Italy during the 1980s, to Yanagihara's and Taylor's excavations of physical and sexual trauma, and to Lansky's revision of bourgeois self-invention, these texts demonstrate Muñoz's assertion that queerness is "a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility." This new queer realism is a flexible, crucial, and utopic facet of contemporary American fiction, foregrounding the novel as the site of the possible, and realism as perpetually "not-yet-here."

Chiara Patrizi, "We Ain't Going Nowhere. We Here": Survival and Witness in Jesmyn Ward's Fiction and Nonfiction

Jesmyn Ward's *oeuvre* belongs to an area of the American literary canon that has notable antecedents in the novels of William Faulkner, Zora Neal Hurston and Toni Morrison, and her themes and style show also a polyphony and a sense of the tragic explicitly reminiscent of Ancient Greek tragedy. My article employs Christina Sharpe's concept of *the wake*

to analyze how – in her novels, memoirs, and nonfiction – Ward manages to work within that literary tradition and with the burdening history (both past and present) of Black people and to produce narratives in which there may be no space for redemption, but which nonetheless show a peculiar sense of hope, grounded on the concepts of survival and witness. In Ward's writing, survival and witness become the elements that allow an unexpected radiance to shed among the desolation of her stories, thus involving readers in the act of becoming, they too, witnesses. These two means of resistance and resilience have shaped Black people's identity from the very beginning. A resilience that may appear pointless in the current racial waste land depicted by Ward, but which constitutes a powerful voice to reclaim dignity and humanity for her characters, her people.

Paolo Simonetti, The Self in/and History: Historiographic Autofiction in Contemporary US Literature

This article aims at investigating the relationship between autofiction, postmemory and historical novel in contemporary US literature through a hybrid subgenre that I would tentatively call "historiographic autofiction" – novels set in a (real or reimagined) historical past (or having to do with historiographic reconstruction) in which the author also appears as a fictionalized character. By analyzing as case studies Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* and William T. Vollmann's *The Rifles*, it will be possible to see how autofictional strategies applied to historical narratives apparently provide factual legitimacy to personal, reconstructed, or imagined events, while paradoxically presenting them (as well as their author/protagonist) as fictional. Putting the author's autofictional self in a historical setting lends credibility to the narration and gives the mark of sincerity and authenticity to the text, bestowing it with testimonial value. At the same time, the work's evident fictionality deconstructs any actual claim of objectivity or truthfulness, stressing the inevitable manipulation and stratification of history while encouraging reflections on how past narratives influence one's identity in the act of shaping (and being shaped by) one's life story.

Angelo Grossi, "War Is Ninety Percent Myth": Post-postmodern Revisions of Vietnam in Denis Johnson's *Fiskadoro* and *Tree of Smoke*

Denis Johnson's post-9/11 incursion into the Vietnam war genre, the sprawling novel *Tree of Smoke* (2007), is a prominent example of a typically post-postmodern constructive attitude towards the crisis of historical referentiality. This issue can be further illuminated by reading *Tree of Smoke* in the light of another novel by the same author, the overlooked post-apocalyptic phantasmagoria *Fiskadoro* (1985). Set in a "time between civilizations" following a nuclear holocaust and in a region of Florida called "The quarantine," *Fiskadoro* portrays a fallen and linguistically hybrid America where only the elements that were marginalized by the myth of American exceptionalism seem to have survived. *Fiskadoro*'s only incursion into the past, buried in the memory of a mute centenarian female character, concerns the fall of Saigon, which is narrated also in *Tree of Smoke* and is seen as the event that marks the beginning of the decay of the US empire. Reading *Tree of Smoke* in connection to *Fiskadoro*, this article will analyze how Johnson's literary project reflects on the ritualistic and mythical dimension of the construction of history with a sensibility that both incorporates and overcomes postmodernism.

Daniela Daniele, "*In a Tumbling Void*": DeLillo's Late Lyrical Prose

DeLillo's *The Silence* contemplates the entropy which lies at the core of digital trafficking in a new, sustained critique of the accelerations of the new economy, recently intersecting with the current and recurrent states of emergency. My analysis of his late lyrical prose locates this novella within his Millennium series of six short lyrical narratives written in the sparse, paratactic form inaugurated with his absurdist plays. In these late works, the author recovers an experimental, modernist style which, in its clipped, hermetic tones, explores the secrets of domestic jargons and of small talk while calling for a badly needed social reconstruction and for a compelling reflection on post-traumatic confinement as a condition still able to preserve the humane ability to write and communicate beyond screens.

Mirella Vallone, Listening in Khaled Mattawa's *Zodiac of Echoes*

This article analyzes the acoustic dimension in Khaled Mattawa's *Zodiac of Echoes*, particularly its relation to diasporic subjectivity, faith and translation, starting from the premises of Jean-Luc Nancy in *À L'Écoute* (2002) / *Listening* (2007). Unsatisfied with the visual paradigm that dominates Western thought and the related anesthesia of the senses associated with ocularcentrism, the French philosopher evaluates the possibility of an ontology and epistemology based on listening as the sense that touches upon and stimulates all bodily senses and the mind. Like Nancy, Mattawa seems to propose resonance as a foundation, as the first or last profundity of sense itself. *Zodiac of Echoes* is the space/time of reverberations where the diasporic subjectivity of the poems lends an ear in the process of ongoing definition and redefinition of the self.

Angela Santese, Narrating the Nuclear Armageddon: The Atomic Menace in the US Popular Culture of the 1980s

During the 1980s, the idea that a nuclear war could materialize led not only to an unprecedented antinuclear mobilization in the US and Europe and to a public conversation on these themes, but also to a series of cultural initiatives designed to alert public opinion and politicians to the atomic peril. In this political and social context, key cultural moments can be detected in the book *Fate of the Earth*, in the initiatives that revolved around the Nuclear Winter Scenario, and in the TV movie *The Day After*. Using primary sources and through an historical approach, this article aims at analyzing how these cultural products described the consequences of a nuclear war on the planet, highlighting also the environmental costs of a nuclear war, and their impact on US public opinion and media. Moreover it discusses how the scheduled airings of *The Day After* in 1983 became the arena for a political and media clash between the Ronald Reagan Administration and the antinuclear movement, since both actors indeed tried to exploit the film to influence public opinion on US nuclear posture.

Fabiola Mazzola, Detecting the "Specters" of Chicano/a Past in Lucha Corpi's *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*

Since its first affirmation at the end of the nineteenth century, the detective genre has been highly debated: on the one hand it represented a very popular genre, but on the other hand it has always been considered "inferior," receiving scant academic attention. Nevertheless, during the 1960s and 1970s, hard-boiled fiction got a new boost due to the increasing recognition from both a wider audience and critics. It also became one of the means through which multicultural writers could explore society and deal with issues such as gender and ethnicity. The aim of the present article is to show how detective fiction has been rethought from both a multicultural and a postfeminist perspective, to give voice to those deprived of it, through an analysis of Lucha Corpi's first detective novel, *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* (1992), and of her heroine, detective Gloria Damasco. In the novel the past and the history of the Chicano/a Movement overwhelmingly re-emerges, in Derrida's words, as a specter to resume its fights after an unforgettable disillusion.

Notes on Contributors

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Leonardo Buonomo teaches American literature at the University of Trieste. He has written extensively on nineteenth-century American literature, Italian American literature, and American popular culture. His latest book is *Immigration, Ethnicity, and Class in American Writing, 1830-1860: Reading the Stranger* (2014). In 2018 he contributed to *Nathaniel Hawthorne in Context*, ed. by Monika Elbert. In 2019 he served as President of the Henry James Society. More recently, he has contributed to the volume *Republics and Empires: Italian and American Art in Transnational Perspective, 1840-1970*, edited by Melissa Dabakis and Paul H. D. Kaplan (2021), and has edited *The Sound of James: The Aural Dimension in Henry James's Work* (2021). He is member of the Editorial Board of *RSAJournal: Rivista di Studi Americani*.

Daniela Daniele is Assistant Professor of American Literature at the University of Udine and the author of two volumes on postmodern American narratives (1994 and 2000). She currently runs an international seminar of Modern American Poetry in translation and has recently edited two special issues of the bilingual journal of art and poetry *Zeta* on Mary Caponegro's short stories (2017) and on Frank O'Hara's collaboration with poets and painters of the New York School (2019). She edited a special issue of *Nuova corrente* on Don DeLillo in 2005 and (with Marisa Bulgheroni) the American entries of the *Garzantina della letteratura* (2007). As a student of innovative American writings she also edited a collection of interviews to contemporary American authors (2000) and an anthology of American prose and poetry on September 11 (2003).

Tommaso Detti taught Contemporary History at the University of Siena from 1975 to 2016, and is former President of SISSCO (Società Italiana per lo Studio della Storia Contemporanea, 2003-2007). He has worked on the history and historiography of the labor movement, of Socialism

and of health systems; on the economic, social and demographic history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Tuscany; on the history of globalization and of the origins of the Internet. He has co-authored a university textbook of Contemporary History and *L'età del disordine: Storia del mondo attuale, 1968-2017*.

ANGELO GROSSI is *cultore della* materia a Ca' Foscari University of Venice. He earned his PhD in American literature from the same university in 2018, with a dissertation that explores David Foster Wallace's work through the interpretative prism of film theory. His fields of interest are intermediality, transmediality, film theory, American postmodern and post-postmodern fiction, and contemporary poetry. He is author of essays on the ekphrastic practice in Tino Villanueva's poetry and on the intermedial and transmedial strategies in Jonas Mekas's cinema. Upcoming is an article that reads David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* through a Neo-Baroque lens.

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Fabiola Mazzola graduated with honors at the University of Naples L'Orientale. Her BA thesis presented a feminist and Freudian reading of suicide of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). Her MA thesis, *Detecting Ethnicity, History, Psyche, and Gender in Lucha Corpi's* Eulogy for a Brown Angel, offered a multi-layered approach to contemporary multicultural detective fiction in the United States, with a focus on its relation to the Chicano Movement, also from a feminist point of view. The thesis was awarded with the Premio Lombardo-Gullì by the Italian Association of North-American Studies (AISNA).

Chiara Patrizi is *cultrice della materia* at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice. She has a PhD from Roma Tre University. Her research focuses on the "wilderness of time" in contemporary American literature, exploring the interactions between human existence and time in terms of wilderness experience. Her MA thesis received a special mention of the Lombardo-Gullì Award (2015). She has published on Don DeLillo, Langston Hughes, Jesmyn Ward, Ted Chiang, and on the relation between time and trauma in American literature. She is member of the advisory board of *JAm It! Journal of American Studies in Italy*. Her research interests include: Contemporary US Literature, African American Literature, Trauma Studies, Popular Culture, Literature and the Arts in America.

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Angela Santese is adjunct professor of US Foreign Policy since 1945. She earned her PhD in Contemporary History from the Department of Political Sciences of the University of Bologna. In 2012 she was junior visiting scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center of Washington, DC. She won the SISSCO Prize awarded by the Italian Society for the Study of Contemporary History for the best 2016 research monograph, *La pace atomic: Ronald Reagan e il movimento antinucleare (1979-1987)*. In 2017 she won the Postgraduate Vibeke Sorensen Grant from the Historical Archives of the European Union. Her research interests deal with US foreign policy, Cold War history and the history of antinuclear and environmental movements.

Cinzia Schiavini teaches American Literature at the University of Milan. She is the author of *Strade d'America: L'autobiografia di viaggio statunitense contemporanea* (2011) and *Leggere Twain* (2013). She has published on nineteenth-century (Herman Melville, Mark Twain) and twentieth-century literature, on nature writing (Barry Lopez, William Least Heat-Moon), on life writing and travelogue (Jonathan Raban, David Foster Wallace). Her current research investigates contemporary Arab American theater and culture, with a special focus on the post-9/11 turn.

Paolo Simonetti teaches American literature at Sapienza Università di Roma. His research interests include the works of Herman Melville, the reconfiguration of historical narratives and the junction between autobiography, postmemory, and historical novel in postmodernist and contemporary US fiction. He is the author of a book on conspiracy and paranoia in the works of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Paul Auster (*Paranoia blues*, 2009), and of essays on literary theory, detective fiction, adaptation theory, graphic novels. For the series "I Meridiani" Mondadori he has recently edited the complete works of Bernard Malamud and two of the three volumes of Philip Roth's novels.

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