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Books Erased

Printed Word Censorship
and US National Identity

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Submissions must be in English, must use the *MLA Handbook (7th edition)* in text, notes, and bibliography, and must be no longer than 40,000 characters maximum (including spaces, notes, and bibliography). These must be accompanied by a 200-word abstract and a separate cover sheet bearing the author's name, address, telephone number, e-mail address, and affiliation. Submissions are double-blind peer reviewed; the author's name should not appear anywhere in the manuscript. *RSAJournal* reviews submissions with the understanding that they have not been submitted concurrently to another journal.

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Andrea Carosso, Editor's Note 7

*Special Section: Books Erased, Printed Word Censorship,
and US National Identity*

Rachele Dini and Elisa Pesce, "That's What All This Wokeism Is About:" Books Erased, Printed Word Censorship, and US National Identity 9

Barbara Becnel, US Book Banning as Racialized Political Strategy: National Narratives, Public Pedagogy and the Fostering of a Tug-of-Values War 47

Anna Ferrari, Mice, Slurs and Freedom Fries: American Tensions between Teaching the Literary Canon and the Need for a National Narrative in an Era of Book Bans 67

Michael Baugh, The "Ed Scare" and the Ritualistic Burning of Black Texts 91

Katherine Inglis, Skim, Quote, List: The Censorship of *All Boys Aren't Blue* 119

Nicola Paladin, The Success of US Literature in Italy During Fascism: Ambivalent Censorship, Market, and Consensus 145

Articles

Marco Petrelli, The Ghost Dollhouse of Dixie: Dead Places, Hauntology and the Uncanny in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* 171

Alice Balestrino, A Genealogy of Genius in Gertrude Stein's *Four in America* 189

Giulia Crisanti , Franchising the Golden Arches in Italy: A New Perspective on Americanization	209
Stefano Franceschini , “Between the Key of Hope and the Atonal Slash of Nothingness:” Musical Meaning in Richard Powers’ <i>Orfeo</i>	235
Francesco Nieddu , What is Left of Human Nature? Posthuman Subjectivity in Joanna Russ’s <i>The Female Man</i>	257

Forum: AISNA at 50

Andrea Carosso , AISNA at 50	279
Leonardo Buonomo , Introduzione	281
Donatella Izzo , Miti necessari: Note sugli Studi di letteratura americana in Italia ieri e oggi	285
Daniele Fiorentino , Breve storia dell’AISNA e dei suoi rapporti istituzionali (1973-1991)	293
Giorgio Mariani , L’AISNA e l’internazionalizzazione degli Studi americani	305
Valerio Massimo De Angelis , Uno sguardo indietro: La vita e i tempi di <i>RSAJournal – Rivista di Studi Americani</i>	311
Lorenzo Costaguta, Stefano Morello, Virginia Pignagnoli , L’istituzionalizzazione dell’AISNA Graduate Forum e le sue pratiche prefigurative	321
Maurizio Vaudagna , American Studies in Italy: Historical Legacies, Public Contexts and Scholarly Trends	331

First Editions

Stefano Chessa Altieri , Resettling China Policy Game Rules: A Confidential Memorandum from Brent Scowcroft to President Bush Sr.	343
Brent Scowcroft , Memorandum to George Bush, April 2, 1990: China – Game Plan for MFN	355

Books Erased
Printed Word Censorship
and US National Identity

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Editor's Note

Con questo numero 35 di *RSAJournal* si insedia al timone della Rivista una nuova Redazione, designata dal Direttivo AISNA nel settembre 2023.

Dallo scorso ottobre abbiamo lavorato alacremente a due obiettivi: quello della preparazione del nuovo numero, che qui leggete, e quello – concordato con il Direttivo dell'Associazione – della transizione della Rivista da strumento principalmente cartaceo a strumento di consultazione esclusivamente digitale attraverso la piattaforma OJS. Il passaggio, che garantirà la presenza di ogni singolo saggio sull'indice DOAJ (e, in futuro, anche su Scopus), consentirà una molto più ampia circolazione della Rivista, dei suoi contenuti e dei suoi autori. Siamo certi che tutto questo riscuoterà l'apprezzamento dei Soci.

Raccogliamo un'eredità importante – adesso interamente fruibile e in bella mostra nell'archivio OJS (rsa.aisna.net) – costruita dalle Redazioni precedenti. In particolare, lavoriamo in continuità con il lavoro delle colleghe e colleghi che ci hanno immediatamente preceduti, guidati dal direttore Valerio De Angelis, che hanno avuto, tra le altre cose, il grande merito di portare la Rivista nella “classe A” ANVUR.

Proseguendo l'impegno loro e di chi è venuto prima di loro, ci impegniamo a posizionare la Rivista sul *leading edge* della ricerca sugli Stati Uniti e sul Nord America. Come primo atto, dedichiamo la *Special Section* a un tema di forte impatto per la società e la cultura statunitense oggi: quello della censura. Curata da Rachele Dini ed Elisa Pesce, la *Special Section* presenta saggi di sicuro interesse su uno dei risvolti più controversi dell'America del ventunesimo secolo.

Nell'augurarvi buona lettura, la Redazione desidera ringraziare tutti coloro che hanno reso possibile la realizzazione di questo numero: oltre

naturalmente ad autrici, autori e peer reviewer, un grazie di cuore va alle editor della *Special Section*, Rachele Dini ed Elisa Pesce, per la dedizione e lo scrupolo con cui hanno seguito la preparazione della sezione monografica; all'ex Direttore, Valerio Massimo De Angelis, per i preziosi suggerimenti che hanno assicurato la continuità del lavoro redazionale; alla Language Editor Gabrielle Barfoot e alla Consulting Editor Raffaella Malandrino per aver vagliato con competenza e puntiglio ogni riga del manoscritto; a Fabrizio Podda per averci consegnato un numero graficamente impeccabile e a Leonardo Bosello per aver realizzato la bella copertina tematica; e, *last but not least*, alla Journal Manager Valentina Romanzi, per l'efficientissimo coordinamento e l'enorme lavoro prodotto nella transizione alla nuova piattaforma online e nella sua gestione.

Andrea Carosso, per la Redazione di *RSAJournal*
27.06.2024

“That’s What All This Wokeism Is About”

Books Erased, Printed Word Censorship, and US National Identity

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ABSTRACT

The history of US literature has been shaped, from its inception, by the fundamentally political question of *who* the printed word is for, and *what* purpose it should serve. The historical justifications given by the State for denying specific demographics’ right to literacy and access to educational institutions, by campaigners for banning individual books from classrooms, school libraries, and bookshops, and by education policy makers for including some subjects in school curricula and not others, are indicative of how (some) Americans have answered these questions.

The contributors to this Special Section of *RSAJournal* locate the vocabulary of censorship and discourse around free speech of the 2020s within the broader history of the liberation struggles of those groups whose representation is at the heart of contemporary discussions around the shape of school and HE curricula, reading lists, and intellectual debate, and within a wider, conservative political agenda aimed at maintaining the status quo by restricting and policing (among other things) the promotion and exercise of critical thinking, especially among young people. Studying the evolution of the public discourse around book banning and censorship, they argue, provides a valuable way for understanding, more generally, how US hegemonic powers discursively construct writing, reading, and

education to maintain existing social hierarchies and shape the individual subjects within them. From this perspective, portrayals of inclusive curricula, literary works that center historically marginalized voices, and initiatives to complicate established accounts of the nation's history as impinging on individual freedom serve to foreclose opportunities for critical reflection that might result in the questioning of the social order.

In this Introduction we zoom out from the specifics of book banning, tone policing, and curriculum reform to advance a broad-ranging structural analysis of the socio-political landscape from which these phenomena have emerged. We begin by tracing the evolution of a word, “woke,” central to free speech alarmist discourse (Section 1), which we use to analyze critiques of the so-called campus free speech crisis (Section 2). The last two sections expand our enquiry to locate this discourse within a broader culture of nostalgia apparent across the US and Western Europe (Section 3) and to analyze its metabolization by Italian media (Section 4), the latter of which provides a useful case study for understanding European free speech alarmist rhetoric as strategically leveraging longstanding European constructions of America to produce a singular affective response of disdain.

KEYWORDS

Book bans, Culture wars, “Woke” culture, Free speech and cancel culture, American exceptionalism

In April 2023, the conservative US think tank The Heritage Foundation published a new edition of its *Mandate for Leadership* – a series of policy proposals it has released in advance of every presidential election campaign since 1981. The brainchild of a coalition of conservative groups called Project 2025 established to ensure Trump 2.0 achieves the sweeping legislative changes that the first administration failed to pass, *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* seeks to “bring the Administrative State to heel, and in the process defang [*sic*] and defund the woke culture warriors who have infiltrated every last institution in America” (Roberts 9). Among its targets are the alleged existential threats posed by the climate change “alarmism” stifling investment in domestic energy production (Gilman 676), the “long march of cultural Marxism through our institutions” (Dans and Groves xiv), “the new woke gender ideology” (Vought 62), and the “inva[sion]” of school libraries by “drag queens and pornography” (Roberts 1). These, its authors argue, are the product of a “highly educated managerial elite” who oppose the American values of “self-governance, the

rule of law, and ordered liberty” and who look down on “humble, patriotic working families” (Roberts 10). To achieve its goals, Project 2025 aims to disarm the Environmental Protection Agency (Gunasekara 420-45); delete from all legislation words including “sexual orientation and gender identity [...], diversity, equity, and inclusion [that are] used to deprive Americans of their First Amendment rights” (Roberts 4); “excis[e]” from public school curricula texts that “inject racist, anti-American, ahistorical propaganda into [the nation’s] classrooms” (8); and close the Department of Education (DoE) itself (Burke 319).

The Conservative Promise is a natural extension of a series of narratives that since the mid-1950s have cast public libraries and primary, secondary, and higher education as facilitators of an all-out ideological assault on the American way of life on the one hand and free speech and debate within the so-called marketplace of ideas on the other (Steel and Petley 1-10; see Diamond; Davies n. pag.; Scatamburlo-D’Annibale 230). One finds here echoes of the Red and Lavender Scare-era rhetoric used in the 1950s to justify purging government and cultural institutions of alleged communist sympathizers and queer people (who were supposedly more vulnerable to blackmail by Soviet agents looking to recruit spies) (Johnson 10-16). One finds echoes, too, of the language in the “Massive Resistance” laws passed in 1956 to prevent the desegregation of public schools (Wallace n. pag.) and of corporations in the 1960s to position support for market regulation as “a pathological and phobic response akin to racial bias” that discriminated against businesses (McCarthy 72). But most notably, *The Conservative Promise* echoes the vocabulary enlisted in the 1970s and 1980s by the campaigns of a then-nascent Christian Right funded by conservative corporate philanthropic foundations (Scatamburlo-D’Annibale 223) to remove from school libraries works deemed inappropriate for children and adolescents due to their sexual content, references to racism, or supposedly anti-American themes (Heins 11), and to discredit a Higher Education (HE) system long viewed as an incubator of radical leftist thought and the prime obstacle to the implementation of free market economics and the shaping of compliant neoliberal subjects (Scatamburlo-D’Annibale 222-31).

To achieve the latter, conservatives launched a coordinated campaign against “political correctness” – a term originally used by left-wing activists

to mock themselves, and which the Right appropriated at the turn of the 1990s to recast the diversification of university syllabi, implementation of diversity, equality, and inclusivity (DEI) initiatives, campus environmentalist policies, and emergent theories for explicating systemic inequalities as ideological assaults on individual freedom (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale 223). This narrative, exemplified by Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Higher Education* (1991), soon dovetailed with the theory of "cultural Marxism" referred to in *The Conservative Promise*, which extended the Nazi conspiracy theory of "Cultural Bolshevism" to ascribe so-called political correctness to the pernicious influence of Jewish Marxist philosophers associated with the Frankfurt School and, just as inexplicably, postmodernist thought.¹ And it has formed the basis of conservative activism in the three decades since (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale 229; see Smith; Wilson and Kamola). In the absence of a meaningful counternarrative, and despite the wealth of data attesting to the contrary (Hanlon n. pag.; see Wilson and Kamola),² this view of US academia as a seeding ground for dangerously radical, censorial views and of equality movements and initiatives as impinging on freedom of expression has morphed from a conservative talking point into the dominant perspective advanced by media outlets.

¹ The first articulation of cultural Marxism for a mainstream audience, an essay by Michael Minnicino titled "The New Dark Age: The Frankfurt School and 'Political Correctedness,'" explicitly linked the new so-called assault on free speech to the specter of Jewish leftist power (see Woods; Braune; Jamin). Anyone familiar with the vast divergences between Marxist thought, the ideas of the thinkers most frequently criticized by Bloom's generation (Derrida, Barthes, Foucault), and postcolonial, feminist, gender, critical race, and queer studies frameworks will recognize the oddity of assuming their interchangeability.

² When Georgetown University's Free Speech Project examined speech violations reported on campuses between 2016 and 2018, it identified only 60 such cases, which translates to 0.65 of all 4,583 colleges and universities in the country. The researchers concluded that "beyond the same oft-cited anecdotal examples [...] there is very little actual evidence that conservative and libertarian voices are routinely stifled on college campuses," and that the data does not support claims that "safe spaces, speech codes, and trigger warnings" have stifled speech (Wilson and Kamola n. pag.).

The contributions to this Special Section of *RSA Journal* contextualize the vocabulary of censorship and discourse around free speech of the 2020s within the broader history of the United States, with specific attention to the history of the liberation struggles of those groups whose representation is at the heart of contemporary discussions around the shape of school and HE curricula, reading lists, and intellectual debate. We are especially interested in the reinterpretation of social justice efforts intended to enable historically underrepresented groups to participate more fully in public life, and which are premised on a definition of “freedom of speech [as] a negative freedom” that grants “freedom *from* persecution/discrimination based on expressed views, not on the freedom *to* express those views” (Bacevic n. pag.), as, instead, limiting the rights of non-minorities and betraying American values, however defined.

Our focus stems from our acute awareness of the mounting pace, and growing success, of conservative lobbying efforts in the US to restrict the circulation of printed texts, position progressive calls for social justice as authoritarian, and foster public distrust towards educational institutions specifically and the value of intellectual enquiry more generally. It also stems from our concern with the dissonance between the popular account of universities’ leftist militancy and privileging of ideology over truth or knowledge and our own experiences as educators in the neoliberal university, whose capacity to publicly critique racism, misogyny, transphobia, war conflict, and the structural inequalities in our own institutions (Docherty 248-51) has eroded in line with the broader decline in power, autonomy, pay, and job security of academic faculty apparent across the sector, especially within the humanities (Docherty 248-51; Slaughter and Leslie 2, 43; see Morrish and Sauntson; Fasenfest; Klikauer and Young; Gray 745-50).

To this end, Barbara Becnel’s “US Book Banning as Racialized Political Strategy: National Narratives, Public Pedagogy and the Fostering of a Tug-of-Values War” contextualizes contemporary efforts to circumscribe how race is taught in public schools within the nation’s broader history of limiting Black American expression, including antebellum-era bans on teaching Black free men and slaves to read or write. Anna Ferrari’s “Mice, Slurs and Freedom Fries: American Tensions between Teaching the Literary Canon and the Need for a National Narrative in an Era of Book Bans”

examines the debate around the teaching of sensitive subjects including race, gender, sexuality, disability, and the Holocaust as illustrative of broader tensions between different stakeholders in the construction and reaffirmation of America's national narrative. In "The 'Ed Scare' and the Ritualistic Burning of Black Texts," Michael Baugh develops the concept of "*arsonic* violence" to unearth the violent subtext of the book bans, delimiting of what school children learn about race, and targeting of Black academics and public intellectuals that comprise the so-called "Ed Scare" of the 2020s. In "Skim, Quote, List: The Censorship of *All Boys Aren't Blue*," Katherine Inglis develops a forensic analysis of what she terms the conservative book challenger "playbook," which instructs activists to forego in-depth reading or critique in favor of skimming for sexually and racially charged content. Finally, Nicola Paladin's "The Success of US Literature in Italy during Fascism: Ambivalent Censorship, Market, and Consensus" draws our attention overseas to the translation, censorship, and circulation of American literary texts in fascist Italy to analyze the role of American letters in the Regime's efforts to shape a new national identity.

In this Introduction we zoom out from the specifics of book banning, tone policing, and curriculum reform examined in our contributors' pieces to advance a broad-ranging structural analysis of the socio-political landscape from which these phenomena have emerged. We begin by tracing the evolution of a word, "woke," central to free speech alarmist discourse (Section 1), which we use to analyze critiques of the so-called campus free speech crisis (Section 2). Our last two sections expand our enquiry to locate this discourse within a broader culture of nostalgia apparent across the US and Western Europe (Section 3) and to analyze its metabolization by Italian media (Section 4), the latter of which provides a useful case study for understanding European free speech alarmist rhetoric as strategically leveraging longstanding European constructions of America to produce a singular affective response of disdain.

The Social Life of "Woke"

The quote in our title comes from a bewildering pronouncement made by Russ Vought, the president of the Christian Nationalist Organization,

and one of *The Conservative Promise's* contributors, while a guest on the conservative podcast *The Charlie Kirk Show*: “I am against the Department of Education because I think it’s a Department of Critical Race Theory [...] you’re funding essentially a cultural revolution not just with teachers, but with the students. That’s what all this wokeism is about” (Last Week Tonight 2:58-3:05). Vought’s statement employs a mode of rhetorical obfuscation and dog whistle politics – “coded racial appeals that carefully manipulate hostility toward nonwhites” while appearing to do nothing of the kind (Haney-López 5) – apparent throughout the different instantiations of censorship analyzed by our contributors. In her contribution to this issue, Barbara Becnel reads such constructions as paradigmatic of what George Lakoff describes as political rhetoric’s reliance on the activation of the “automatic, effortless inferences that follow from” the “cognitive structures” or “unconscious frames” that shape what we call “common sense” (qtd. in Becnel 54). Becnel notes that such rhetoric is premised on “political narratives that over centuries have been embedded into the unconscious frames of the populace in service of two unyielding ideas: white superiority and black inferiority” (54).

But in her analysis of the strategic leveraging of specific social constructions of childhood innocence, maternal concern, and obscenity-condoning leftism in the conservative book challenging discourse against LGBTQ+ texts, our contributor Katherine Inglis shows how such rhetoric also activates a plethora of other, complementary, frames (118). Vought’s grammatically dubious soundbite seeks precisely to activate multiple such structures contemporaneously: the third-person pronoun (“this”) transforms his earlier articulation of the specific threat of the DoE’s alleged leftism into an indictment of a more general assault on American values, while the semiotically supple word “wokeism,” whose meaning he does not define but about whose negative ramifications he is unequivocal, allows the audience to project onto the generic threat their own specific fears.

The term “woke” originated as a descriptor for what Brianna Perry terms “an alternative temporal state, in which Black people are perpetually aware of the state of the world” (93). White mainstream audiences were first introduced to a diluted version of this meaning in 1962, via the Black writer William Melvin Kelley’s discussion of white America’s appropriation and distortion of Black vernacular in a *New York Times* article titled “If You’re

Woke, You Dig It.” However, scholars trace its origins, variously, to Marcus Garvey’s essays and speeches of the 1920s in which, drawing on Marx and Engels, he called on Black subjects globally to “wake up” (5) to their shared struggle and referred to “the awakened spirit of the New Negro, who does not seek industrial opportunity alone, but a political voice” (56);³ to Williard “Ramblin” Thomas’s complaint, in “Sawmill Moan,” that he couldn’t “stay woke for crying;”⁴ and to the spoken afterword, “Stay woke,” at the end of blues singer Lead Belly’s 1938 protest song, “Scottsboro Boys,” about the Black men in Scottsboro, Alabama, wrongly accused of raping two white women (Perry 91; Carter n. pag.). Ironically, the glossary flanking Kelley’s article (SM 45) reduced this imperative to be alert to racial violence to an adjective for someone “well-informed, up-to-date” – thereby divesting the word of its radicalism, priming it for use by white Americans, and further side-lining the centrality of Black lexicon to a rapidly growing Black liberation movement (one wonders if this was Kelley’s choice, or the editors’).

The *New York Times*’ deflection notwithstanding, the use of “stay woke” both in everyday Black speech and as a rallying cry gained momentum over the course of the Civil Rights era, propelled by its deployment by the Black Power movement (Robinson n. pag.). And after lying dormant for decades, it was recovered in the 2010s by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that arose following the acquittal of white police officer George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2013 and the murders, also by white police officers, of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014 (Carter n. pag.). On social media, at rallies, and in BLM literature, “stay woke” communicated a denunciation of police brutality specifically and institutional racism more generally (see Chambers and Harlan; Szetela).

³ For this and other examples of Garvey’s use of the expression, see *More Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, initially published in 1923 and re-issued in 1925 and 1968. Notable instances include his description of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (over which he presided) as “represent[ing] the hopes and aspirations of the awakened Negro” (120), and his proclamation, “Wake up Ethiopia! Wake up Africa!” (5).

⁴ While Thomas’s use of the expression is seemingly a descriptor of the singer sobbing himself to sleep, Stephen L. Carter identifies this as an example of blues musicians’ tradition of embedding their lyrics with “hidden meanings representing opposition to cultural norms” (n. pag.).

This usage gained further currency following the release, in 2016, of the award-winning television documentary *Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement*, and after the summer of 2020, when the murder of George Floyd saw BLM become a global phenomenon (Asmelash n. pag.).

Just as the expression was diluted for the *NYT*'s majority-white readership in 1962, however, "stay woke" was rapidly appropriated: in the first instance by brands intent on positioning themselves as allies, and in the second instance by conservative journalists and politicians to challenge the movement's legitimacy. "Life For Now" (2017), a Pepsi ad directed by Michael Bernard and starring the white reality television star and social media influencer Kendall Jenner, is emblematic of the first of these shifts (ABC News). In the ad, Jenner interrupts a modelling shoot to join an undefined march reminiscent of a BLM protest minus the overt anti-racist messaging, and then prevents a violent encounter between marchers and armed police by offering the latter a Pepsi – all to the tune of Bob Marley's grandson's studiously apolitical song, "Lions" (Dinh n. pag.). "Life For Now" was pulled almost immediately after being widely condemned by its target audience of 16- to 35-year-olds and derided, across the political spectrum, as a poor imitation of "Hilltop: I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke" (1971) – the iconic Coca Cola ad whose nod to the countercultural movements of the 1960s is generally recognized as the first major instance of a brand's integration of (diluted) progressive political imagery into its messaging (Dini, "Into the Blue Again" n. pag.).

Marked by BLM organizers as trivializing the "sacrifices" that radical protest entails (Victor n. pag.), by advertising experts as a lesson in tone-deaf scripting (Monloss n. pag.), by historians as a logical extension of corporate America's reduction of activist movements to fashion trends (see Shankar), and by the Right as a dangerous precedent foretelling a "woke" minority's potential to bend corporate America to their ideological will ("People Actually LIKED Pepsi's Ad!"), the "Live for Now" saga reads, in hindsight, as a proverbial canary in the coalmine, foretelling how large swathes of the American public would metabolize the discourse around the place, tone, function, and appropriateness of this new vocabulary of social justice and the calls for change it seeks to articulate. For, as with the term "political correctness," "woke" has evolved from indexing allegiance to the cause of advancing social equality (specifically for

Black Americans) into an “intentional linguistic inversion” (Hernández-Truyol 20) used to charge any effort to redress injustice as discriminatory (see Kilgore; Blake). This charge has been leveraged against BLM, the trans rights and Stop Oil movements, DEI initiatives, curriculum decolonization efforts, advocacy of Covid-19 vaccines and mask-wearing, calls for a ceasefire in Palestine, and the campaign to boycott, disinvest from, and sanction (BDS) Israel. And it has served, we argue, to group these various positions as constitutive, together, of a worldview defined by intolerance of difference to be roundly ridiculed.

The Free Speech Panic Industry

One finds an apt allegory of “woke”’s trajectory from call for liberation to coopted slogan to “term of derision, subject to memeification” (Perry 94) that “exists in its own hyperreality” (Zavattaro and Bearfield 585) in a 12-second video that the libertarian tech billionaire Elon Musk posted on then-Twitter a month after purchasing the platform. Captioned “Found in closet at Twitter HQ fr [for real] 🇺🇸 🇺🇸,” the video featured Musk narrating, in mock-documentary style, the discovery of “an entire closet – *secret* closet! – of hashtag woke t-shirts.” Where Twitter under Jack Dorsey had leveraged BLM and subsequent social justice movements to promote itself as *the* platform for social justice activism, Musk’s public disposal of #staywoke merchandise in 2022 marked the beginning of his much-publicized mission to reform the site to “stop the woke mind virus” whose infectious censoriousness risks destroying humanity before it can “colonize Mars” (Higgins n. pag.).

Musk’s attempt to capitalize on anti-“wokeism” forms part of what Peter Mitchell describes as “the lucrative gaslighting industry” (“Culture Wars” n. pag.) that has arisen since BLM to explain to liberal and conservative Americans alike why social justice movements, campus activism, decolonizing efforts, and DEI are in fact bad. Among such interventions are a plethora of sensationalist titles by conservative authors, mostly male, including Ben Shapiro’s *Bullies: How the Left’s Culture of Fear and Intimidation Silences Americans* (2014), Jordan B. Peterson’s *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (2018), Chris Heitzman’s *The Coming Woke Catastrophe: A Critical*

Examination of Woke Culture (2022), Vivek Ramaswamy's *Woke, Inc.: Inside Corporate America's Social Justice Scam* (2021), Tom Pickering's *The Evil of Silence: Woke Culture and the Mechanics of Tyranny* (2021), and Ted Cruz's *Unwoke: How to Defeat Cultural Marxism in America*. In the liberal camp are Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt's *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (2018), Michael Rectenwald's *Beyond Woke* (2020), John McWhorter's *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America* (2021), Yascha Mounk's *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time* (2023), Susan Neiman's *Left Is Not Woke* (2023), and Greg Lukianoff and Rikki Schlott's *The Canceling of the American Mind: How Cancel Culture Undermines Trust, Destroys Institutions, and Threatens Us All* (2023).

The narratives advanced by these texts rely on what Leslie Dorrough Smith terms “chaos rhetoric” – a “type of declension speech” that persuades by instilling fear of “an imminent threat to a beloved entity (which could include everything from children, to liberty, to the nation itself,” and which our contributor Baugh discusses in his article (qtd. in Baugh 100). And like the screeds against political correctness that precede them, they follow the logic of DARVO – the acronym for “Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender” coined by Jennifer Freyd in the late 1990s to describe domestic abusers’ strategic claim of victimhood when confronted about their behavior (30). Hence the function of memorable pejoratives such as “snowflakes” (entitled and too-easily offended progressive),⁵ “social justice warrior” (overly militant youth), “gender ideology” (which constructs both the trans rights movement and transsexuality as a cult premised on the rejection of science), “cancel culture” (denoting the stifling effects of a

⁵ The word “snowflake” derives from David Fincher’s 1998 film adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk’s 1996 novel, *Fight Club*, where it serves to articulate the effects of a late capitalist paradigm premised on the commodification of individuality – as exemplified by the strategy of promising millions of people that one product marks them all out as special – in fostering fascism. The Right’s adoption of this word to discredit leftists’ commitments to social justice and the prevention of fascism is either a lesson in poor reading comprehension skills or an extension of the broader strategies of rhetorical *détournement* discussed throughout this piece.

culture in which public figures can be publicly shamed or lose work for statements or actions deemed socially unacceptable).

Within conservative media, chaos rhetoric and DARVO are at play in *New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens' description, in a 2021 article titled "Why Wokeness Will Fail," of schools and universities that teach about racism and misogyny as "Orwellian" "factories of wokeness" (n. pag.); Fox News columnist Ryan Walters' vision of a "radical left [that] believe[s] the mistakes of our past define our character and our future" and that seeks to "indoctrinate young, impressionable minds [...] [to] be ashamed to be American" (n. pag.); Florida Governor Ron DeSantis's definition of "woke" as "a form of cultural Marxism" and a "war on truth" that "put[s] merit and achievement behind identity politics" (qtd. in Scully n. pag.); Texas Senator Ted Cruz's pledge to defeat "cultural Marxism" and "tak[e] our society back from the woke neo-Marxists who have captured it" (62); and philosopher turned anti-woke self-help pundit Jordan Peterson's campaign against something he calls "postmodern neo-Marxism," which rather marvelously mischaracterizes both postmodernism and Marxism to describe the West's supposed siege by cultural relativism and totalizing narratives centered around race and gender. Chaos rhetoric and DARVO are also at play in political science academic Eric Kaufmann's condemnation of applications of social psychology concepts including DARVO to critique structural inequality and anti-woke rhetoric as, themselves, emblematic of a "ensorious victimhood culture" (n. pag.). And too, they are evident in the myriad riffs, in conservative writing, on "the long march through the institutions" – a phrase coined by Rudi Dutschke and subsequently popularized by Herbert Marcuse to describe revolution from within, which when reworded as a "long identitarian march" (Kaufman n. pag.), "long march of cultural Marxism" (Dans and Groves xiv), or "The Long March Through the Corporations" (Gonzalez n. pag.), serves to reframe equality movements as a hidden menace. This is the rhetoric that our contributors Becnel, Ferrari, Inglis, and Baugh examine, and which shares features with that of the Italian Fascist Regime whose treatment of American literature that our contributor Paladin analyzes.

The liberal narrative is a different beast entirely, as its use of chaos rhetoric is tempered by a vocabulary of reason and concern that helps

position the critic as at once wise, authoritative, and compassionate, and to construct (1) postmillennial campus protests as aberrations of previous progressive movements, (2) the so-called limiting of debate as a threat to the free exchange of ideas on which liberalism itself depends, and (3) the American student populace as emotionally fragile, privileged, and intolerant to difference. These constructions merit closer scrutiny as they have served to establish the free speech crisis as a *fact* and distract attention from the more extreme forms of censorship being championed by the Right.

The first construction forms the basis of Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt's "The Coddling of the American Mind," the much-quoted *Atlantic* article published in August 2015 that formed the basis of their eponymous book. In the article, whose title nodded to Allen Bloom's earlier-mentioned screed against political correctness, Lukianoff and Haidt differentiated between what they described as the laudable "politically correct" efforts of activists in the 1990s to "restrict [...] hate speech aimed at marginalized groups" and decolonize the "literary, philosophical, and historical canon," and what they termed a twenty-first-century "movement [...] largely about emotional well-being" that "presumes an extraordinary fragility of the collegiate psyche" (n. pag.). Ironically, Richard Bernstein's "The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct," the *NYT* article that in October 1990 brought the free speech panic to the mainstream, characterized the end-of-millennial campus culture that Lukianoff and Haidt applauded in precisely the same terms: as a "growing intolerance [...] closing of debate, [and] pressure to conform to a radical program" out of step with the spirit of earlier liberation movements (E1). Just as Bernstein disassociated postcolonial, gender, environmental, and critical race studies and the campus activists who sought to apply their ideas from the midcentury liberation movements that engendered them, "Coddling" recast postmillennial students as naïve militants, and their efforts as irruptions divorced from a wider history of political organizing.

Exemplifying the second construction (censorial illiberalism) is "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate," an open letter signed by 153 writers, academics, and public intellectuals and published in *Harper's Magazine* at the height of the 2020 BLM protests. Appealing to readers' sense of

nuance, the letter described the BLM protests as “heighten[ing] a new set of moral attitudes [...] that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity” (“A Letter on Justice” n. pag.). This construction relies on what Nesrine Malik describes as a politics of equivalence that views the KKK and BLM as equally deserving of condemnation (qtd. in Steel and Petley 4). It also relies on a reductive if not downright warped interpretation of Enlightenment-era thinking (Kemp 25, 33-34) premised on a universalized white, male, and upper-class human subject, and on a culture of debate involving only members of this demographic – a far cry from the contemporary context in which liberal free speech alarmists seek to apply it. In a multicultural, multiethnic, and gender diverse society, in which public discourse around the rights of the historically marginalized takes place in and is shaped by a minimally regulated media ecosystem largely funded by a handful of white male billionaires with vested interests in popularizing some ideas over others, the pledge to “defend to the death” the right of one’s opponent to speak becomes rather moot.

Finally, exemplifying the third construction (student fragility) is Barack Obama’s denunciation, a mere month after the publication of Lukianoff and Haidt’s article, of university students’ supposed sense of entitlement “to be[ing] coddled and protected from different points of view” (qtd. in Nelson n. pag.) and his imploration to the 2016 graduating class of Howard University (a historically Black institution) to resist the “trend” of intolerance and instead “engage folks who disagree with you [...] no matter how ridiculous or offensive you might find the things [they say]” (qtd. in Politico n. pag.). The latter drew heavily on the vocabulary of respectability politics – the term Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined to describe Black Americans’ advancement of their position via the strategic and performative rejection of the more controversial or “bad” aspects of their identity (187-88). But another case in point is former *Guardian* columnist Hadley Freeman’s ascription of the younger generations’ “evangelism about gender ideology” (trans rights advocacy) to their desire for “a civil rights fight of their own,” akin to those waged by their mothers and grandmothers and more interesting than environmentalism – since “fighting for plants is not quite as fun” as fighting for people (“Hadley Freeman, Toni Crews” 9:40-

10:05; “Where Does Feminism Go Next?” 23:30-24:07). According to this logic, cisgender women’s right to vocally oppose trans rights is under threat by emotionally delicate ideologues playing at politics but with no skin in the game.

Free Speech and the Backward Gaze

As Peter Mitchell notes, the incitement to university students to open their hearts to “opposing views” deflects from the fact that those “‘opposing views’ [are] usually [...] some variation of exactly the same one,” and that “the ‘people who disagree with you’ are always some variation of the same person: a well-paid white man who isn’t sure where all these women and brown people and queers came from but has some ideas about where he’d like to send them” (“Culture Wars” n. pag.). More generally, framing those who challenge inequality as spoiled children who need to be carefully managed out of something that is *most likely* just a phase but that risks solidifying into a dangerous radicalism facilitates the elision of both the material realities that produced the supposedly censorial social justice movements and initiatives under examination and the material reasons their critics oppose them.

Firstly, it ignores the fact that the demands of so-called “woke” youth are but *recapitulations* of demands made by earlier generations whose main distinction is to have permeated beyond campuses and establishment media headlines thanks to a digital ecosystem that enables the dissemination of concepts, theories, and terminology at a pace that would have baffled the so-called class of 1968, and that have especial pull with members of the first generations since the Second World War to face worse prospects than their parents’ by nearly every metric (see A. Peterson xxii, 11; see Bessant; Farthing and Watts n. pag.). Secondly, it negates that the questions around DEI, curriculum decolonization, and the vocabulary of intersectional politics with which college campuses are grappling might in fact be ascribable to tensions resulting from the professoriate’s lesser and slower diversification than the students it is tasked with teaching (see Brahm; Matias, Lewis and Hope). Finally, it sidesteps the other stakeholders in

the conflict: private enterprises and philanthropies lobbying, as mentioned earlier, for universities to run like businesses and instill neoliberal values, and the State, which has a vested interest in limiting critiques of the social order. The latter is attested by Florida's banning of Critical Race Theory and mention of homosexuality from school curricula, and by the 2023 Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act passed in the UK, where some of our contributors are based, and which critics argue is designed to limit campus protest and academic speech as part of a more general assault on universities' capacity to intervene in public life (Bacevic n. pag.; see also Riley).

Together, these elisions enable the construction of the recent past as a time when minorities were less angry, activist movements were less disruptive, and students talked about something other than identity politics. Such a construction, we argue, belies a broader concern with protecting the story of the nation that America has long told itself, and which in turn reflects what critics have variously identified as "postcolonial melancholia" (Gilroy), "imperial nostalgia" (Mitchell), and "postmillennial nostalgia" (Dini, "Things of Beauty" n. pag.; "Appliance Nostalgia" 441-42; see *All-Electric Narratives* 259-304). This is a structure of feeling apparent across former imperialist nations that is characterized by a heightened sentimentality towards and adherence to nationalist myths of exceptionalism, and condemnation of the perceived desecration of cherished traditions, national memories, and modes of commemoration. It is rooted in anxieties about individual nations' relative loss of power, hegemony, and credibility on the world stage (see Golub; Wallerstein 1, 7), the decline of the so-called Liberal International Order established (according to this credo) to preserve liberal democratic values (see Porter), the diversification of power among states, and demographic shifts within the nations themselves (see Didier; Bigo). It is a response, in other words, to the destabilizing effects of global shifts on the one hand, and the proliferation of voices and perspectives within the nation itself on the other, which together pose a challenge to its identity as a global leader, beacon of progress, and custodian of democracy and protector of human rights (see Nye). Hence the defense, in the Netherlands, of "Black Peter" – St Nicholas' chimney-soot covered assistant, who is usually played, in Christmas pageants

by a white man in blackface (see Hilhorst and Hermes). Or the British media's vitriolic coverage of the National Trust's efforts to acknowledge its properties' imbrication in the transatlantic slave trade (Mitchell, *Imperial Nostalgia* 58) and of Megan Markle, the first Black and American royal, initially for perceived instances of "breaking royal protocol" and later for identifying such coverage as racist (Clancy n. pag.). Our contributor Becnel's concept of "public pedagogy" – the utilization of narrative tactics to shape collective attitudes – enables us to understand these responses as premised on entrenched racialized values whose challenging poses a threat to the national identity (53). So, too, does our contributor Ferrari's analysis of the anxieties that undergird the discussion around the place in school curricula of classic American texts that contain racist or ableist slurs: for at stake is the national narrative that the teaching of these works over the decades has helped construct (78).

Revisionism is also what facilitates Stanley Fish's performatively dispassionate appraisal, over the course of three decades and four books – *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing, Too* (1994), *Save the World on Your Own Time* (2008), *Versions of Academic Freedom: From Professionalism to Revolution* (2014), and *The First: How to Think About Hate Speech, Campus Speech, Religious Speech, Fake News, Post-Truth, and Donald Trump* (2019) – of free speech as "just the name we give to verbal behavior that serves the substantive agendas we wish to advance" (*There's No Such Thing* 102), and of what he calls "activism" and "political views" as defiling the sacred apoliticality of academia (*The First* 64).⁶ Such an account facilitates the dismissal of the latest manifestation of a long and inherently political history of competing interests regarding the place and function of intellectual enquiry – including who should be allowed to pursue it, enjoy its fruits, steward its history, and shape its future – as, instead, a foolish game between conservative and so-called radical academics who should know better than to bring politics into the classroom. Recasting free speech as an opportunistic construct separate to the pursuit of

⁶ It is not clear how Fish reconciles these views with his acceptance of a post at New College-Florida in 2023, shortly after it replaced its entire board of trustees with conservatives and denied tenure to staff perceived to hold liberal views (Gutkin n. pag.).

knowledge in turn provides an expedient means to deflect attention from the academy's historical role in the imperialist project and how this role has been historicized.

Finally, revisionism enables the swift reframing of liberation movements as *illiberal*. We have already seen how “wokeness” has been reappropriated to denounce BLM and other parallel movements. But another notable example is the media backlash against the #metoo movement that arose following Harvey Weinstein's arrest in October 2017, which portrayed the thousands of survivors who had shared their experiences of sexual harassment and rape on social media as a mob threatening the freedom and livelihoods of innocent men. The movement's one-year anniversary was marked by a slew of articles in liberal media outlets that reconstructed the events of the previous twelve months as a story of male suffering. These included Jian Ghomeshi's “Reflections from a Hashtag: My Path to Public Toxicity” in *The New York Review's* special issue on “The Fall of Men,” John Hockenberry's “Exile and a Year of Trying to Find a Road Back from Personal and Public Shame” in *Harper's Magazine's* special issue on “The Printed Word in Peril,” and *The New Yorker's* profile piece on Al Franken. Following these came counter-allegations of defamation (Weisbrot 335) and Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPS) against survivors who publicly shared their accounts of experiences ruled by a court of law to constitute abuse (“SLAPP suit” n. pag.) – many of which were successful (Morgan n. pag.). That the narrative of the ruined accused man is contradicted by the very publication in prominent media outlets of his stories and by the devastated careers of the survivors he has successfully sued does not appear to have registered.

The collective DARVOing of #metoo and its legacy in institutions including HE, where a wealth of scholarship shows sexual misconduct is pervasive, survivors are dissuaded from coming forward and encouraged to sign non-disclosure agreements if they do (see Bondestam and Lundqvist), and researchers of academic sexual misconduct are prevented from publishing their findings on the grounds of libel (Morgan n. pag.), provides a salient example of the ramifications of the weaponization of free speech to cloak *actual* efforts to silence, and of the leveraging of nostalgia to further entrench regressive beliefs and prevent social change. The backlash's swift recasting of survivors' accounts of their harassment, rape, and assault as

more dangerous than the acts themselves demonstrated the speed with which a liberation movement can be neutralized through its integration into a fantasy of disruption and loss. And its trajectory finds its parallels in the disciplining measures, discussed in our contributors Becnel, Ferrari, Baugh, and Inglis' individual articles, taken against those individuals and institutions that have attempted to recover marginalized histories and introduce them into collective memory.

The Italian Perspective

In this last section, we cast our gaze home to examine Italy's metabolization of the different mediated versions of the so-called free speech crisis discussed thus far. Our focus here is not on what Emiliana De Blasio and Donatella Selva describe as the strategic leveraging, apparent across Europe, of anti-woke rhetoric to foment a "polarising discourse" to "establish hegemony" (91)⁷ but on what we identify as the *construction* of American "wokeness" and censorship that European media generally and Italian media specifically treats as a foreign artefact to be utilized to confirm extant attitudes to US culture and the perils of Americanization.

One group of these critics dismisses trigger warnings, safe spaces, and so-called cancel culture as exemplifying a quintessentially American presentism stemming from the nation's relative youth, and a uniquely American earnestness, humorlessness, and self-righteousness born out of its puritanical roots (see Faloppa; Vitiello; Righetto). Another identifies them as exports akin to "McDonalds, Marvel superhero movies[, and] rap" that attest to the pernicious "cultural hegemony of Made in the USA" (Pizzati n. pag.).⁸ And a third warns of their threat to Western civilization and

⁷ Vassallo and Vignati note Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's targeting, between 2016 and 2022, of "political correctness" alongside "international finance, globalist utopias, Islamism and [...] the Left" in a manner akin to that of far-right parties in Hungary, Poland, France, and the US (184). Since 2022, Meloni has increasingly reframed herself as "anti-woke" and Italy as a haven from "woke" diktats (Kaval n. pag.).

⁸ This and all subsequent quotes from Italian publications and English versions of Italian article titles are Rachele Dini's translations.

implores Italians “not [to] let those who would cancel the West succeed” (Lucattini n. pag.). All three construct “wokeism” as *sui generis* – a product of a unique culture of extremes distant from the realities of a less polarized, less self-righteous, Europe – to more easily reject the progressive ideas and movements with which it is associated.

We argue that these constructions are in keeping with a broader pattern of distancing and deflection identifiable, for example, in the tendency among Europe’s former slave-trading nations to rhetorically disown the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade by casting slavery itself as specifically American (and that can be seen as another manifestation of the nostalgic mode discussed earlier).⁹ As De Blasio and Selva note of the French context, “rather than marking a clear distinction between left and right, the *quérelle* on *wokisme* in France rests on a common rejection of what is perceived as an Americanism alien to French culture” (32).¹⁰ The Italian media’s discursive construction of the US campus free speech discourse is but another example of American culture’s function in the European imaginary as a theatre where conflicts and dramas in which Europe is directly enmeshed are reformulated as antithetical to European values, in the interest of reaffirming a particular idea of the continent generally and of individual nations specifically.

A case in point is the way “woke” entered the Italian mainstream in 2021: not via coverage of the second wave of BLM protests but via an opinion piece by the gender critical feminist Marina Terragni titled “Cancel culture. La dittatura del gender nel rifiuto di ogni confronto” (“Cancel Culture: The Gender Dictatorship in the Rejection of Debate”), published in the conservative newspaper *Avvenire*, and via a reprint (in translation) in the center-left newspaper *La Repubblica* of the earlier-cited Bret Stephens article, “Why Wokeness Will Fail.” Published on

⁹ As Trinidadian historian Eric Williams famously said to explain British publishers’ refusal to publish his book, *Capitalism and Slavery*, “British historians write almost as if Britain had introduced Negro slavery solely for the satisfaction of abolishing it” (qtd. in Owalade 78). See also Olusega. For an analysis of what Myram Cottias terms France’s “politics of forgetting” its history of slavery, see Hannoum.

¹⁰ For a more expansive analysis of the discursive function of *wokisme* in French politics and public debate, see especially Campagne.

23 September 2021, Terragni's article cited Binah Shah's description of trans rights as "gender colonialism," identified so-called cancel culture as an inevitable product of "the mortal graft of postmodernism and French theory on a society as narcissistic and navel-gazing as America's," and implored Europeans to "vaccinate ourselves" against America's "woke virus" before it "overwhelm[s] us" (n. pag.). Meanwhile Stephens' article, originally published on 9 November in the *NYT*, compared "wokeness" directly to the destructive impetus of white supremacy (n. pag.). Notably, when *La Repubblica* reprinted Stephens' article on 11 November, it did not reprint *NYT* columnist Charles M. Blow's riposte of 10 November, which identified "the war on woke" as a bipartisan attempt to vilify movements that "indic[t] the status quo" (n. pag.). Like Terragni's citation of only gender critical feminists, *La Repubblica*'s reprinting of Stephens' piece without Blow's rejoinder ensured readers encountered a very specific account of America's culture wars.

Such a positioning is only possible, of course, in a context defined by a lack of discourse: which is to say that it is precisely because the American free speech panic is much less prominent in the Italian press than in the US that the few publications that do cover it¹¹ have the power to effectively shape its public perception. The most interesting example from this perspective is an article published in the nonpartisan (and more or less centrist) newspaper *Corriere della Sera* in March 2024 about an anonymous 42-year-old Italian MA student mortified by Columbia University's *cultura woke* ("woke culture"), and which was subsequently covered in the national news and republished in conservative media outlets. Titled "Un'italiana a New York: 'Io, dentro la dittatura woke. Sono bianca e devo scusarmi anche se non sono razzista. E guai a chiedere: di dove sei?'" ("An Italian in New York: 'I, Under the Woke Dictatorship. I'm White and Have to Apologize Even if I'm Not Racist. And Don't You Dare Ask Where Somebody is From'"), the article portrays an HE system defined by diversity training

¹¹ Of these, *Avvenire* and nicolaporro.it, a media outlet launched in 2015 by the conservative, climate sceptic, director general of the center-right newspaper *Il Giornale*, are in the lead. For examples of *Avvenire*'s coverage, see Lavazza; Righetto; Lanzieri; Simone. For examples from nicolaporro.it, see Lodige, "Woke, benvenuti;" Lucattini; Piccoli.

sessions and privilege-checking exercises premised on the “dogma that the only true racism is that by us white people against the Blacks” (Rampini n. pag.).

It may well be, of course, that Columbia’s equality efforts are reductive and ineffectual: some scholarship on campus DEI initiatives does indicate, for example, that their effectiveness is undermined by the defensiveness they trigger in staff from high status groups (see Brad et al.; Spisz and Tanega; Dobbin and Kaley). Building on Zavattaro and Bearfield (588), we ourselves submit that diversity initiatives often deflect from wider systemic issues that institutions choose not to address, effectively functioning as a performance of institutional commitment to equality and a proxy for the kinds of radical critiques and transformation that the neoliberal university has, in fact, a vested interest in curtailing. But the *Corriere* article is not interested in such discussions. Instead, its strategy of alienation-by-distancing seeks to provoke an *affective* negative response by presenting DEI as an unintelligible language whose distance from supposedly homogeneous Italian values (gestured at in the article’s reference to an “us whites” that presupposes its Italian readers are the woman’s same race and will identify with her distress) renders it inherently absurd, and its import into Italian culture even more so.

This linguistic focus shares features with a tradition of popular depictions of Americanization that between the 1950s and 1990s took playful aim at the nation’s enthusiastic absorption of, and indoctrination into, American culture at the level of language through comedic depictions of *inglese maccheronico* – the combination of Anglicized Italian words and approximations of English words by someone who does not speak the language. Here we are thinking especially of the *inglese maccheronico* punctuated by *oirait, oirait* (“all right, all right”) of Alberto Sordi’s Americophile protagonist in *Un americano a Roma* (1954); the nonsense lyrics of Adriano Celentano’s celebrated song “Prisencolinensinainciusol” (1973), which mimicked the sound of American words spoken in an Italian accent and whose *oirait, oirait* in the refrain paid homage to Sordi; and Maxibon’s 1994 ad, “Du gust’ is megl che uan,” whose co-option of end-of-millennial Italian youths’ relationship to American culture (and Italian men’s fascination with American women) gained it cult status.

The last of these paid homage to *both* Sordi and Celentano, depicting Italian actor Stefano Accorsi attempting to flirt, in *inglese maccheronico*, with two women he mistakenly assumes are American, by comparing their combined beauty to the luscious hybridity of a Maxibon ice cream bar. It also ironized the brand's own participation in the Americanization of popular culture: Accorsi's collapsing of the Italian phrase "due gusti sono meglio di uno" and its American translation "two flavors are better than one" was but an extension of the logic of the name "Maxibon," which juxtaposed the Latin word "maxi" with an Americanization of "buono."

In each of these instances, the collision of languages was calibrated to bring together its audience in a moment of collective self-recognition. Thus, for example, Sordi's myriad linguistic mishaps and failed efforts to become American, exemplified in the famous scene in which he attempts to eat what he thinks is American food only to spit it out and scarf down the plate of *maccheroni* he had initially rejected, all while mumbling in *inglese maccheronico*, articulated an all-too familiar ambivalence towards American culture with which audiences could identify. Celentano's song in turn confronted listeners with the Freudian Uncanny to provoke a collective reckoning with the making-strange of Italian by American English and the making-strange of American English by its Italian butchering.

But while the title of "Un'italiana a New York" gestures to Steno (Stefano Vanzini)'s affectionate satire of *Americamania*, the article's enlistment of repetition, concatenation of decontextualized anecdotes, and framing of the vocabulary of social justice as gibberish are strategically geared towards eliciting a collective sense of *revulsion*. In this way, the *Corriere* article repackages the tropes of "woke" militancy and illiberal campuses by now established in public discourse in the US to reaffirm American culture as a place of extremes and, by extension, Italian culture as a rational environment free of the madness of "wokeism" and its puritanical vocabulary. Like a 2023 article in the liberal/progressive newspaper *La Stampa*, aptly titled "Tu woke fa' l'americano" (after Renato Carosone's 1956 song), which quoted neoconservatives including John Gray and Tyler Cower to bemoan European nations' naïve acceptance of this new instantiation of American cultural hegemony (Pizzati n. pag.), "Un'italiana a New York" implores its readers to keep their defenses high.

As an Italian scholar of American studies educated at MA level in Italy and at PhD level in the UK (Elisa), and as a scholar of American studies raised between Italy and the US by Italian academics at US universities before studying in the UK and working in UK HE (Rachele), we are especially interested in this instantiation of the free speech debate and the different rhetorical purposes it serves. I, Rachele, was profoundly shaped by my otherwise liberal parents' view of American education as limited by a political correctness that put student comfort ahead of knowledge. Their incitements to me, throughout my childhood in the 1990s, to *non essere così Americana*, like their Italian friends' amusement at American students' supposed inability to take a joke, long shaded my understanding of the place and value of social justice issues, and their appropriateness in the context of academic letters. Though this is but an anecdote, it is illustrative, like the *Corriere* article, of the kinds of ascriptions and extrapolations of meaning, and critical reflections on or affirmations of particular national myths, to which an exported discourse such as "political correctness" or "wokeness," beginning with the very export of the English word itself, lend themselves.

And so we return to our contributor Nicola Paladin's account of the tension between Italian editors' and fascist censors' competing ideas about the place and function of American letters in Italian culture: as a tool in acculturating the public into a particular understanding of great literature, versus an opportunity to import a carefully delimited image of America consonant with the regime's vision of a modern Italian nation poised for the future. This of course is not to directly compare fascist Italy's construction of America to bolster its own national project with the country's elaboration in the 2020s of America's so-called free speech crisis, but to contextualize the export of America's anti-woke "discourse" within a broader history of Italian appropriations and reformulations of "America," and of the concepts of freedom, free expression, and dialogue as mediated by American letters, in order to reflect on what American Studies scholars outside of the US generally and in Italy specifically might add to the ongoing discourse around the reality, nature, and extent of a free speech in freefall.

Conclusion

In this Introduction we have advanced a structural analysis of the American culture wars to contextualize a free speech discourse characterized by a core set of recurring narrative formulae cut through by variations in tone, style, and underlying logic that in the aggregate produce quite different accounts of the source and ramifications of their subject of alarm. And we write these last paragraphs in the wake of the latest illustration of the politics of equivalence: the report by *Reuters/The Nation* that the Biden presidential campaign plans to respond to the attempted assassination of Donald Trump, and to Republican politicians' claims that the shooter was inspired by Democrats' hate speech, by switching from "verbally attacking Trump" to "draw[ing] on [Biden]'s history of condemning all sorts of political violence including his sharp criticism of the 'disorder' created by campus protests over the Israel-Gaza conflict" (Heer n. pag.).

We argue that the zeal with which US politicians, media outlets, and pundits across the political spectrum have condemned social justice activists, which has been more vehement than the criticism of book bans, censorial legislation, or violence of police officers breaking up campus protests, is emblematic of the underlying function of the term "woke." That is, to buttress high status groups against threats to their position, stymie the consciousness-raising effects of online discourse, and reduce universities to producers of uncritical neoliberal subjects. From this perspective, the defense of Christian values, free enterprise, tradition, national pride, due process, liberal debate, and so on enlisted to both criticize social justice initiatives and DEI and justify the curtailing of school curricula are ancillary to what is essentially a circling of the wagons of those who benefit from the structure of American society as it stands – a group that includes both self-proclaimed white supremacists and advocates of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all. To attempt to debunk their individual arguments is but to contribute to and legitimize their broader project.

The contributors to this issue thus argue that at a time when *actual* authoritarian parties are gaining influence globally ("The Global State of Democracy Report 2023" 1, 7), and hate crimes in the US against those

with protected characteristics are on the rise (Nakamura n. pag.; Tynes 17-18; “Report to the Nation” n. pag.), remaining focused on the collective impact of the rhetorical strategies, vocabulary, imagery, and constellations of values enlisted by free speech alarmists is especially vital. So, too, is distinguishing between the different strands and permutations of this discourse, and its material manifestations across the different arenas in which American letters circulate, including outside the bounds of the nation itself.

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US Book Banning as Racialized Political Strategy

National Narratives, Public Pedagogy and the Fostering of a Tug-of-Values War

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that racialized political narratives articulated by US politicians are strategic, as well as potent forms of public pedagogy. In this instance, public pedagogy is defined as education in the public square, instead of in a traditional classroom setting. Such public pedagogical narratives are conceptualized here as designed to achieve yet another goal: demonstrating to large numbers of people that the political party in question aligns with the otherwise covert racialized values of those would-be constituents. My contention is that the current book-banning campaign in the US has been spawned, at least in part, by a powerful national narrative purposefully constructed to attract the votes of the citizenry targeted by this example of strategic political propaganda. Also, this paper will explore how nonpoliticians can use narrative tactics as public pedagogy to thwart biased political narratives. An historical analysis of race, politics, and religion comprises the methodology for this work, along with desk-top theory-building and an examination of recent book-banning research in the US. This paper deconstructs the concept of racialized political narratives to further reveal the complex conceptualizations that undergird this strategy, such as politics and privilege, Christian nationalism, and an idea I have labeled a racialized US values infrastructure (Becnel 2024). My argument is that white superiority and black

inferiority are values that were inscribed in the country's legal, institutional, and social infrastructure during the Slavery Era and largely remain in place today. Those racialized conceptualizations are contended here to have animated the choice of topic – book banning – for recent political campaigns dominated by cleverly-crafted narratives.

KEYWORDS

Book banning, Racialized narratives, Racialized legal practices, Public pedagogy, Political narratives, European superiority

Introduction

In *How We Win the Civil War* (2024), US political commentator Steve Phillips argues that the contemporary crisis in American politics is rooted in the nation's history of racial conflict: “We are up against opponents,” he writes, “who are waging an unrelenting, centuries-long war in defense of their cherished belief that America should be a white nation” (xxii). Phillips's bold assertion of racialized nationhood echoes religion scholar Robert P. Jones's articulation, in *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy* (2023), of the “Doctrine of Discovery” – the theological narrative conceived by religious leaders in the mid-1400s to justify Europeans' domination of other entities as a God-informed right based on the “superiority” of their race, culture, and religion. This form of messaging in the centuries since has worked to establish clear caste distinctions among the citizenry based on race and sexuality – black versus white, heterosexual versus LGBTQ+ – in the US, and still shapes today's political narratives.

In what follows, I draw on Phillips's and Jones's arguments to analyze the racialized political narratives utilized by book-banning campaigns in the US, which reflect a belief in white supremacy and, therefore, both rely on and exploit the existence of a voter base that supports this type of messaging. My focus is on racialized book banning specifically – that is, campaigns to target books on the basis of their engagement with issues of race – though my contention throughout is that white supremacist values in fact underlie book challenging across the board. This is to say that although the books banned in US libraries and classrooms in this

current wave have been targeted for engaging with topics other than race (according to PEN America, 26 percent of books banned during the last six months of 2022 centered on LGBTQ+ themes or identities, compared to the 30 percent that dealt with race, racism, and characters of color), the impetus behind their targeting can be traced back to the Doctrine of Discovery that has its roots in a white supremacist logic.

I begin by examining how the narratives of white supremacy that underpin book bans are entangled with complex societal structures, including American values infrastructure and public pedagogy, Democrat-versus-Republican politics and power, white Christian nationalism and morality. This analysis provides a means to better understand why racialized book banning in the US is occurring in its current forms and what strategic counter narratives might be mobilized to challenge them. Secondly, I use frame-semantics literature to deconstruct the art – or science – of political messaging to re-conceptualize current debates about controversial books as a strategic, racialized form of public pedagogy for political gain, such as the passing of book-banning legislation at the state level. That legislation is designed by conservative political majorities to support, and sometimes even in response to, local conservative grassroots advocacy to ban certain categories of books, particularly covering race, racism, American history, and LGBTQ+ topics (see Meehan and Friedman; Meehan et al.). In some states, conservative legislators' collaboration with grassroots activists to foment a book-banning movement via the tools of law-making and news-media messaging forms part of a calculated strategy for voter recruitment.

Religion and the Emergence of an American Values Infrastructure

The Doctrine of Discovery imagined and reimagined by papal authorities throughout the fifteenth century involved grand political and theological storytelling to support Europeans' God-given entitlement to colonize the new worlds they "discovered," and to rule over the indigenous people who in fact already inhabited those so-called new worlds. The Doctrine was bolstered by the principle that monarchs were divinely ordained – chosen

by God and therefore exercise authority in accordance with God's rules (Figgis 3; see Newcomb 51; Jones 14) and by the extension of the Church's sovereignty beyond spiritual matters (Newcomb ix). The latter was a direct consequence of the former: as entitled by divine right to their subjects' obedience, Monarchs were accountable to God, not man, and thus required the Church to theologially codify their laws. Such codification came in the form of papal edicts or doctrine, the first of which, *Dum Diversas* (1452), justified the expansion of the Portuguese Empire by framing inhabitants of the lands in its sights as "enemies of Christ wheresoever placed," and granted it the right to "invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens [Muslims] and pagans," seize "the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all moveable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them," and "reduce their persons to perpetual slavery" (qtd. in Jones 15). A later papal edict issued in May 1493 asserting Spain's ownership of the indigenous American land "discovered" by Christopher Columbus ensured, in turn, that the Church, and "especially the Catholic faith and the Christian religion," would "be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread" throughout the Americas (16).

Dum Diversas transformed the practices and customs of imperialism into officially sanctioned doctrine and law throughout much of the world (15). And as Steven T. Newcomb explains, Christian doctrines continued to exert a "clear and unambiguous" formative influence on US "property law, nationhood, and federal Indian law in the early nineteenth century" (ix). "Court decisions bound US law to the world of Christendom and Christian imperialism" in a process that was "n[either] hidden or mysterious, nor [...] conspiracy among judges and priests" but rather "a long-range planning for the takeover of a continent and a hemisphere. It was the theory that guided colonial practices" (ix). Originally a drastic remedy for converting "barbarous" citizens to Christianity to serve a ruling caste comprised of royalty and religious leaders, the legacy of this rationale endured in colonial America to justify slavery even after the Enlightenment. At that time, the rationale took on a belief in natural law that ostensibly followed the laws of nature, reflecting God's intentions for man and for a basic right to freedom, but, too, a natural social *order* in which black slaves were at the very bottom (Barnes 23).

On Thursday, 30 March 2023, more than five-hundred years since *Dum Diversas* was issued, the Vatican released a press bulletin repudiating those edicts that, it acknowledged, encouraged “violence, oppression, social injustice and slavery” and asking forgiveness for “the human weakness and failings of Christ’s disciples in every generation” (Holy See n. pag.). But in line with the co-originator of Critical Race Theory Derrick Bell’s assertion of the permanency of racism (qtd. in Cobb n. pag.), and sociologist Paul Gilroy’s delineation of the US’ foundation in the “racialized reason and white supremacist terror,” as written in his seminal work, *The Black Atlantic*, which characterized the cultural-political formation of slave-trading nations (x), I argue the damage done to millions of people over many generations extends beyond the theft of land, freedom and, at times, life. That history has encompassed, too, the erasure of entire cultures and the construction in their stead of a way of life, a culture of Eurocentric or white privilege, that so far has proven to be enduring. The purposeful messages imbedded in Christian doctrines conceived hundreds of years ago, I argue, cut deep cultural grooves in the social bedrock of colonial America that remain palpable to this day, contributing to the creation of a racialized values infrastructure that continues to shape US politics and culture and that underpins the narratives that support today’s racialized book-banning campaigns.

A notable descendant of the papal edicts’ assertion of Europeans’ superiority over nearly everyone else in the world was the Barbados Slave Codes Act of 1661. While the Doctrine of Discovery and its corresponding theory of the Divine Right of Kings bestowed Europeans with the authority to enslave populations deemed barbarous, the Slave Codes instructed Europeans and colonial Americans on how to deal with those barbarous men and women once they were enslaved. The country where the Codes were first issued, Barbados (The National Archives London, CO 30/2; Handler and Reilly 42-45), became in the ensuing decades Britain’s first openly identified slave society, developing a thriving sugar cane industry reliant on a slave workforce of thousands to meet global demand. During the latter part of the 1660s, the slave law was amended to more clearly enshrine black slaves’ status as commodities and more precisely delineate the justifications for their dehumanizing treatment. In 1668, for instance,

the law *An Act Declaring the Negro-Slaves of this Island, to be Real Estate* was passed in Barbados and published in 1764, along with a collection of slave and other laws from 1643-1762, by a member of the Barbados Assembly, Richard Hall.

The language of and ideological impetus behind Barbados' slave and indentured servant laws came to inform slave legislation in Colonial America. In the 1600s, the Crown sought to grow the nation's wealth by gifting tracts of colonized land to the aristocracy to encourage them to develop business interests there (Sirmans 463). One such aristocrat, Sir John Colleton, an acquaintance and epistolary correspondent of John Locke, was granted land in Barbados together with a proprietary charter in colonial America's state of South Carolina. From his home in Barbados, Colleton assisted Locke in his writing of Carolina's first constitution by sharing with him the language of the Barbados Slave Codes (463). Thus Locke's declaration in the constitution that "Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves" (qtd. in Sirmans 463; Isenberg 43), mirrored Clause 2 of *An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes* (1661), which asserted that "any Negro Man or Woman slave" who "offer[ed] any violence to any Christian [white European]" would "for his and her first offence [...] be severely whipped by the Constable" and "[f]or his second offence [...] be severely whipped [,] his nose slitt [*sic*] [,]" and "some part of his face" "burned [...] with a hot iron" (qtd. in R. Hall 118).¹ The language of both communicated a similar principle of European entitlement to control non-Europeans as that found in the papal edicts of the 1400s. Both documents, in turn, afforded different rights to white indentured servants and black slaves. Namely, white persons could not be slaves and black people and people of color could not be indentured servants; slaves were not attributed "any positive rights [...] whatsoever" (Rugemer 439); and while indentured servitude

¹ Clause 2 of *An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes* was transcribed from an image of the handwritten Old English original 1661 document, made accessible to the author on 22 September 2021 by the National Archives, London. The words 'Negro,' 'Man,' and 'Woman,' are capitalized and 'slitt' is spelled with two 't's'. Commas were also included for clarity since they did not exist in the original document.

had a prescribed timeframe after which servants would be free from their duties, slavery was a life condition that a black slave passed on to their children. These tenets were subsequently introduced into legislation in Maryland, Virginia and eventually in the other American colonies (Sirmans 462).

In *The Origins of Others*, Toni Morrison argues that contesting white supremacy requires identifying what benefits are derived from “creating and sustaining an Other” and warned that it was important to think through the potential social and political consequences of fighting to deprive white America of entitlement (19). Evidence of these benefits can be found across the policies enacted during and after slavery, including the anti-literacy laws that for over a century (1740 to 1867) prohibited black Americans from learning to read or write. Colonial America was in fact one of the only territories in the world to use the legal system to deny people of African descent the right to read a book (Span and Sanya 402). The restrictions applied to both free black people and black slaves, and to those both in the north and in the South (402). And not unlike the current book-banning movement’s targeting of white and other educators who write about, or advocate for teaching, black history, the anti-literacy laws included clauses designed to prevent white Americans and anyone else from educating either black free men or slaves. In 1830, for example, Georgia passed laws that specified white citizens who dared teach black people how to read be fined, publicly beaten, and even imprisoned (27).

While purportedly designed to deny black slaves the skills that might enable them to flee captivity, for example by creating fraudulent documents that could help them to escape (Maddox n. pag.), the broader motive behind them was the recognition that education would render black Americans less pliable, more difficult to discipline, and more likely to resist their enslavement. As Carliss Maddox explains, it was to this threat that Hugh Auld, Frederick Douglass’s owner when he was a child slave, pointed when chastising his wife for having taught the boy to read: “He [Douglass] should know nothing but the will of his master and learn to obey it. As to himself, learning will do him no good, but a great deal of harm, making him disconsolate and unhappy” (qtd. in Maddox n. pag.). Auld’s expressed concern with protecting the young Douglass from “disconsolat[ion] and

unhappin[ess]” (n. pag.) belied a recognition of the potential for books to raise the boy’s consciousness and prompt a desire to rebel against his enslavement. Anti-literacy laws, then, provided white people the benefit of black ignorance – a powerful means for ensuring compliance and, too, for reaffirming whites’ superiority. And contemporary book-banning policies are their direct descendent – an example of the “anti-black racism” that Harvard University’s online “Confronting Anti-Black Racism Resource” describes as a “consistent factor” throughout the history of US education (n. pag.).

Isabel Wilkerson’s concept of “heritability” provides a useful tool for thinking through the logic that links the Doctrine of Discovery, slave codes, anti-literacy laws, and the contemporary book banning discourse. Wilkerson developed the concept to examine how race informs class and caste. Though each of these is determined at birth, caste is distinct in its immutability (103). Black slaves and their children were intended to be owned in perpetuity. That was the permanent caste that they inherited. Wilkerson argues that even though they are no longer enslaved, black Americans have been unable to escape their place at the bottom of a “social hierarchy” (103). This includes the black middle-class, who exist on a lower rung to white society and who she notes, citing Raymond T. Diamond and Robert J. Cottrol, have become “like a group of American untouchables” (qtd. in Wilkerson 106-07). Heritability serves a valuable function for the ruling class. The permanent, inferior status of black Americans across economic classes is offered up to middle- and working-class white Americans as evidence of their superiority over black people and justification for whatever entitlements accompany that white superiority. As the thirty-sixth US president, Lyndon Baines Johnson, famously put it, “If you can convince the lowest white man he’s better than the best colored man, he won’t notice you’re picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he’ll empty his pockets for you” (qtd. in Moyers n. pag.).

This principle, I argue, remains foundational, and is laced throughout the discourse of those campaigning to modify school curricula and edit out those aspects of US history that threaten to undermine the entitlement and superiority historically central to white Americans’ sense of identity. The

othering of black Americans on which twenty-first century conservative political efforts to limit what children read about race is premised, provides a “benefit” of luring white middle- and working-class people into a fantasy of racial superiority. If the real history of American racism is muted, for example, then remedies like the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and diversity policies can be easily eliminated on the grounds that they unfairly favor minorities. Their elimination can then be politically framed as a long-overdue correction that will improve white people’s lives. Granting white working- and middle-class people the power to banish the stories of black people and others in turn serves to reaffirm their entitlement to control how and if black history is taught in schools and thus reinforces their superiority in relation to black America. Book-banning campaigns, then, offer opportunities to display white superiority that is strategically framed to promote social and political advantage.

Political Messaging as Public Pedagogy and Political Strategy

A racialized values infrastructure in America is, I argue, the product of a five-hundred-year narrative and reflects a political strategy carried out as public pedagogical messaging: by which I mean the education of the public by means other than traditional classroom instruction. The Doctrine of Discovery and Barbados Slave Codes of 1661 can be considered early examples of public pedagogy since they were not taught in classrooms. What’s more, the behaviors and values that these and ensuing slave laws endorsed became, themselves, harsh instructional tools, cementing the social construction of Europeans’ superiority over non-Europeans and providing the justification, and indeed precedent, for subsequent acts of violence and oppression.

Book-banning campaigns follow a similar logic but are distinct from earlier descendants of the Slave Codes in their replacement of overtly anti-Black rhetoric with one constructed in opposition to “wokeness:” a term that while rooted in the Black Liberation Movements of the twentieth and early twenty-first century, has come to index, since the late 2010s, any social or political position perceived to be liberal. Identifying “wokeness”

as the target enables campaigners to obscure the racist and discriminatory impetus for their attack on the freedom to write, and be read, of those who have been cast as the Other. This is an example of framing, which conservative politicians and local advocacy groups have used in the news media and on social media to garner public support for this issue. Linguist and cognitive scientist George Lakoff, who is known for his work on political discourse, describes the concept of framing as creating “mental structures that shape the way we see the world” (xi). Framing, I argue here, is a way of purposefully establishing a perspective to direct how a group acts and reacts in their environment and, indeed, to render these behaviors predictable, and even formulaic. It is a form of epistemic manipulation whose aim is to either change how we process knowledge and thus our understanding of the world or reinforce our existing beliefs about what we know – or think we know – about it. Framing, therefore, forms the basis of all political discourse. As George Lakoff notes in his analysis of political frames’ impact on public policy:

You can’t see or hear frames. They are part of what we cognitive scientists call the “cognitive unconscious” – structures in our brains that we cannot consciously access, but know by their consequences. What we call “common sense” is made up of unconscious, automatic, effortless inferences that follow from our unconscious frames. (xii)

This characterization of framing provides a valuable lens through which to understand the US racialized values system as the product of a concatenation of strategic efforts to turn white entitlement into “common sense.” More specifically, it enables us to identify the nation’s racialized values system as the result of political narratives that over centuries have been embedded into the unconscious frames of the populace and polity in service to two unyielding ideas: white superiority and black inferiority. Put differently, political framing has rendered racism both an American value and a kind of background noise – a principle that both structures and underlies culture and politics in innumerable ways, in turn enabling political messaging that can be shielded with a wink or well-placed denial.

This framing has served to cognitively structure what Edward J. Clemmer and J. Gregory Payne term the nation's "public political mind" – that is, the public's "affective cognitions," or absorption, of rhetorical messaging. Clemmer and Payne's application of this concept to analyze the rhetorical messaging used in George H.W. Bush's 1988 presidential campaign (29) is especially useful for our purposes as it allows us to establish certain continuities between the racialized narratives described thus far and the framing strategies deployed by contemporary book-banning lobbyists. Most notably, the Bush campaign appealed to white conservative Americans by repurposing the racist archetype of the "welfare queen" – a low-income black woman who manipulates the welfare system to get rich – first advanced by journalists in the 1960s and later developed by Reagan while governor of California and US president (Clemmer and Payne 37; Dudas 188-89). Like Reagan, Bush deployed the welfare queen phenomenon to frame conservative white voters as the primary taxpayers in America, and thus the most harmed by the welfare queen phenomenon – a strategy that relied, too, on conflating poverty, criminal behavior, and blackness. As described by political scientist Jeffrey R. Dudas, Reagan-era rhetorical messaging reliant on highly specific and racialized pejorative imagery became the "ideological cornerstones of political practice" for Republicans in the US (158).

The book-banning narratives advanced by conservative American politicians in the 2010s and 2020s are premised on these same tropes. And they succeed, I argue, due to their adherence to longstanding protective rhetorical patterns that have historically served to buttress the well-being of white America as deserving priority over that of other, "lesser," populations deemed in need of subjugating and disciplining. More specifically, twenty-first century book-banning campaigns rely on a rhetorical messaging centered around the figure of the innocent white child who must be shielded from exposure to the history of racism in America lest it make them feel bad about themselves. The vivid image of the damaged white child is embedded into what Clemmer and Payne term the "popular imagination" (30) to warn against the dangers of allowing books about race in schools. And like the image of the "welfare queen," its success relies on the construction of racism as common sense provides a

powerful tool for those who seek social and political dominance over those society has cast as Other.

Conservative bills premised on racialized frames of white entitlement, the disenfranchisement of black history, and the decoupling of discussions of racism or its history from the discussion or recognition of black people's experience have all served to strategically reinforce grassroots book-banning campaigns. Take, for instance, the "Stop WOKE [Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees] Act," originally known as the "Individual Freedom Act." Enacted in Florida on July 1, 2022, the act provides that "subjecting individuals to specified concepts under certain circumstances constitutes discrimination based on race, color, sex, or national origin" (Florida House n. pag.). It stipulates that the Education Department "revis[e] requirements for required instruction on the history of African Americans [and] prepare and offer certain standards and curriculum," authorizes it "to seek input from a specified organization for certain purposes," and "prohibits instructional materials reviewers from recommending instructional materials that contain any matter *that contradicts certain principles*; requires DOE to review school district professional development systems for compliance with certain provisions of law" (n. pag.; emphasis added). I have italicized the phrase "that contradicts certain principles" as it exemplifies the encoded messaging of anti-"woke" legislation and, in particular, the legislation's reliance on the assumed indisputability of white entitlement. In deliberately leaving unspecified what these "certain principles" are, the legislation at once obscures its racist premise while affirming those principles as self-evident in much the same way as the determinative values of white supremacy heralded in the papal bulls of the Doctrine of Discovery and the Slave Codes. Both of the legislation's titles – "Stop WOKE" and "Individual Freedom" – are also examples of politicized framing. Positing the circumscription of what is taught in schools as a matter of protecting individual freedoms and child safeguarding serves to obscure its true, racialized, intent and render it palatable for public consumption.

The application of HB 7 by Studies Weekly, a Florida-based supplier of lesson plans for K-6 textbooks, provides an apt example of the real-world consequences of the racialized censorship of history and the resulting

legislation. Responding to Florida's (white) governor, Ron DeSantis's, demand that K-20 textbooks be scrubbed of all references to "contested issues" Studies Weekly radically revised the section on "Responsible Citizens in History." Most notably, it reduced civil rights activist Rosa Parks' arrest for defying the Montgomery, Alabama transit system's segregationist policies and the 382-day-long bus boycott and protests it catalyzed to a cryptic account of generic, unspecified, personal integrity: "Rosa Parks showed courage. One day, she rode the bus. She was told to move to a different seat. She did not. She did what she believed was right" (Gamble n. pag.). Lacking any explanation of why she refused to move or what made this refusal courageous, Parks' story became an abstracted and universally applicable parable about "responsible citizenship" attesting to the merits of doing the "right" thing.

Stuart Hall's concepts of "encoding" and "decoding," which he first introduced in a paper presented to the Council of Europe Colloquy on "Training in the Critical Reading of Televisual Language" (1973), help in understanding counter-narratives developed for television news media and social media that eventually forced Studies Weekly to disavow the revisions as errors, and, more generally, to challenge racialized book-banning and censorship campaigns. Hall described "encoding" as the production of a message, which relies on various modes of framing to convey a particular meaning and "decoding" as the interpretative process, or translation, of the encoded message. The development of meaning, he argued, requires both encoders and decoders. But in direct contradiction of the established conceptualization in mass communication theory of the period of television viewers as passive consumers of content, Hall identified the *decoder*, not the *encoder*, as the most important actor in the development of meaning (Procter 1-2). This is because decoders have the capacity to produce conflicting translations of the encoded messages they are expected to understand, accept, and adhere to – which is to say that there can be no guarantee that the meaning produced as an outcome for the decoder will align with the meaning intended by the encoder (Procter 1-2).

In the case of Studies Weekly, decoders who accepted HB 7's framing of censorship likely decoded the encoded message in the textbook supplier's lesson plans (that is, Rosa Parks' bio) as a statement about a courageous

woman called Rosa Parks who did not budge or as a welcome corrective to the longstanding burdening of white children with unjustified guilt and shame. Those who decoded HB 7 as infringing on free speech in turn likely decoded the Studies Weekly bio as a near-senseless string of words with dubious pedagogical value, a worrying falsification of the US' racialized history, or both. This was the framing, too, of the public-pedagogical campaign launched by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Legal Defense Fund, and the national law firm Ballard Spahr to accompany their lawsuit against the state of Florida. Notably, the statement of opposition to HB 7 on the ACLU website reflects a strategy of counter-narration that frames the act's self-proclaimed protection of students' individual freedom as an assault on their civil rights:

The lawsuit argues the Stop W.O.K.E. Act violates the First and Fourteenth Amendments by imposing viewpoint-based restrictions on instructors and students in higher education that are vague and discriminatory. The complaint also argues that the law violates the Equal Protection Clause because it was enacted with a racially discriminatory purpose and will have a disparate impact on Black educators and students. (ACLU, "*Pernell v. Lamb*: Free Speech" n. pag.)

Through the dissemination, across multiple media, of similar encoded messages that framed HB 7 as restricting freedom of expression and the textbook revisions as censorship, ACLU generated enough pressure to oblige the Studies Weekly to issue a press statement that uncannily resembled the Vatican's apology for the violence condoned by the papal edicts of the 1400s: "We find the omission or altering of historical facts to be abhorrent and do not defend it" (n. pag.). In contrast to the latter, however, Studies Weekly rationalized its actions as the result of misguided decoding. They had had, "like every publisher [,] to decipher how to comply with [the Department of Education's] legislation," and the edits were merely "unapproved changes" made by "individuals [who] severely overreacted in their interpretation of HB 7" and that were published due to "errors in the quality assurance process" (Gamble n. pag.). In this way, the erasure of a key event in the history of black American civil rights was

reframed as an unfortunate byproduct of an eager effort to comply with the law, and its racist intent was thus neutralized.

The ACLU's successful campaign against the Studies Weekly revisions and, to a lesser extent, the rhetorical strategies the latter in turn deployed to divest its actions of racist connotations or intent are examples of public pedagogy. My contention is that television news, video podcasts, and other social media locations in which to frame messages are all public pedagogical outlets to educate the public and are the main tools these days for conveying framed political narratives.

Conclusion

Thus far, I have outlined the historical evolution of the strength of white superiority and black inferiority in the US to help explain how a racialized book-banning campaign could possibly surface in a modern society. My work has also focused on how political messaging has led to new oppressive book-banning and history-altering laws and practices. But there are anti-book-banning groups that have formed to provide access to black literature. Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has become involved with three organizations – Visit Philadelphia, the Free Library of Philadelphia, and Little Free Library – to create an initiative called Little Free(dom) Library that provides access to approximately 1,500 banned books authored by black writers. A Temple University director of community outreach explains the racialized circumstances that black writers face:

Sharing black history is an offense to some white people, so they have state laws that censor books that share historical events in America when it was legal for more than 400 years to oppress and abuse African Americans. [...] Some officials continue to ban literature by black authors because of the color of their skin; oppressive gatekeepers feel that black literary works aren't on par with mainstream white authors and audiences. It was wrong then and it's wrong now to censor that artistry. (qtd. in Baum n. pag.)

Providing locations to purchase banned books by black authors is one way of fighting against a book-banning movement. But I return to George Lakoff and his discussions of *reframing* as a means of “changing the way the public sees the world” and, in turn, establish a new basis for common sense (xii). Rather than slogans, reframing involves the developing of ideas that appeal to what people already unconsciously believe or value. The next task is to make those beliefs or values conscious and then repeat the message over and over again until it is normalized in everyday public discourse (xiii). My concern, of course, is that such a strategy is not designed to change existing racialized unconscious beliefs. However, this is not to say that it cannot be done. There is potential in fact to transform the American public political mind by constructing “hot” affective cognitions, as described by Clemmer and Payne, of strategic counternarratives of vivid imagery to produce powerful new archetypes capable of neutralizing racialized political messaging (29). These are topics that require more analysis than I can provide here. But it is a beginning for a study that I intend to pursue and upon which I invite others to build.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

Social justice activist, scholar, and author Barbara Becnel has more than twenty years of experience working for prison reform in the state of California, while writing nine award-winning non-fiction books on street gang culture, as well as over one-hundred academic journal, magazine, and newspaper articles.

From leading an international media campaign aimed at preventing the judicial execution of reformed Crips gang co-founder and Nobel Peace Prize nominee Stanley Williams, to organizing an ‘Occupy San Quentin’ rally attended by hundreds in front of the state prison that houses California’s death chamber, she has often shown inspiring leadership and tenacity. Recently, she was appointed by the Scottish Parliament to an Expert Steering Group for tackling racial harassment in Scottish higher education. She also participated in a Steering Group focusing on the development of an anti-racist curriculum for Scotland’s universities and colleges.

Building on her MSc in Social Justice and Community Action (With Distinction) earned from the University of Edinburgh, Barbara returned there to earn a PhD in social justice and criminology. Her thesis explored how death row became a symbol of heroism for America’s street-gang generation. Integral to this was her collaboration with three former-though-imprisoned South Central Los Angeles gang members who were co-researchers on the project.

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Mice, Slurs and Freedom Fries

American Tensions between Teaching the Literary Canon and the Need for a National Narrative in an Era of Book Bans

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ABSTRACT

In the last few years, the phenomenon of policing what should be read and how has occupied a prominent space in the American public debate. Books by authors like Toni Morrison and Art Spiegelman have been erased from school curricula and removed from public libraries. An effort at policing literature is also recognizable on the progressive side: works like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* have been removed from school curricula due to the repeated use of the N-word. These events can be identified as being part of a struggle about building a comforting national American narrative. The article deals with the intersecting dynamics of policing narratives and the strife to build a reassuring (in all the different, respective acceptations of the word) national American narrative, focusing on how different incarnations of censorship (sometimes involving the same works) concern the building of an unsettling counterpublic seeking to subvert the publicly accepted discourse about race, gender and sexual orientation.

KEYWORDS

Book Bans, American Myth, Toni Morrison, Huckleberry Finn, Trauma

It's called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it.
(George Carlin)

In the American cultural landscape, the years that followed the election of Donald Trump have heightened tensions that had been simmering in the country but have reached the surface as a consequence of the recent political polarization. Literature and education are areas in which these dynamics are particularly evident. In the years following 2016, language and literature have reached the eye of a complex cultural storm, where the question of which texts are available to which audiences and in which spaces, from school classes to libraries, has developed in different directions. This issue, generally labeled in the press as “book banning,” has for the most part been carried out in legislative form in states with a Republican majority. Understandably, the removal of texts from public institutions such as libraries and schools has attracted the media’s attention, especially because it also involved influential, award-winning works such as *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison and *Maus* (1986) by Art Spiegelman (see Garcia). These bans have been sparked by a largely recognized attempt on the part of Republican politicians, most notably but not exclusively Governors Ron DeSantis in Florida and Glenn Youngkin in Virginia, to influence the way American history and culture are taught, particularly as it pertains to the oppression endured by minorities. However, more progressive efforts to control the circulation of culture have followed similar dynamics. While usually presented by those in power (politically, entrepreneurially, culturally) as a way of protecting vulnerable portions of society from harmful or offensive content, shielding people from specific texts has the effect of limiting the knowledge those people can access. The commonalities between conservative and liberal interventions aimed at regimenting literary texts and their circulation are most evident in the fact that they have, at times, targeted the same works, including classics such as Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) (see O’ Kane; Flood).

As a consequence, the phenomenon of policing what should be read and how, through either banning or editing, has come to occupy a prominent role in the American public debate.

In what follows, I analyze the dynamics underlying the challenges to some hyper-canonized texts, aimed at either removing them from the school libraries of several American states or editing them to appease modern sensibilities. By discussing points of contact and contrast among these books, I argue that, despite being moved by largely different motives, censorial attempts share the effect of reducing young readers' possibility to access important parts of American culture. I present efforts to police canonical works of fiction as a manifestation of the increasing tension between the need to protect the dominant, reassuring American national narrative, and to subvert it to restore the voice of marginalized groups. In so doing, I highlight two inseparable aspects of hyper-canonical literary texts: that they have historically been key in shaping the image that America has – and wants to project – of itself, and that the elements upholding their canonization are often the same as those that currently upset progressive audiences.

Myth and Fantasy

While it may be considered as overly broad, a key concept for my argument is the notion that storytelling has played and continues to play a crucial role in shaping American identity. The American myth, the American dream, and American exceptionalism are closely interrelated notions, with a common denominator, I argue, in the act of narrating. In their history of American literature, Richard Ruland and Malcom Bradbury remark that the original idea of America “first came into existence out of writing” (4), thus out of a form of narration. Analogously, Kurt Andersen argues that myth and fantasy have been key in determining how America has seen itself since the very beginning. Andersen observes:

from the start, our ultra-individualism was attached to epic dreams, sometimes epic fantasies – every American one of God's chosen people building a custom-made utopia, each of us free to reinvent himself by imagination and will. In America those more exciting parts of the Enlightenment idea have swamped the sober, rational, empirical parts.

Little by little for centuries, then more and more and faster and faster during the last half-century, Americans have given ourselves over to all kinds of magical thinking, anything-goes relativism, and belief in fanciful explanation, small and large fantasies that console or thrill or terrify us. (5)

These “small and large fantasies” have contributed to shaping the myth of American exceptionalism, a self-projected image that is particularly consequential for the understanding of the darkest pages of American history. Lauren Berlant draws a similar connection when she argues that “nations provoke fantasy” (1) and that the forms of “the experience of identity [...] are always ‘collective’ and political” (2-3). Berlant defines the intersection of the juridical, territorial, genetic, linguistic and experiential elements which make up America as the “National Symbolic” (5), a “national fantasy” shaped through “the images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate through personal/collective consciousness” (5). Culture and literature contribute to consolidating such fantasies but, as Jonathan Arac remarks,

literary culture and national culture may be seriously at odds, and they harmonize only when the nation is given a meaning more psychological than religious or political. This psychological understanding of the nation, in turn, has granted America the spiritual legitimacy of literature, while subordinating literature to an America so conceived as to disarm political criticism. (17)

When literature and history intertwine to shape fantasies around national identity, these fantasies (and, indirectly, fictional and historical narratives) often contribute to a utopian, mythical idea of America, one that is difficult, when not dangerous, to challenge with counter-narratives.¹

¹ Hodgson observes that “much of the history Americans are taught in schools [...] is not so very different from Parson Weems’s discredited but beloved story about George Washington and his father’s cherry tree. That is no accident. Americans have felt so proud of their nation’s achievements that they have wanted to socialize their children, and their

The myth surrounding the idea of America carries unavoidable political implications. As John Archer suggests, “[b]y their very nature, myths are frequently, and in large measure, political [...] the crucial role of myth is often to sustain the relationship between the citizen, the broader culture, and social and political institutions” (8). To effectively fulfil their role, therefore, myths must be optimistic. This is particularly true in the case of the American Dream, a myth that has not been available to everybody in the same way. Godfrey Hodgson points to the idea of America being “morally exceptional” (10) as an important aspect of American exceptionalism, but disparities in rights and opportunities have pervaded American history, particularly in relation to race. These disparities can be exemplified, according to Toni Morrison, by the continuing overlooking of the influence of Africans and African Americans on American history, literature and culture. Morrison explains:

For some time now I have been thinking about the validity or vulnerability of a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as “knowledge.” This knowledge holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States. It assumes that this presence – which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture – has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture’s literature. Moreover, such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular “Americanness” that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence. (141)

The close relationship between knowledge as described by Morrison and a particular idea of Americanness lies at the core of the American national myth. In this context, any narrative that challenges established knowledge

immigrants’ children, with that national pride” (14).

risks being received as a threat to the perceived essence of American identity.

By and large, this comforting vision of American identity was developed to exclude – and by excluding – any group that was considered as “other,” not only based on race and ethnicity but also, among other things, gender and sexual orientation. Unsurprisingly, then, in the American educational system the need for a comforting national narrative aligns closely with the implied audience that such narrative aims to comfort: Americans who belong to the hegemonic group. The act of teaching the history of slavery and African American racial oppression, for instance, is usually challenged with the argument that such topics would make students uncomfortable (Kernahan) – that is, white students. These attacks, which are closely tied to the issue of book banning, are part and parcel of the fight against Critical Race Theory (CRT), a phrase that originated in legal studies in the 1970s but in recent years was coopted by conservative politicians and broadcasters to loosely refer to contents in the school syllabus that look critically at race history and culture in America.² John Guillory acknowledges that in the American cultural system “the far larger role belongs to the school itself, which regulates access to literary production by regulating access to literacy [...] The literary syllabus is the institutional form by means of which this knowledge is disseminated” (ix). It is logical, then, to infer that the “active exclusion” (9) of certain texts and subjects severely affects the dissemination of knowledge. In some American states, these texts and subjects once characterized as ‘other’ are not taught as “non-canonical” (9) but removed altogether from the syllabus. The presence, perspective and experience of non-normative groups are perceived as problematic and, therefore, challenged by political institutions. In service of “an imaginary cultural unity never actually coincident with the [American] culture” itself (38), the level of comfort of students of color, or of queer students, does not seem to be regarded with as much concern.

Literature arguably has the ability to express the struggle of human experience even more powerfully than history books. Henry Louis Gates

² See “Basic Tenets of Critical race Theory.” <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/critical-race-theory/Basic-tenets-of-critical-race-theory>>.

writes that “the study of the humanities is the study of the possibilities of human life in culture” (*Loose Canons* 114). Particularly when it comes to the history of minorities, storytelling can have the collateral but crucial effect of creating a deeper, more personal form of understanding which undoubtedly plays a role in the educational sphere: “the teaching of literature is the teaching of values; not inherently, no, but contingently, yes” (35). Simply put, art and literature provide the empathy that could be lacking in a more “denatured and dry” (Fishkin, “Teaching Mark Twain” 34) historical display of the facts: according to Shelley Fisher Fishkin, with history “you can keep your distance from it if you choose [...] Novelists, like surgeons, cut straight to the heart. But unlike surgeons, they don’t sew up the wound. They leave it open to heal or fester, depending on the septic level of the reader’s own environment” (34). Works of fiction can portray facts from a different perspective and even act as living documents of their time. Hence, they can provide a counter-narrative to the generally accepted, comforting national myth. Based on this premise, I discuss some literary works that have shaped what Michael Warner calls “counterpublics” (56) in tension with the main national narrative and are, therefore, banned from school libraries in several American states (see Meehan et al.).

Obscenity: *Beloved* and *Maus*

According to PEN America, Toni Morrison was one of the most banned writers of the 2022/23 school year. PEN’s list includes more than one work by the Nobel Prize-winning author, but it was the removal from school curricula of her 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved* that caused the most uproar in the press. The book has been banned in Kentucky (see “Joint Letter”) and in 2021 was at the center of a controversy in Virginia, where then-gubernatorial candidate Glenn Youngkin put out an ad featuring a mother who had tried to get *Beloved* banned from her son’s high school. The accusations made toward Morrison’s novel have to do with the presence of explicit subjects such as violence, racism and sexuality. But *Beloved* is primarily a haunting portrayal of the experience and trauma of slavery: KC Davis called it “an overt and passionate quest to fill a gap

neglected by historians, to record the everyday lives of the ‘disremembered and unaccounted for’” (274), while Pamela Barnett described it as being “haunted by history, memory, and a specter that embodies both” (418). The act of offering a counter-narrative to dominant representations of slavery is therefore perceived as more subversive than any explicit representation of sexual acts.

Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus*, which recounts the author’s father’s experiences during the Holocaust, shares with *Beloved* the portrayal of a traumatic historical event from an individual and family perspective. Both works deal with the themes of memory and trauma, and with the personal repercussions of historical collective tragedies. *Maus* and *Beloved* also both portray the killing of a child: in Morrison’s novel, Sethe cuts her daughter’s throat to spare her the horrors of slavery, while Spiegelman’s aunt poisons his older brother to save him from Auschwitz. *Maus* has been banned by a county school board in Tennessee (see Andrew) and, surprisingly, obscenity is among the reasons provided for its removal. The accusation relies on one image, in which Spiegelman portrays his mother from overhead while she lays in the tub after having committed suicide, the outline of her breasts visible. That this detail, in a work about the Holocaust, is the element deemed disturbing seems at the very least paradoxical.

The fact that Morrison’s and Spiegelman’s texts portray some of the greatest horrors in human history but are removed from curricula and public libraries for trivial reasons, such as nudity and language (see Waxman), suggests that the content of these works is what is actually deemed inappropriate to be taught in schools. In the case of *Beloved*, those who favor the ban are more likely disturbed by Morrison’s harsh portrayal of slavery than by the inclusion of sexual content.³ Scholar Emily Knox told *Time* that, when it comes to the history of race in America and specifically the trauma of slavery, Morrison’s books “do not sugarcoat or use euphemisms. And that is what people actually have trouble with” (qtd. in Waxman). The novel embodies the phenomenon that Cathy Caruth described as “the oscillation

³ Barnett observes that “Morrison revises the conventional slave narrative by insisting on the primacy of sexual assault over other experiences of brutality. *Beloved* embodies the recurrent experience of a past that the community of women in the novel wants to forget” (420).

between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7). Spiegelman similarly focuses on personal and collective forms of trauma: his father’s experience at Auschwitz, his own second-degree trauma – what Marianne Hirsch calls “post-memory” (8) – as the child of a camp survivor, and the familial tragedy of his mother’s suicide. As is often the case with print censorship, obscenity reveals itself a convenient excuse to police the access to uncomfortable books: the pretense of protecting children is a powerful alibi that can easily shut down any pushback.

Touching the Classics

One striking aspect of the current wave of book banning is that it also involves texts that have been part of the syllabus for decades without stirring controversy. The two most prominent examples are Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Both books belong to the canon of American literature and are among what Chinua Achebe has called “permanent literature” (15). In recent years, however, their presence in school curricula has been challenged. A school district in Minnesota, for example, removed them from the curriculum to shield students from the language deployed by the authors, specifically the repeated use of the N-word. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been challenged in different states, including Mississippi, California and Virginia (see Phillips). Set in 1930s Alabama, Lee’s novel includes offensive language, mostly racial slurs. Since its publication in 1960, the book has been featured in school curricula as a text with an anti-racist message. The fact that the plot revolves around children has furthered its popularity, as it allows for a discussion of complex, painful and violent subjects (and the teachings that should originate from them) to be more easily accessible to young readers. Apart from the 1962 film version, the novel’s relevance to present-day America has been confirmed by Aaron Sorkin’s 2018 stage adaptation. However, when he brought the play back on Broadway in 2021, after the interruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, Sorkin made some changes to the script, prompted by the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the Black Lives Matter protests (see Ford).

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has encountered a similar destiny. Many of the school districts that banned *To Kill a Mockingbird* banned Twain's novel as well due to the presence of racial slurs (see Lock). However, Jonathan Arac describes the novel as an allegorical link between literature and "fundamental national historical experiences" (18) and a preeminent example of "hypercanonization" (14), that is, a work of literature that monopolizes the American cultural landscape and that expresses at the same time tradition and innovation (24-25).⁴ *Huckleberry Finn* is largely considered the most prominent American novel about slavery in the syllabus, and its content has long been considered anti-racist. It would be easy to interpret the motivations behind the removal of these two books as a desire to avoid any mention of slavery in the classroom, but the situation is more nuanced. In fact, the teaching of both *Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* has often been challenged by progressives and people of color, mostly due to the repeated use of the N-word and the perceived effects its reading would have in the classroom (see Balingit).

Fishkin, a preeminent Twain scholar, has defended the inclusion of the N-word as an important part of the learning experience:

Sanitizing the language which aided and abetted white America's denial of the humanity of black Americans from the nation's founding doesn't change that history [...] Facing that history in all its offensiveness is crucial to understanding it and transcending it, and literature is uniquely positioned to help us do that. ("Take the N-Word out of *Huck Finn*?" n. pag.)

Several literary critics also challenged the representation of black characters in these texts. Ralph Ellison, who famously discussed the representation of Jim in his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," argued that

Twain fitted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition, and it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim's dignity and

⁴ Ako-Adjei evokes a similar idea when she talks about the "immutable place on school curriculums" of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (185).

human capacity – and Twain’s complexity – emerge. Yet it is his source in this same tradition which creates that ambivalence between his identification as an adult and parent and his “boyish” naïveté, and which by contrast makes Huck, with his street-sparrow sophistication, seem more adult. (92)

His perspective is echoed, among others, by Elaine and Henry Mensh, who explain:

Huck, a poor boy from a then-maligned ethnic group, could – with his quick wits, daring improvisations, and ceaseless searching – rise quickly to become America’s child. But Jim – with traits that invert Huck’s – could never transcend in a reader’s imagination the ‘place’ that, at the time Huck Finn was published, the society had preordained for African-American adults. (105)

The complex repercussions of the representation of black characters also affect *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Naa Baako Ako-Adjei argues that the popularity of Lee’s novel is due to the possibility for white readers to identify with the white savior trope, most notably in the scene in which black people applaud Atticus Finch in the courtroom (185). Sorkin chose not to include this scene in his play because

that is probably the favorite scene of zero people who aren’t white [...] Those people in the balcony should be rioting in the streets [...] but instead they’re standing up, docile, in respect and gratitude to the white liberal [...] That’s the liberal fantasy, that oppressed people will look at me and say, “Thank you for being one of the good ones.” (“The Scene Sorkin” 1:55-2:06)

Dynamics such as this seem to influence parents’ decisions to challenge the teaching of these novels more than the mere presence of racial slurs: the word “fantasy” used by Sorkin is indicative of what is really challenged by the introduction of non-hegemonic perspectives in national narratives. The comforting, resolved feeling that Lee’s courtroom scene brings to a narrative about race (a subject hardly resolved now, and certainly not resolved in the

early 1960s) trivializes a painful aspect of American history and culture to offer instead a reassuring fantasy. To challenge and deconstruct the tropes that feed and perpetuate this fantasy seems more substantial than to challenge the presence of slurs: the N-word can be repeatedly found in *Beloved* as well, just like the swastika can be found in *Maus*. It is difficult to imagine, however, that a black or Jewish parent would ask for Morrison's or Spiegelman's works not to be taught in schools.

When it comes to *Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the issue of banning is a double-edged sword. The subject of language, for instance, can be interpreted as both a legitimate concern by black parents and a pretext, much like the violence and nudity in *Beloved* and *Maus*, by conservative parties who would rather avoid an uncomfortable discussion of race. The fact that these two classics, penned by white authors, are narrated from the point of view of children is also relevant: on the one hand, it helps present events as traumatic as slavery and segregation to young students, since the narrator's innocent gaze works as a filter and shields readers from the story's most disturbing aspects. On the other hand, the adoption of an inevitably simpler and reassuring tone makes it more difficult to convey nuance: everything is right or wrong, black or white. This dichotomy lends itself, in Ako-Adjei's words, to the construction of the myth of white innocence (198). Ako-Adjei argues that, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, racism is outlined in a distinctly Manichean way, mostly through the grotesque portrayal of the character of Bob Ewell. Lee's novel, she explains,

gives voice to the collective and peculiar American delusion that racism in the United States wasn't really about the systematic use of terror, or the threat of terror, on black people in order to maintain white supremacy, but that racism and racist violence, were perpetrated by a negligible number of Americans who were not dissimilar from Bob Ewell. (185)

The fact that Lee shows racism as something to be found in monsters rather than in ordinary people makes her, to use Achebe's famous definition, a "purveyor of comforting myths" (16). Conversely, Fishkin identifies *Huckleberry Finn*'s greatness in the fact that

it requires teachers and students to examine what's wrong with a society that gives the most admirable person in it – the slave Jim – the same rights as pigs and chickens. This forces readers to question why so many people who thought of themselves as “good” – religious, upstanding, well-meaning – supported the indefensible status quo as long as they did. (“Take the N-Word out of *Huck Finn*?” n. pag.)

The implications of reading the novel from this perspective are arguably much more subversive.

As Guillory observed, “canonicity is not a property of the work itself but of its transmission, its relation to other works in a collocation of works – the syllabus in its institutional locus, the school” (55). The transmission and canonization of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is thus largely due, as Ako-Adjei argues, to its “sentimentalized account of America’s racist history” (200) and more palatable portrayal of the segregated South, to which its child narrator has certainly further contributed.⁵ The foregrounding of a romanticized narrative of youth over racial violence in the era of slavery has similarly rooted the success of Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* in the possibility that it offered to consolidate what Eve Sedgwick defines as the white reader’s “privilege of unknowing” (23). To deconstruct all the elements that participate in these dynamics means to challenge the hyper-canonization of these works and the national myth they have come to symbolize.⁶

Don’t Mention It. No, Really

In American culture, the concept of a national myth is always political. Hodgson writes that “exceptionalism, it would seem, is not so much a

⁵ Ako-Adjei highlights this dynamic observing that “a book on racism in the segregated South seems more concerned with a sentimental recounting of childhood than it does with a realistic account of racism during Jim Crow” (197).

⁶ In her book *Was Huck Black?*, Fishkin argues the importance of including “the role previously neglected African-American voices played in shaping Mark Twain’s art in *Huckleberry Finn*. Given that book’s centrality in our culture, the points I make implicitly illuminate, as well, how African-American voices have shaped our sense of what is distinctively ‘American’ about American literature” (9).

disinterested view of the American patriotism [...] American history has been encrusted with accretions of self-congratulatory myth” (14). Starting from the 1980s, he argues, “a new insistence that America be admired, almost worshiped” (xii) arose, and an object of worship cannot, by definition, be questioned. In a country in which school boards are an expression of political power, then, to challenge a reassuring national myth in the classroom is in and of itself somewhat heretical. If popular consciousness is identified, as argued by Bruce Kuklick, through an analysis of popular writing such as editorials, best sellers, pulp fiction, political speeches (443), then the current challenges to the teaching of some canonical works of literature must be understood as a manifestation of the tension between the inevitable evolution of American culture and society and the unwillingness to deconstruct the comforting narrative built around American history and culture. The latter has generated a political rhetoric where the protection (or the appearance of protection) of American values is the primary factor dominating the debate on national identity. Attempts to influence what is taught in schools, particularly in flagrant examples such as Governor DeSantis in Florida (the state at the top of every book-ban list), include a performative aspect that is evocative of the “Freedom Fries” movement of the early 2000s (Edwards 270). This time, instead of putting a popular dish in the middle of a foreign policy controversy, popular culture in general is at the core of the debate: one of the quintessentially American characters, Mickey Mouse, suddenly found himself in the middle of a policy controversy when Disney opposed the Don’t Say Gay bill sponsored by DeSantis. The legislation had the intention of doing with gender identity and sexual orientation something similar to what has been done in matters of race, in which, as Morrison noted, “silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse” (142). The strategy seems to be to avoid any discussion of uncomfortable subjects. And it is expanding to affect any entity deemed a threat to the national myth.

In the American broader cultural landscape, it’s impossible not to notice that the attempts to influence the circulation of language and knowledge have gone beyond the school system. Classic films have been called into question. Novels have undergone a process of editing to take out language

considered offensive to contemporary sensibilities. What happened with Roald Dahl's books is particularly significant. These texts, aimed at children, have been reworked by Puffin in order to remove terms such as "fat" (Alter and Harris), an effort justified with the argument that children would then repeat the offensive term (a similar reason was presented in the case of the N-word in Twain and Lee) (see Lock). Other parts of Dahl's books were "updated," for instance erasing gender references about the Oompa-Loompas in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), and turning mothers and fathers into "parents" in order to accommodate a more inclusive notion of family and gender roles (Cumming et al.).

Works by authors like Dahl inevitably include elements considered inappropriate by today's standards.⁷ This is why, for example, in the 1970s Dahl himself changed the portrayal of the Oompa-Loompas to erase its racist implications, making them an imaginary people from Oompaland instead of pygmies from Africa (Baxter 542). There is a difference, however, between an author deciding to update their own work and a third party making the decision – one that in the case of publishers is usually the result of a business strategy. It is also worth noticing that there is a difference between Puffin's editing of Dahl's books and Sorkin's adaptation of Lee's work. An adaptation presupposes a new reading of a text, often in the light of contemporary historical events. It is something different to operate a change on the source text in order to make it more palatable for modern sensibilities. To limit access to an influential text expressing outdated values, be it with editing or by banning it from the syllabus, has cultural repercussions as readers are kept from seeing it for what it is: a document.⁸ And documents can, and should, be read and taught with context, perspective and awareness.

That classics are now at the center of political controversies exposes the relationship between the teaching of art and literature and the notion of

⁷ Another example is represented by the anti-Semitic tropes in *The Witches* (1983): see Dubno.

⁸ Lionel Trilling, the critic perhaps most responsible for the hypercanonization of *Huckleberry Finn*, described Twain's novel as "one of the central documents of American culture" (101).

national identity. The socio-cultural influence of literature is not mutually exclusive with its aesthetic value. In any national culture, the canon tells a people who they are, by both portraying the values and themes that shaped them through history and excluding other, contrasting values and topics. Gates describes the canon as “the ‘essence’ of tradition, indeed, as the marrow of tradition: the connection between the texts of the canon is meant to reveal the tradition’s inherent, or veiled, logic, its internal rationale” (*Loose Canons* 32). He also highlights the connection between a literary education and Americanness: “universal education in this country was justified by the argument that schooling made good citizens, good American citizens; and when American literature started to be taught in our schools, part of the aim was to show what it was to be an American” (34). Hence, the intersection of literature, fantasy and nationalism in American culture is quite powerful.

Expanding and Multiplying

In 1993, Allen Carey-Webb observed that

since no text by a black – or any other minority group member for that matter – has yet to make it to the list of most frequently taught works, *Huckleberry Finn* has a peculiar visibility. The novel remains the only one in the common ‘canon’ to treat slavery, to represent a black dialect, and to have a significant role for an African American character. (23)

While this is changing, the special prominence of Twain’s novel has had enduring consequences as, for a long time, its troubling representation of slavery and Black people has been the only one acknowledged. Granted that the syllabus has gotten more diverse in the past few decades, Carey-Webb’s argument is still relevant. Firstly, the fact that literature is under attack from the institutions reminds us of the importance of diversity in the canon. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, myths and traditions are as slowly shaped as they are deconstructed. A few years of a more diverse syllabus are not enough to balance the cultural impact of Jim being for

such a long time the only African American character with a significant role within the standards of the American canon.

The predominant whiteness of canonical authors grants tropes like the “white savior” a bigger impact – what Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls “the danger of the single story.”⁹ In school curricula, the problem is not as much the importance given to Lee’s writing about segregation, as the absence, for instance, of James Baldwin’s. In challenging the American myth, the solution is not to remove controversial texts from the canon, but to use them as an opportunity to analyze American culture and history. Fishkin has devoted a significant amount of her writing on *Huckleberry Finn* to the implications of teaching a novel that occupies such a complicated position in American literature:

If we lived in a world in which racism had been eliminated generations before, teaching *Huck Finn* would be a piece of cake. Unfortunately that’s not the world we live in. The difficulties we have teaching this book reflect the difficulties we continue to confront in our classrooms and our nation. As educators, it is incumbent upon us to teach our students to decode irony, to understand history, and to be repulsed by racism and bigotry wherever they find it. (“Teaching Mark Twain” 34)

Huckleberry Finn can be a masterpiece *and* have a complex history when it comes to race.¹⁰ The analysis of both those aspects feels necessary.

When it comes to updating the role of canonical literature in the curriculum, the solution seems twofold. On the one hand, it is necessary to keep expanding the number of readings and, consequently, of narrative voices. On the other, according to Morrison, it is important to expand the act of reading itself:

⁹ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg>>.

¹⁰ Stephen Railton highlights the importance of the contradictions of Twain’s novel: “since it is racist as well as about racism, in itself it is part of the problem. The vexed aptness of *Huck Finn* is that it makes the problem immediate, personal, emotionally compelling. At its worst, it insinuates the legacy of racism. At its best, though, it convinces us – the way novels convince, through our feelings – how much we stand to gain by trying to solve the problem” (393).

If we supplement our reading of *Huckleberry Finn*, expand it – release it from its clutch of sentimental nostrums about lighting out to the territory, river gods, and the fundamental innocence of Americanness – to incorporate its contestatory, combative critique of antebellum America, it seems to be another, fuller novel. It becomes a more beautifully complicated work that sheds much light on some of the problems it has accumulated through traditional readings too shy to linger over the implications of the Africanist presence at its center. We understand that, at a certain level, the critique of class and race is there, although disguised or enhanced by humor and naiveté. (156)

The possibility of a multiplicity of interpretations in a single text should be considered one of the features of great literature. In Twain's novel, Elaine and Harry Mensh acknowledge, aside from the traditional, infantilizing interpretation of Jim, another reading “which holds that Jim adopts a survival strategy devised by the slaves: deliberately mirroring the stereotypes in white minds, he feigns the traits attributed to him” (13). This interpretation has been recently taken on by Percival Everett, whose novel *James* (2024) offers a rewriting of Twain's classic precisely along these lines. It is easy to speculate whether Everett was prompted to write *James* by the banning efforts of these recent years, particularly considering the crucial significance he gives to language and reading in the book. Regardless, in his review of Everett's novel in *The New York Times*, Dwight Garner writes that *James* “should come bundled with Twain's novel” (“Huck Finn Is a Masterpiece”). A paired reading of the two books would certainly provide an enriched perspective on one of the most significant topoi in America's consciousness.

Instead, national myths rely on the dominance of a single narrative and, thus, of a single interpretation. Hodgson defines “dangerous” the unrealistic features of exceptionalism, as they lead to “hubristic assumptions of the American destiny” (16). While he develops his argument with reference to narratives about the Iraq war as an example of actions that shape the future, the efforts to ban or alter literary texts highlights the linkages between the past and the present: a distorted understanding of American history cannot but cause a distorted understanding of the country's identity. As Brian Finney remarks about *Beloved*, it “is about a haunting that won't go away. Only by returning to the past can the present lead on to the future”

(25). A return to the past can lead anywhere only through an analysis of its nuances and contradictions, not clinging to an idealized, pre-established, comforting interpretation.

John Alberti observes that “in the end, the controversy over *Huckleberry Finn* or any other text is not finally an interpretive argument, but a debate over what education should be” (934). I would bring his point one step forward, by drawing attention to the (convenient?) absence of one, fundamental factor from both sides of the book-banning debate: teaching. Every argument about the harm that readers (especially young readers) would encounter in the interaction with a work of literature that includes unsettling themes seems to neglect the idea that students are not left to deal with the text by themselves. The mediation provided by the teacher, their role in expanding the knowledge and the nuances present in literary works is crucial: Fishkin writes that *Huckleberry Finn* must be presented “in a larger historical and literary context – one that includes the history of American racism and the literary productions of African American writers” (“Teaching Mark Twain” 32). With a novel like this, she argues,

a philosophy of ‘the text and nothing but the text’ is irresponsible and counterproductive when it comes to bringing this book into today’s classroom. If we want to teach *Huck Finn*, we have to be willing to teach other works before it and alongside it. Am I saying that if we want to teach this text responsibly, we have to redo the entire American literature syllabus in secondary school and college classrooms? Yes. Sometimes a work of art can be a lens through which a moment in history is refracted with unprecedented clarity and brilliance. (“The Challenge of Teaching” 190)

However, in the book ban debates, teachers’ essential role as described by Fishkin seems to be non-existent. But there is always a filter inserted between young readers and texts, whether animated by political, economic or academic interests.¹¹ Teachers providing context and explanations,

¹¹ Gates remarks that “to speak of a curriculum untouched by political concerns is to

expanding the reading of the text and bringing it beyond the comfort zone seem unacknowledged, possibly due to the subversive implications of their work.

Ako-Adjei remarks that the American school system is unprepared to question controversial works like Lee's and the resulting "construction of white innocence" (198). However, either as counter-narratives, documents or both, I would argue that literary works represent an essential tool not only to understand American culture but also American history. Book banning efforts animated by reactionary intents have – rightfully so – received a lot of attention in the public debate. However, the removal of texts for more progressive or politically correct reasons also represents a rejection of the possibilities of teaching, and therefore in a way a rejection of history. Even a text filled with racist tropes has an educating function if it is taught while addressing its contingent historical context. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for instance, was considered for a long time a positive narrative about blackness, an interpretation that is impossible to embrace today. Rather than removing texts from the curriculum when their conventional perception changes for the worse, however, I would argue that it is preferable to teach them along with the controversial dynamics that surrounded their writing and earlier interpretations. This helps challenge cultural assumptions, create more informed readers – hence, more informed *citizens*. Complexity isn't a vice.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

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imagine – as no one does – that education could take place in a vacuum. Stated simply, the thrust of the pieces gathered here is this: Ours is a late-twentieth-century world profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class, and gender. And the only way to transcend those divisions – to forge, for once, a civic culture that respects both differences and commonalities – is through education that seeks to comprehend the diversity of human culture" (*Loose Canons* xv).

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The “Ed Scare” and the Ritualistic Burning of Black Texts

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ABSTRACT

This text employs the lens of Afropessimism to articulate the relationship between the Ed Scare and the legacies of anti-Black activity that continue to structure and govern the social world. The Ed Scare, primarily understood as the culture war combat taking place across K-12 and ivory tower arenas, is described here as that which attempts to resolve the ontological nightmare that “wokeness” presents to the non-Black unconscious. Wokeness, rooted in Black parrhesian defiance, heightens White and non-Black fears of the imagined ontological ascension of Blacks and the undermining of White-led value systems. The Scare emerges to confront and slay this “nightmare” (the Black) whose pursuits in the social arena are “unbecoming” of one who has been deemed Humanity’s slave, and whose negation is a prerequisite for the psychic stability of the nation. The Scare emerges from the longstanding tradition of nourishing non-Black life through a call for non-Blacks to forget not their civic and ontological duty (participation in public anti-Black activity). To quell the imagined threat that Blacks are believed to currently and always represent, a consuming fire has once again been kindled in the depths of the collective non-Black world. And what the collective mob desires is to “burn” Blackness in the world of the symbolic and assault Blackness in the realm of the concrete.

KEYWORDS

Ed Scare, Afropessimism, Book burning

That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth – and indeed, no church – can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable.

(James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*)

Nothing more thoroughly reveals the actual intentions of this country, domestically and globally, than the ferocity of the repression, the storm of fire and blood which the Panthers have been forced to undergo merely for declaring themselves as men – men who want “land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace.”

(James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*)

In the summer of 1835, the American Anti-Slavery Society (AAS) embarked on a campaign to flood the South with abolitionist literature in what came to be known as the “Great Postal Campaign of 1835” (Stephens 80; see Wyatt Brown; Mercieca). The federal response to this effort was decisive. President Andrew Jackson used his annual address that year to lecture on what he called the “painful excitement produced in the South by attempts to circulate through the mails inflammatory appeals addressed to the passions of the slaves” (A. Jackson n. pag.). Seeking to mute “the misguided persons who have engaged in these unconstitutional and wicked attempts,” Jackson declared it would be “proper for Congress” to pass “such a law as will prohibit, under severe penalties, the circulation in the Southern States, through the mail, of incendiary publications intended to instigate the slaves to insurrection” (n. pag.). Local and state-level factions also responded with great force. “Within weeks [...] enraged citizens of Georgia, Mississippi, Virginia, and South Carolina had passed laws and resolutions outlawing the newspapers” (Mercieca 52). Many in the South also took to “closing black schools [...] and imprisoning and often lynching anyone suspected of accepting the newspapers” (52). During that summer, Charlestonians formed a mob and stole bags of newly arrived abolitionist literature from the post office, made effigies of abolitionists, and set fire to abolitionist literature in front of an assembly of thousands of Southern White spectators

(Wyatt-Brown 230). Similar literature burnings took place in the decades following. In 1860, vigilantes from Mississippi, Texas, and South Carolina responded to the John Brown-led revolt known as the Harpers Ferry raid by “confiscat[ing] all books considered ‘anti-Southern’ and destroy[ing] them in ceremonial book burning” (Oates 321; see Reynolds).

While this unfolded, plantation owners clamped down on their slaves and threatened to “whip or hang any Negro who even *looked* rebellious” (Oates 321) while Alabama moved to protect “impressionable” young minds from abolitionist teachings (321). Then, a vigilance committee was formed in Palestine, Texas, to oversee “a public burning of ‘incendiary books’” that opposed slavery (Reynolds 20) while Blacks, and Whites suspected of being abolitionists, were also murdered.¹ In 1892, a White mob burned down the Memphis office of *The Free Speech*, a newspaper known for its owner, Ida B. Wells’, vocal opposition to lynching (see Wells; Mobley). In 1898, the Wilmington Massacre and Coup d’état saw White supremacists set ablaze *The Daily Record*, a Black-owned newspaper and a central voice for Black perspectives in the region (see Zucchini). And during the early part of the Second World War, US military officers, intelligence agents, and federal agencies responded to the Black-owned newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier*’s Double V Campaign, which sought to expose the hypocrisy of America’s simultaneous condemnation of the Nazis and apartheid-like treatment of Black subjects, by censoring Black newspapers, banning Black officers from US bases, and intimidating Black journalists “into softening their criticism of American racism” (Carroll 98).

As this brief selection of events confirms, efforts to censor the printed word – and by extension the subjects who are the source and recipients of that word – remain a distinguishing feature of the Black experience. One might argue that the historical record of literary censorship contains

¹ I capitalize the words “Black” and “White” throughout this piece in line with Ibram X. Kendi’s assertion of the importance of distinguishing between Black and White as social categories and black and white as colors, and to heed Eve L. Ewing’s call to make Whiteness visible and foreground the better to interrogate the apparatus that sustains it (n. pag.). This text will, at times, deviate from this intentional capitalization while adhering to the casing used in the direct quoting of other scholars.

a directory of diverse characters and an index of discourses (religion, sexuality, etc.). However, the continuous reprisals and cyclical nature of episodic anti-Black assaults and condemnation of the efforts of Blacks to communicate (whether in print or speech) in the public square are part of a long tradition of obstructing Black entrance into what W.E.B. Du Bois termed the “kingdom of culture” (3).² These antagonistic efforts acutely echo the history of what “is done to make an example of this bad nigger so there won’t be any more like him” (Baldwin, “Interview” 5:32-5:37).

In this article, I analyze contemporary efforts to curtail the teaching of Black writing and Black history in school curricula and beyond as inextricable from the broader history of attempts to circumscribe if not actually eradicate Black American liberatory consciousness. Interrogating the ramifications of these efforts requires us to straddle the space between the concrete and the metaphorical and, I want to argue, to grapple with the connotations of fire that the expression “book burning” implies. It requires us to address the violence that underlies efforts to censor texts that envisage the removal and dismantling of hegemonic and ontological structures and that seek to unsettle the coloniality of being and to decenter Europe and European conceptions of humanity and knowledge systems (see Wynter). It is in this context, too, that the circumscription of Black literature, education, and thought today must be understood.

I enlist the image of flames and redirect the metaphorical language advanced by James Baldwin in the epigraph of this essay to examine the dystopian and conservative domain of what I call *arsonic* violence evident in the nationwide campaign, since the early 2000s, to restrict or prohibit the instruction of race in schools and universities known as the “Ed Scare” (*PEN America* n. pag.). I am specifically concerned with enlisting concepts from Afropessimist thought to explore the racialized, and, as I will show, *racist*, subtext of the logic that governs the effort to control and redirect schoolhouse discussions about race. My term “*arsonic* violence,” a moniker

² Du Bois desired for Blacks to be “co-worker[s] in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation” (3). He strived for Blacks to be part of civil society, to be included fully in the American fabric, to exist not as slave but as a citizen. He wanted Human recognition and access to the political economy.

for a particular mode of antiblackness, aims to capture the recurring and iterative circumscription of Black American voices – a continuous reprisal that dates back to the antebellum era. Here I am building on the Afropessimist scholarship of Jared Sexton, who identifies the violence befalling Black flesh as part of Modernity’s “opening gesture” (“Racial Profiling” 198). Afropessimism understands violence against Blacks to be not contingent on a transgressive act but, rather, to be a manifestation that is part of “repetition compulsion” (Wilderson, *Red, White & Black* 55). Unlike the Foucauldian notion of disciplinary activity that is dependent on deeds and elaborates on non-racialized dualistic formations (Foucault 199), Afropessimist understandings highlight the persistent prosecution and punishment of dark-skinned subjects by the regime of the State/Empire and social collective whose penalty/punitive torture is rooted in their mere appearance (as Black) to the rest of the world and a dualistic formation that elaborates on one’s status as non-White and non-Human.³ James explains, “In racialized societies such as the United States, the plague of criminality, deviancy, immorality, and corruption is embodied in the black because both sexual and social pathology are branded by skin color” (26). The activity of “civil society reenacts gratuitous violence on the Black” so “that civil society might know itself as the domain of Humans – generation after generation” (26). It is the violence of reifying non-Black Human renewal and self-assurance.

“*Arsonic* violence,” then, connotes the untamed, gratuitous, violence that underpins book bans and the censorship of Black bodies, and to which Baldwin’s descriptors, the “fire of human cruelty” and “storm of fire and blood,” quoted in the epigraph of this article, allude. The term also highlights the direct relationship between contemporary assaults on the discussion and instruction of race and the nation’s violent history of book

³ See, for example, Wilderson’s articulation of Blackness as “always-already criminalized in the collective unconscious” (qtd. in Ball 09:27). See, too, Joy James’s critique of the omission of race and colonialism from conceptualization of panoptical mechanisms of dominance (24), and Brady Thomas Heiner’s excavation of the unacknowledged influence of the writings of the Black Panther Party, with whose leaders Foucault spent time in the early 1970s, on the latter’s work – most notably, the fact that Foucault never cited any of them.

burning, drawing attention to the anti-Black sadism (Ajari, “Irrepressible” 4) undergirding such activity. In turn, it provides a tool for squarely confronting the predatory nature of this fundamentally anti-Black nation that is America.

I locate myself, in part, within the Black prophetic tradition which embraces “parrhesia” – that “fearless speech” in the face of injustice so often displayed by Ida B. Wells and Malcolm X (West 142). One may even label my communicative methods an *arsonic* effort designed to counter the fire of the White-led world and that echoes the assertive rhetoric of the Black press of the 1940s. My style is also inspired by scholars of the Black Arts era such as Amiri Baraka and James Baldwin. Throughout, I will also refer back to the critical work of Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson, who spearhead the advancement of pessimism within the Black Radical tradition. Section One introduces the Afropessimist conceptual framework on which I draw. Section Two applies these concepts to the Ed Scare.

Ontology, Blackness-Slaveness, Civil Society, and the Libidinal Economy

Afropessimism maintains that Blacks exist within a specific ontological context, and are subjects of ontological violence, both of which are the direct consequence of the rise of a modernity that removed the African from the field of relationality and cast them into the abyss of Blackness/slaveness – a condition that Orlando Patterson describes as “the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons” (Patterson 13). The slave is deemed “a socially dead person” who is “culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors” (5). Wilderson in turn describes Blackness as an “ontological condition” and argues that Blackness and slaveness are “coterminous” products of a modernity that recast the African as the ultimate “other” against which the modern concept of the human could be defined (*Red, White & Black* 18; “End of Redemption” n. pag.). Afropessimism attends to this “ontological debasement of Blacks, the negation of their humanity, and their reduction to the status of tools, instruments” (Ajari, “Irrepressible” 37; see Wilderson *Red, White & Black*).

If we understand the slave as someone who exists in what Fanon

called the “zone of nonbeing” (*Black/White* 2) we can begin to recognize the continuities between the construction of Blackness-slaveness at the dawn of modernity and the status of Black people today. The condition of Blackness-slaveness did not conclude with the end of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, decolonization, or the passing of laws against racial discrimination. To quote Sithole, “the structural position of being black in the anti-black world is to be a slave” (25). And the slave, Wilderson contends, “is not a laborer but an anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity” (*Red, White & Black* 11). This is what Baldwin intimated in his assertion that “One knew where one was by knowing where the negro was” (qtd. in CBC 21:33).

Civil society is the realm of the social in which Humanity plays. It is, in my view, the “kingdom of culture.” It is where those to whom the social contract applies reside.⁴ We must wrestle with the notion that American civil society is “predicated on black death” (Wilderson, “Gramsci” 234). We must conclude that “racism or anti-Blackness are pillars of both white states and white civil societies” and therefore “Black liberation requires breaking free from these structures” (Ajari, *Darkening Blackness* 9). This suggests that there is something about civil psychic health and symbolic meaning that is dependent on or that requires the concrete and metaphorical reinforcement of existing hierarchies. The marker of Blackness functions to meet the needs of civil society – including defining its very structure, determining its borders, and justifying its exclusionary practices.

This brings us to the libidinal economy, and to my key concepts: *arsonic* violence and Black texts. The libidinal economy “underwrites” the political economy, and encapsulates “the fantasies of murderous hatred and unlimited destruction” underlying the violent anti-Black activities of non-Black society (Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism” n. pag.).⁵ This pertains to anti-Black fantasies and the role of those fantasies in the psychic, political, and economic life of society, wherein “the Black imago” is positioned as a “phobogenic object” that “saturates the collective

⁴ I am drawing, here, on the link Dancy and Edwards make between the “social contract” (of philosophy) and the composition of civil society (31).

⁵ Black and non-Black bodies do participate in the fantasy and engage in the destruction of those who have been made Black.

unconscious” (Wilderson, “Ruse of Analogy” 56). The phobogenic object called the “Negro” is “a stimulus to anxiety” (Fanon *Black/White* 117) that according to Fanon exposes the White’s phobia toward Black flesh and that according to Ajari reveals the “life-affirming” “anti-Black sadism” that structures White society (“Irrepressible” 4). To quote Wilderson, hostility toward Black beings is best understood not as “a form of discrimination, but as a form of psychic health and well-being to the rest of the world” (qtd. in Ball 10:25). Identifying police brutality as an allegory for the broader disciplining of Black flesh, he notes: “policing – policing Blackness – is what keeps everyone else sane” (qtd. in Ball 10:10). This was the (not so subtle) subtext of DeSantis’s unprovoked proclamation in December 2023, in response to the conflict between Hamas and Israel, that “If someone was firing missiles from the Bahamas into, like, Fort Lauderdale, we would never accept that. We would flatten. Anything that happened, it would be done like literally within 12 hours, it would be done” (qtd. in Gancarski n. pag.). DeSantis’s Manicheanism, in which the settler/colonial paints the native or Black as perversion, is evident (see Fanon, *Wretched*). But more importantly, what is evident is DeSantis’s *need*, on an intimate level, for the vilified Blackened figure to be “real.” This allows us to conceptualize White conservative figures’ portrayal of Black flesh, Black literary texts, and Black imaginaries as the encroaching manifestations of the (Black) “phobic object” that is not an aberration but, rather, ubiquitous. I am referring to the “excitement” that anti-Blackness inspires, and that I argue, following the logic of Afropessimist thought such as Ajari’s, spurs the White to act. This is tantamount to saying that the White *must* participate in this *arsonic* performance that tramples on the Black object. “The white” Ajari writes, “must ensure that the black is nothing, in order to attain the certainty that he is everything” (“Irrepressible” 4). And this psychic gravitation is the impetus behind the concrete efforts to have books removed from school curricula and libraries, and the incendiary hate speech and suppressive efforts that stalk teachers, university professors, and writers, especially those of color, on social media platforms and conservative activist websites.

My use of the term “Black text” in turn derives from Ronald L. Jackson’s articulation of “the body [as] socially understood and treated as

a discursive text that is read by interactants” (2) and Hartman’s position that “the fungibility of the commodity” – which is to say, the way that commodification effectively transforms the object (or objectified human) into an extension of their owner’s desires – renders “the captive body [of the slave] an abstract and empty vessel, vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values” (*Scenes of Subjection* 21). This coincides with Fanon’s statement that the Black “is woven” by the White [Le Blanc] “out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” (*Black/White* 84). The “Black” is the dark phobic and fungible canvas onto which the White supremacist narrative can script the horrors it invents to justify their violence.⁶ To quote Marriott, “the racialized body is made up of several racist fantasies or ‘myths’; each myth is contiguous to the others in so far as they fuse a Manichean logic” (*Whither Fanon* 67). In this way, Black bodies become, on a metaphorical level, at once a text onto which White culture inscribes signification, and, specifically, the threat of danger, and a text whose elimination or elision “rescues” White culture from that same, imagined, danger. Useful, too, is Marriott’s articulation of “epidermalization,” in which “the body forms an imaginary surface veiled (or disfigured) by hostilities” and a “historical-racial schema” is imposed on a corporeal one (*Whither Fanon* 67).

I use “Black text,” too, to index the slippage between the perceived destabilizing effects of Black texts and the destabilizing effects of those Black people who write and consume them, and to highlight the interdependence of the history of emancipation and the writing and literature that fueled it, which is literalized in the shared fate of both runaway slaves and abolitionist literature. In their reassertion of the sovereignty of Black bodies, Black texts cannot but invite their own destruction. The term *arsonic* violence registers this slippage between Black text and Black body. I in turn also employ the term “fugitive text” to underscore the efforts to systematically thwart the Black textual imagination and, in particular, the imagining of being elsewhere. But I also wish to evoke the fugitivity and desire for

⁶ Fanon introduces the Black phobic object in *Black Skin, White Masks*. The conception of fungibility and accumulation in relation to Blackened bodies originates in the work of Hortense Spillers and Saidiya V. Hartman.

sovereignty within Frederick Douglass' revelation that he was a criminal for rebuking the White world's regulative hand and stealing himself back by running away from formal enslavement (310).

I argue, following Afropessimists such as Sexton and Wilderson, that what we might term the ontological engineers, benefactors, and allies of White culture respond to the threat that Black texts pose to the culture's psychic coherence by treating Blacks as metaphorical slaves in revolt. Black texts, in multiple forms, are also "guilty" in advance, because the very endeavor to "integrate," if that is the aim of that particular text, cannot be done without questioning the "why" behind the desire to integrate what was lost/ what has yet to be integrated. When I speak of *arsonic* violence and fugitive texts, then, I am pointing to the specific connotations of book banning and censorship of Black writing, knowledge, and abolitionist calls for an "ontological revolution" (Warren 171), in the context of a long and violent history. These terms throw into vivid relief the parallels between the treatment of books as dangerous influences to be torched lest they destroy the hegemonic order, and the immolation of Black subjects. To speak of fugitive texts is to speak of the radical capacity of literature to threaten and destabilize an entire network of relations that upholds our supposedly post-racial society.

Hartman informs us that "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (*Lose Your Mother* 6). This highlights the "tragic continuities in antebellum and postbellum constitutions of blackness" (*Scenes of Subjection* 7). Can we not consider that this calculus and arithmetic are part of "the fire"? The fact remains that both the Blacks of yesteryear and the Blacks of the present day exist within the same consequences, in the same ontological location, under the same regime of violence. In connection with our theme, the Ed Scare is part of the continuity, part of "the afterlife of slavery" that includes "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration..." (*Lose Your Mother* 6).

The Ed Scare

As the events described at the outset of this piece attest, the phenomena of censorship via the banning or burning of books or the vehement opposition against Black beings in such a form in the US is cyclical in nature – consistently rooted in the perception that Blacks have disrupted the ontological and anthropological order, threatened the stability of civil society via “Black infiltration,” or violated White Manichean logic. The Ed Scare that began in 2021 is the most recent iteration of this longstanding tradition, and is characterized by “educational gag orders” passed in many states that “target discussions of race, racism, gender, and American history;” prohibit “divisive” dialogue in grades K-12, spaces of higher education, and the workplace; and work to “ban books that address these topics” (*PEN America* n. pag.). It is a distinctly postmillennial phenomenon, intimately related to the resurgence of the Far Right after the election of Barak Obama in 2008; the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2014 in response to police brutality against Black youth and the broader Prison-Industrial Complex (in which the carceral state’s relationship with Blacks became, once again, a focal point); the election of Donald Trump in 2016; and the resurgence of BLM following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. The lingering currents of discourse at the time concerned the need for social justice, police reform, reparations, and so on, and were swiftly met with the histrionic decrying of DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion), affirmative action policies, and claims of “reverse racism.”⁷ Most notable were White conservatives’ focus on Bell’s “critical race theory” and their intense concern with excising what they refer to as “wokeism” – a word that stems from the expression, “stay woke.”⁸ Coined in the early twentieth century to articulate a heightened level of Black consciousness, adopted in

⁷ A discussion of so-called “reverse racism” against Whites would merit an article in and of itself.

⁸ Some scholars trace the first use of “stay woke” to William “Ramblin” Thomas’s 1928 song, “Sawmill Moan” (see Carter). Its first documented use in print was in William Melvin Kelley’s 1962 New York Times article, “If You’re Woke, You Dig It,” a commentary on White appropriations of Black linguistic style.

the 1960s by Civil Rights activists, and reemployed in the 2010s by the Black Lives Matter movement (Carter n. pag.), the word “woke” in the speeches, sound bites, and social media posts of reactionary politicians and activists in the US and beyond functions as ill-defined pejorative shorthand to portray efforts to redress systemic injustice as irrational, propagandistic, racist towards Whites, anti-American, and a threat to the social order (see Robin). Clark notes that “anti-woke rhetoric” is “an exercise in destructive abstraction” that “uses inference and imprecise language to position Black people” and in some ways other minorities “as Others whose very presence and influence are aberrations in American culture” (1). This reframing of “woke” as a destructive force exemplifies what Leslie Dorrough Smith has termed “chaos rhetoric” – a “type of declension speech,” especially prevalent within the Christian Right, “that seeks to persuade [...] by stressing an imminent threat to a beloved entity” – anything “from children, to liberty, to the nation itself” (5). Chaos rhetoric transforms the teacher who, for example, assigns a book that discusses historical inequalities into an embittered actor who is intent on making “White children” as Chuck Todd articulated “feel ashamed of their race” (“Meet The Press” n. pag.),⁹ and Critical Race Theory, developed by the Black educator and lawyer Derrick Bell to explicate structural racism and now often found in university curricula, into what Chris Rufo called an “existential threat” that “has pervaded every aspect of the federal government” (02:48, 00:07). It mandates that the history of Black slavery be replaced with claims that, for example, “slaves developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit” (Atterbury n. pag.). And, building on Afropessimist thought, I argue that it frames Black texts as necessarily subjective, partisan, inflammatory, and heretical (Isen n. pag.) and the promoters of its contents as necessitating proverbial immolation. In some fashion, this speaks to David Marriott’s description of racial anxiety and fear as stemming from “the intricacies of cultural fantasy [...] abjection, and desire”: the “unconscious fear” that Fanon described in *Black Skin,*

⁹ Anchor Chuck Todd is not agreeing with this assertion. Rather, he is explaining how some stakeholders view discussions on certain social justice-oriented issues in schools.

White Masks is a fear within “Western culture” of “being intruded upon [...] by the black other” (*Haunted Life* 208, 211).

The Ed Scare has manifested itself in a range of different forms. On one level, we find this hyperbolic fright in policies circumscribing what is taught in schools and, in particular, to reframe the history of slavery, emancipation, and desegregation. Thus, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis’s 2022 decision to reject K-12 students access to an African American studies course, which he argued would enable the infiltration of radical thought such as Black Queer theory and what he referred to as “cultural Marxism”¹⁰ into American families – an argument in keeping with that of right-wing White conservatives’ longstanding concern with preserving American family values coded White. Likewise, in 2023, Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders, of Arkansas, signed EO 23-05, “Executive Order to Prohibit Indoctrination and Critical Race Theory in Schools,” which asserted, among other things, that “Critical Race Theory (CRT) is antithetical to the traditional American values of neutrality, equality, and fairness. It emphasizes skin color as a person’s primary characteristic, thereby resurrecting segregationist values, which America has fought so hard to reject” (Sanders n. pag.). In March 2024, DeSantis lauded the fact that “Florida is where DEI goes to die” in the wake of the University of Florida firing all DEI staff (DeSantis, [@RonDeSantis]; see Betts). Elsewhere, he stated with immense satisfaction that Florida is “[w]here woke goes to die” (“Governor DeSantis Delivers Inaugural” n. pag.).

But alongside this material aim of regulating and thwarting revolutionary praxis, the Ed Scare has a symbolic aim: to reaffirm what we might call the right to be unapologetically White via an embrace or reactionary frame that enlists Blackness in order to vivify Whiteness. I think of James Baldwin, who asserted in “Notes for a Hypothetical Novel,” that “the fact of color [...] persists as a problem in American life because it [...] fulfils something in the American personality [...] the Americans in some peculiar way believe or think they need it” (*Price of the Ticket* 242). The project of eliminating critical race theory, or references to slavery, or

¹⁰ See Goldwag, who also lists Ben Shapiro, Jordan Peterson, Tucker Carlson, and Marco Rubio as participating in slander against Marxism.

accounts of lynching, is necessary on a symbolic level: vanquishing the threat of Black violence – interpreted, here, as returning to the safety of the status quo – requires a violent and, indeed, fiery response. The fantasy of torching Blackness pervades White culture but critical flashpoints emerge to assuage rising White libidinal anxiety.

Like the racially-coded “Superpredator Scare”¹¹ of the 1990s that trafficked in the myth of Black male violence to justify the expansion of legislation to try juvenile defendants as adults based on criminologists’ (since-debunked) prediction of an impending surge in “radically impulsive, brutally remorseless [...] teenage boys, who murder, [...] deal deadly drugs” and “join gun-toting gangs” (Bennett, DiIulio, and Walters 27) and the “Birther Movement” (Tumulty n. pag.; Rothman n. pag.) of the early 2000s that sought to delegitimize the nation’s first Black presidential candidate via claims that he was born in Kenya and a “covert” Muslim (Conlon n. pag.), the “Ed Scare” is best understood as perpetrating the fantasy of the Black menace that continually threatens to destabilize White America. It is, in other words, an offspring of a fear of Black emancipation whose purpose is to justify, reinforce, and ultimately quell that fear via the promise of the emendation of schoolbooks and the removal of disloyal or un-American interpretations of the nation’s identity and past. I also want to link this to what Warren calls the “sadistic pleasure principle” which describes the various manifestations of anti-Black violence that have long been “routinized and ritualized” (Warren 2). I’m attempting to tie these libidinal dreams to that which motivates the activity of those who call for the destruction of Black literary/fleshly texts (attacks on literature are truly a method of warfare against the authors of said texts), who desire the destruction and removal of Black books, curriculum, admissions policies, hiring practices, etc.

DeSantis’s maneuvering arouses the libidinal dreams of the collective, tapping into the terror especially saturating the psyches of White ‘victims’ who are already equipped with a prescription for the “Black that plagues” (or so they believe) them.¹² DeSantis and many across the nation promise

¹¹ See “The Superpredator Myth, 25 Years Later” in *EJI* for a brief summary.

¹² Wilderson (*Red, White & Black*) and Sexton (“Afro-Pessimism”) define the libidinal

rescue from “an imagined Black invasion,” and “ensure” that justice for imagined Black offenses will be served by his hand. We might characterize these actions as ensuring the diffusion of the *paradigmatic perfume* of slavery into the social (where the atmospheric conditions are ripe for other forms of anti-Black violence to catch fire).¹³

Baldwin’s explication of the Black experience succinctly summarizes, too, the present turmoil: that for Blacks in America—legal codification remains nonexistent.¹⁴ Baldwin, significantly cited in the literature of Afropessimism,¹⁵ exclaims: “We’re still governed, if that is the word I want, by the slave code. That’s the nature of the crisis. [Y]ou haven’t got to have anything resembling proof to bring any charge whatever against a difficult, bad nigger” (qtd. in Glaude n. pag.). One of the aims of ‘the Scare,’ I argue, is to move directly into the “sentencing phase” for “difficult” Blacks (understood, here to be those Blacks who espouse CRT and anti-White supremacist rhetoric, etc.) and “bad niggers” (whose status as such is predetermined, and effectively encompasses all Blacks. More specifically, the persecution of educational institutions that support DEI initiatives is premised on the treatment of Black texts as *fugitive entities*. In this, it follows the same logic of antebellum legislation such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which punished those who assisted “escaped” Blacks, and of what Kenneth Robert Janken, in his introduction to Walter White’s *Rope & Faggot*, describes as the “civil religion of the ‘Lost Cause,’” which arose in the South as White Southerners “respond[ed] to the overthrow of slavery” (conceived, here, not as Afropessimism defines it, but as chattel and labor) and sought to reframe both the Civil War and “African Americans’ drive for equality” as assaults on the Southern way of life (xxi). Like the slave

economy as the collective unconscious.

¹³ Wilderson argues that “Blackness is a paradigmatic position” that arrived 1,300 years ago – and thus even outside the European Empire and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the people between Cape Town and the Sahara had already been omitted from the Human family by the Arab, Iranian, Moroccan, Jewish, and Chinese worlds (“End of Redemption” n. pag.). This reminds us of a structural reality, a hierarchical formation.

¹⁴ This is articulated in Eddie Glaude Jr.’s Time piece in which an interview between James Baldwin and Ben Chavis is quoted in Eddie Glaude’s text.

¹⁵ See for example Wilderson, *Afropessimism*; Finch.

codes and like the Lost Cause narrative, which the Klan enforced, as McVeigh notes, by curtailing “the range of acceptable behavior for African Americans” and by treating “any type of behavior that did not serve the interests of Klan constituents [...] as a threat to the established order” (McVeigh 73), the Ed Scare understands Blackness to be fugitive in its very essence, and thus assigns to itself the task of constraining it.

The irony, of course, is that DEI support is often, itself, performative, and arguably falls under the umbrella of Derrick Bell’s *interest convergence* – which is to say that conservative legislators are very often campaigning against a mere performance of escape-assistance, and are, in fact, punishing institutions for refusing to *explicitly* defend/uphold the slave code. While seeking to compel the removal of specific texts and the circumscription of specific narratives, the Scare functions more generally as a disciplinary force intended to foreclose even the cogitation of shallow and symbolic alliance – seeking to erect antebellum nostalgia in its stead. The Ed Scare’s chaos rhetoric seeks to prepare the conservative troops for a nostalgic ritual to quell what its proponents characterize as a grand existential and ontological threat.

Political grandstanding and virtue signaling serve as calls to muster the non-Black troops and start the fire. The reactionary conservative legislation that ensues places “texts” in the fire. This placement calls to mind the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill board’s actions toward Nikole Hannah-Jones (author of the New York Times best-seller *The 1619 Project*). The board refused to vote on providing Hannah-Jones tenure with an appointment to the Knight Chair in Race and Investigative Journalism. There were “reports that Walter Hussman Jr., after whom UNC’s Hussman School of Journalism and Media is named, opposed Hannah-Jones’s appointment” (Jaschik, “Hannah-Jones” n. pag.). In unison with the NAACP’s Legal Defence Fund that represented her, Hannah-Jones would pen a letter: “I cannot imagine working at and advancing a school named for a man who lobbied against me, who [...] believed that a project that centered Black Americans” referencing her *1619 Project* “equaled the denigration of white Americans” (qtd. in Jaschik, “Hannah-Jones” n. pag.). She continues, “Nor can I work at an institution whose leadership permitted this conduct and has done nothing to disavow it” (n. pag.). The

conservative outcry grew, and in 2021 Hannah-Jones resigned. A similar pattern is evident in the trajectory of Professor Cornel West’s departure from Harvard that same year. West resigned his post after being denied tenure, which he argued was a response by the administration to his public expression of support for Palestine (Jaschik “Cornel West” n. pag.). Others have argued that the resignation from Harvard of its first Black woman president, Claudine Gay, in 2024 was not a consequence of the allegations made against her of plagiarism or of condoning antisemitic violence on university campuses, but rather the product of a sustained campaign to discredit her launched by Chris Rufo four years earlier, when she reinitiated cluster hiring in the College of Arts and Sciences to bolster ethnic studies (Nair and Wang n. pag.; Radsken n. pag.), or after she inaugurated a new deanship of diversity and the launch of a diversity task force (Radsken n. pag.).

The threat to Black teachers is also present in K12 education. Perhaps the most egregious example of this is the campaign that the White parents in Cherokee County, Georgia launched to object to the school district’s appointment of Cecelia Lewis, a Black woman, as an administrator with a mandate to focus on DEI. Nicole Carr describes the parents’ rallies as components of what amounted to a “war” on CRT (n. pag.), which, I would argue, was (but a stand-in) simply a cover-up for the true threat: the challenging of White hegemonic accounts of US history and culture, and of the place of Black and White children in the social hierarchy. To quote the title of Carr’s article, such a mission required “Chas[ing the] Black Educator Out of Town” and “then chas[ing] her to the next town.”¹⁶

Giroux states that education is arguably “a struggle over what kind of future you want for young people” (qtd. in França n. pag.). This involves considering the ideological and political processes shaping education. First, Giroux considers the types of individuals the system of education is producing rather than the methods that the powerful employ to structure education in such a way as to produce passive creatures. Second, he outlines the danger of an education that presents itself as neutral. Giroux explains this projection of neutrality is the foundation for “a kind of fascist politics

¹⁶ Co-published by ProPublica and PBS Frontline.

because it hides its code for not allowing people to understand the role that education plays ideologically, in producing particular forms of knowledge, of power, of social values, of agency,” and most importantly for our text, “of narratives about the world” (n. pag.). Giroux’s position provides a diagnosis of DeSantis’s Florida Statutes that specifically rail against “indoctrination” and any push towards what they describe as “a particular point of view” in Florida schools – thereby casting DeSantian education as a neutral agent while unintentionally unmasking the fascist politics inherent in those Statutes (Florida Senate Statute n. pag.). Yet I remain fixed on the question within Giroux’s analysis: What kind of future do the powers that be want for young people? Disciplinary regimes project and erect a future of discriminatory scope, a form of “education” that is in line with hegemonic interests. A more pressing question remains, however. Can we even begin to talk of futurity in relation to those who function as slaves? The politics within the Scare are more intensely fashioned to echo an infinite futurelessness that is inherent in the slave’s social death sentence. The Scare proceeds to perform a ritual of foreclosure (and imagines a foreclosed future)¹⁷ that is a reiteration of the making of Blackness (in which the African’s Humanity and futurity ends at the very creation of the Black-slave). Put differently, Scare politics narrates to the former African, and the rest of Humanity, that the Black’s biographic details are and shall remain “absent.”

Upon the young my focus remains. I consider renowned children’s author Rudine Sims Bishop’s framework of “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Doors,” which stresses the transformative potential and power of books to serve as self-affirming instruments, in light of non-White stories that are being given the chance to be told. But a world, and specifically an institution, that projects and affirms Black Humanity threatens to unravel the threads of a society predicated on Blackness as the “nothing” that Warren (*Ontological Terror*) and Ajari (“Irrepressible”; *Darkening Blackness*) respectively underscore. The Scare’s function is to deny Black students even the opportunity to access the remnants of their Afrocentric heritage and to thwart any effort to integrate Afrocentric orientations into their own lives and the story of America (see

¹⁷ In some ways, this is inspired by Sexton (“Afro-Pessimism”) and Douglass et al.

King and Swartz).¹⁸ The Scare’s logic is a natural extension, and byproduct, of the logic that Patterson reminds us that distinguished slaves from Whites, and that was strategically leveraged to further oppress them: “Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives,” or, “to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory” (5). Where antebellum America denied slaves the right to locate themselves in history or indeed the knowledge to craft a sense of community and lineage, the Ed Scare serves both to *continue* denying that right and to *make invisible or normalize that denial* – including its historic centrality to Black oppression. In circumscribing what can be said about the history of Black Americans’ exclusion from the project of writing the nation’s history, the Scare impedes, too, confrontation with the ramifications of that exclusion and its entanglement with centuries of violence. The historical denial of Black Americans’ right to write their own stories, let alone participate in writing the story of America, precludes for centuries the possibility of their contributing to the “kingdom of culture.” Denying the history of that denial in turn precludes the possibility of arriving at an understanding of America that reflects its most horrific aspects.

This is precisely what Oklahoma’s Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters is doing when in 2023 he denied that the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, in which 300 Black people were murdered and thousands displaced, was motivated by race (Khaled n. pag.). This, too, is what Idaho Governor Brad Little and Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction Debbie Critchfield are doing when they construct and present a different curriculum that gifts students with what Little describes as the “factual story of our nation’s history” (n. pag.). To which we might respond by once more quoting Baldwin: “Whereas you from Europe came here voluntarily, I was kidnapped, and my history was destroyed here. For your purposes, this has to be faced” (*Cross of Redemption* 95).

What I have offered here is a soliloquy of the present, and what amounts to a prophecy of the future that the Ed Scare seeks to produce. As I write, I

¹⁸ For more information on Afrocentric considerations in education see Asante.

reflect on the kindling of the fire during the period before the formal rise of the Scare. In November 2020, Fox News broadcast a Trump MAGA rally and one unnamed crowd participant, holding up an explicit placard, stood out. The host interrupted the interview to draw attention to what the sign communicated: “We just saw a very disturbing sign, it said ‘Coming for Blacks and Indians, welcome to the New World Order’” (Fearnow n. pag.). I mention this occurrence because I see it as a foreshadowing of the *arsonic* violence that was to erupt in a multitude of arenas in 2021. This, a story of books and literature in general, is a tale without a comedic ending, a narrative that halts with an abrupt caesura. And, in the end, we look to Woodson for our call to action: “The fire is getting hotter every day, and the Negro is about to be consumed. Who will deliver him?” (8).

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Skim, Quote, List

The Censorship of *All Boys Aren't Blue*

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ABSTRACT

All Boys Aren't Blue: A Memoir-Manifesto by George M. Johnson is currently one of the most frequently challenged books in United States libraries. This article takes the opposition to Johnson's Young Adult memoir-manifesto as a case study to interrogate the reading practices and rhetoric of organized activist groups that operate at scale and drive the removal of books from school libraries. These efforts are amplified by the chilling effects of new laws that address a distorted caricature of Critical Race Theory and 'sexual' material in schools, and that disproportionately affect books that speak frankly and critically about Black history, sexual abuse, and the experiences of LGBTQI+ youth. The challenger playbook analysed in this article is characterized by a reading practice that involves skim-reading for key words, decontextualization of abbreviated quotations, 'slick' and shareable reports, generated book lists, and a forum for challenging that is both online and hyperlocal. Key to justifying the removal of books from libraries is the concept of obscenity, which is misconstrued to cast Johnson's memoir as pornography. Resistance to censorship is considered at local, state and federal level. The treatment of Johnson's memoir by challengers and defenders reveals old and novel censorship mechanisms, emerging anti-censorship coalitions, divergent reading practices, and fracturing constitutional norms. Mapping attacks on and defenses of *All Boys Aren't Blue* complicates our understanding of censorship in modern America.

KEYWORDS

Censorship, Reading, School libraries, Obscenity

In 2023, the Senate Committee on the Judiciary held a hearing to examine ‘book bans.’ Among those who defended the challenging of schoolbooks was Max Eden, a research fellow from the American Enterprise Institute, who concluded his testimony by reciting quotes, taken from a website that identifies and collates objectionable excerpts from challenged books. These included a passage from George M. Johnson’s *All Boys Aren’t Blue: A Memoir-Manifesto* (henceforth *ABAB*), depicting the author’s abuse by an older male cousin, which Eden presented, devoid of context, as an account of “underage incest,” and as an example of the kinds of “explicit passages” that, he claimed, “a politically significant contingent” of journalists, NGOs, and Democratic politicians deem “very good for kids” (Eden 3-4). The rhetorical strategies Eden adopted in his testimony exemplify those of the modern book challenger discourse, which casts conservative activist researchers as “moms” alarmed by the distribution of “inappropriate materials” to (hypothetical, age-unspecified) “kids” and represents the book only by an isolated quotation taken from a conservative activist resource (4). The act of censorship is minimized, and any deliberation on the work as a whole is notable for its absence. The book itself is present only as a trace fragment.

This article takes the opposition to *ABAB*, one of the most frequently challenged books in the US of the last three years, as a case study to interrogate the reading practices and rhetoric of organized activist groups that operate at scale to cast specific topics and texts as obscene and pornographic and instigate the removal of books from libraries. These efforts are amplified by the chilling effects of new laws that address a distorted caricature of Critical Race Theory and ‘sexual’ material in schools, and that disproportionately affect books that, like *ABAB*, speak frankly and critically about Black history, sexual abuse, and the experiences of LGBTQI+ youth. *ABAB*’s treatment by challengers and defenders reveals old and novel censorship mechanisms, emerging anti-censorship coalitions, divergent reading practices, and fracturing constitutional norms. Mapping attacks on and defenses of *ABAB*, and attending to strategies that have received little attention by either scholars or the press, complicates our understanding of censorship in modern America.

Aimed, according to the publisher, at readers aged 14-18, *ABAB*

blends the essay form with autobiography. Its vocabulary and syntax are age-appropriate, but Johnson introduces advanced terminology and concepts, either defining terms or demonstrating their meaning through storytelling, dialogue, and extradiegetic reflection. Personal memories are linked to wider social issues, particularly hostility towards difference, which is, Johnson explains, “where the manifesto part comes in”: their life illustrates “some of the universal experiences of Black and/or queer people,” so that memoir prompts social commentary (6). If the vividly-drawn portrait of the young George’s struggles and triumphs appeals to older adolescent readers, then the adult narrator, who frames and interprets each memory fragment, models joy, survival, and mature understanding. Young queer readers’ need for representation, warnings, and guidance motivates the text’s frankness. The preface explains that *ABAB* covers subjects – sexual assault, homophobia and transphobia, anti-Black racism – that “many reading this book will encounter or have already encountered” but that “are often kept away” from those their age (vii); elsewhere, they conclude an account of a distressing sexual experience by remarking, “I went through that and have shared it so maybe you won’t have to” (275). Though anticipating critical “pushback” (276) for speaking honestly to teens on these topics – as Johnson noted in interview, “for me to not only exist, but have the audacity to tell my story” would provoke conservative critics to “try and shut it down” (qtd. in Carlisle n. pag.) – the text refuses to be silenced by fear (Johnson 276).

Published just prior to the escalation of censorship cases that this special issue examines, *ABAB* has encountered challenges on an unprecedented scale, some in apparent defiance of existing law, others utilizing new statutes and policies. Both the American Library Association (henceforth ALA) and PEN America (henceforth PEN), which use distinct but overlapping methodologies and terminology (‘challenges’ and ‘bans’) to record attempts to restrict or change access to books, identify 2021-2022 as the point when book challenging escalated in the United States (see Campbell’s article in this volume). This change is driven by a shift in book challenger behavior.

Book challenge whack-a-mole; crowd-sourced book list databases; copy-paste legislation; viral circulation of ‘sexual’ quotes; rituals of

outrage at all levels of government; intimidation and defamation; and on the horizon, the mobilization of the far right, a warning and a promise of more censorship to come: this is the context in which *ABAB* became one of the most frequently challenged books in the United States. The logic of its censorship in turn becomes clear when one considers the other titles that topped the ALA's list of the most frequently banned texts of 2022 – Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer*, a graphic autobiography about non-binary, queer, and asexual experience, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, which explores anti-Black racism, colorism, sexual abuse, and trauma, through the perspectives of both adults and children. Blackness, queerness, sexuality: Johnson's memoir-manifesto shares the themes of frequently challenged books (Friedman and Johnson, "Banned in the USA: Rising" n. pag.). It is also in the category of texts whose challenging is likely to result in removal: the *Washington Post* found that challenged schoolbooks about LGBTQ lives were 30% more likely to be removed than others; 41% of "fully banned books" had LGBTQ themes (Natanson, "The Post" n. pag.).

In PEN's analysis, the escalation of censorship is driven by two related issues: novel legislation at state level and coordinated challenges brought or supported by organized groups. While prior to 2021 challenges were commonly made against one book, by one individual, it has since become customary for them to involve multiple titles (ALA, "Book" n. pag.), and to be brought by a prolific group of 'serial filers', which according to the *Post* comprised 60% of challenges in the 2021-22 school year (Natanson, "The Post" n. pag.). PEN puts this figure at around half, and notes that 40% are linked to "proposed or enacted state legislation" and "political pressure" (Friedman and Johnson, "Banned in the USA: The Growing" n. pag.). For Richard Price, such trends indicate a shift from challenges being "episodic and ad hoc" to a favored tactic of "national conservative activist groups" (26). This shift can be understood as a product of the peculiar confluence of political causes that emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic around 2021: anti-vaccination and anti-mask movements, the backlash against Black Lives Matter, Critical Race Theory, and DEI initiatives generally, and the proliferation of legislation constricting transgender people's rights and access to healthcare. As PEN puts it, challenger groups have varied "aims," but share "common cause in advancing an effort to

control and limit what kinds of books are available in schools” (Friedman and Johnson, “The Growing” n. pag.).

The Book Challenge Playbook

Tracing *ABAB*'s progress through the procedures of a challenger group, Moms for Liberty (henceforth MFL), illustrates how challenges operate at scale. Founded in 2021, MFL describes its mission as “fighting for the survival of America by unifying, educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government” (MFL, “Who” n. pag.); the Southern Poverty Law Centre has designated it an anti-government extremist group. Having emerged, by its own account, from activism against Covid-19 measures in schools, a cause that is still prominent on its website, MFL has swiftly attained influence in part by developing an infrastructure to support book challenge cases. Other concerns include sex education, Critical Race Theory, and “gender ideology” (MFL, “Resources” n. pag.). Maurice Cunningham's analysis of tax filings, declared donations, and conservative and radical right media coverage led him to conclude that MFL's rapid rise was propelled by substantial financial and practical support from conservative donors and institutions, rendering implausible its claims to be a non-partisan grassroots organization that has grown solely due to its resonance with conservative moms (9-13).

Though formally non-partisan, MFL is nevertheless influencing Republican politics. MFL school board candidates are encouraged to skip the training provided by state School Board Associations that it claims “foster[s] the same woke propaganda Moms for Liberty is fighting against” (MFL, “Welcome” n. pag.) in favor of courses provided by the The Leadership Institute, which trains conservative activists on topics including Critical Race Theory (in a module delivered by Ted Cruz), legal and procedural issues, and campaigning, which was originally delivered by Bridget Ziegler (the Institute's former Director of School Board Programs and MFL co-founder) and her husband Christian Ziegler (former chairman of the Florida Republican Party) (Leadership Institute, “School” n. pag.; “Final” n. pag.). Its 2023 summit featured five Republican presidential

candidates, including Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis (Knowles and Natanson n. pag.). As Governor of Florida, DeSantis has associated himself with MFL causes: most notably, Florida HB 1557, the 2022 Parental Rights in Education Act – more widely known as Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” or “Don’t Say Trans” state law – which prohibits classroom discussion of gender and sexual identity. HB 1557 built on the Parents’ Bill of Rights drafted by Bridget Ziegler in 2019 (“Governor” n. pag.; McKinnon n. pag.).

Book challenges have featured prominently in MFL’s messaging and campaigns both prior to HB 1557’s passage and in the aftermath – and whether a means to a legislative and electoral end, or an end in themselves, they are integral to MFL’s activism. *ABAB* is one of MFL’s preferred case studies. Characteristically quoted selectively, choice passages or sentences are clipped, decontextualized and circulated as textual fragments at school board meetings, in social media viral videos and TV interviews.

This treatment of the part as a reliable proxy for the whole is a feature, not a bug. MFL’s “Books” site links to two book review websites created in early 2022: BookLook.info, which traces its origins to a MFL library committee (BookLook.info, “Plan” n. pag.), and BookLooks.org, which denies affiliation with any group but was founded by a former MFL member (BookLooks.org, “About” n. pag.). Both sites feature book reports and ratings that are almost identical. However, BookLook.info also hosts a model challenge methodology whose admonishments to challengers, “DO NOT take quote out of context or eliminate words to ‘prove” [sic] your point,” and “DO thoroughly read the entire novel” (“Report” n. pag.), are contradicted by its book reviewing guide, which emphasizes skimming and swift judgments based on intuitive responses to keywords, thereby ensuring that the activist’s first encounter with the text will entail taking quotes out of context. This is made explicit in the explanation, “I skim a book looking for violations [...] I scan about 1 page/5 seconds. Look for key words [...] Try not to be tempted into reading the book and ‘get into’ the story. Do that on your own time ;)” (BookLook.info, “How To” 2). Predicated on a shared understanding of the difference between conventional reading and the reviewer’s practice of scanning, the joke makes clear that this is not an intellectual exercise. As do the ensuing

instructions, which outline a labor-intensive logging process involving converting digital photographs of printed book pages or snipped images from eBooks into text, then pasting them into a Google docs spreadsheet that indexes quotations to statutes. No guidance is given on how to answer questions that invite holistic judgements of the book: for instance, “[t]aken as a whole, is this material without serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value for minors” (8). The extent to which this guidance has shaped challenger practice since 2022 makes it surprising that BookLook.info has received little attention to date from journalists, and none from scholars.

BookLook.info also suggests that activists send presentations on “the worst offenders” to school boards, “brave volunteers” read passages aloud at school board meetings and ask if “this is OK for minors,” and book reports be circulated on social media to “[get] people engaged with outrage” (BookLook.info, “Plan” n. pag.). Reports, which can be found on both sites, take two forms: a summary table of unredacted, and often long, quotations from all the objected-to passages, and for “worst offenders” such as *ABAB*, a brief document called a “slick sheet” comprising a numerical rating and some quotations, which can be radically abridged. A simple “Book Report” interface makes reports freely downloadable (BookLooks.org, “Book” n. pag.). *ABAB*’s summary report on the BookLooks.org site contains a profanity count, a content warning, and fourteen pages of tabulated quotations, most referencing race or racism, queerness, sexuality, or police violence. Instead of engaging with literary aspects of the text – how it might convey judgement through characterization, narrative voice or tone – the summary lists a series of concerns: “This book contains sexual nudity; sexual activities including sexual assault; alternate gender ideologies; profanity and derogatory terms; alcohol and drug use; and controversial racial commentary” (BookLooks.org, “All Boys” 1). The word “contains” suggests that the mere presence of a theme, word, or topic is reason for alarm, helping rationalize the condemnatory judgement: 4 out of 5: “Not For Minors”.

The abridged and decontextualized quotes in *ABAB*’s “slick sheet” similarly distort the book, reducing, for example, Johnson’s account of childhood sexual abuse to a litany of sexual acts in which little of the

child's distress remains. "*This story is complicated,*" Johnson writes in the original, with italics for emphasis, "*but I don't want it to be confusing {...} I want to reiterate his actions were wrong, and I was a victim*" (212). To omit this commentary is to distort the testimony of a survivor. Johnson's original account of losing their virginity at university, a complex memory of mixed pleasure and pain, undergoes a similar transformation. The original juxtaposes the lovers' mutual generosity and the psychological impact of pain:

I can say that he was gentle. His aim wasn't to hurt me, and my aim was for him to be pleased, too. He didn't last long inside of me, thankfully. He gave me a kiss before he pulled out. I didn't stay long, nor did I masturbate after. I was in a state of shock. I just wanted to get back home. (272)

While *ABAB*'s summary report reproduces this passage in its entirety, all that remains of it in the shorter slick sheet is a formulaic pornographic conclusion: "[h]e didn't last long inside of me, thankfully. He gave me a kiss before he pulled out. I didn't stay long, nor did I masturbate after" (BookLooks.org, "Slick Sheet" n. pag.). Body parts, position, sensation, and motion are retained; commentary on the way the encounter was structured by the conventions of pornography, and the young George's anxiety, are cut. The bittersweet quality of a formative experience is lost, as is the force of the word 'shock', which in the original opens up reflection on inclusive sex education, queer trauma, and consent.

First implemented in Florida, BookLook procedure is now model challenger practice nationwide. In two typical cases involving *ABAB* in Brevard and Indian River Counties, Florida, MFL members cited Florida pornography statutes, Critical Race Theory, and "alternate gender ideologies" in bringing their challenges. In response, Brevard County updated its policy so that challenges could apply to the whole district, which would increase the impact of challenges beyond individual schools; Indian River County removed *ABAB* and withdrew 216 books pending review (Stroshane, "Censorship" 7.1 42-45; "Censorship" 7.2 47). Such cases recall *Board of Education v. Pico*, the 1982 Supreme Court case that guides school library cases today. The case originated from a book list

featuring decontextualized excerpts of “objectionable” titles circulated at a conservative parents’ conference; of these, Island Trees school board members ordered the removal of eleven, mostly by Black writers, against the ruling of a committee (Fellion and Inglis 220-23). The plurality opinion argued that the removal of books from school libraries is unconstitutional if done in a “narrowly partisan or political manner,” and that the “right to receive information and ideas” is a necessary corollary of the First Amendment, which, for civil liberties organizations, supports the idea of a right to read (US Supreme Court, *Board of Educ. v. Pico* 867; 854). As with *Pico*, current challenges often involve book lists, but their distribution is now accelerated by social media and digital tools. A “list” of objectionable books today might take the form of a social media meme, viral video, photo of pages shared in a group chat, spreadsheet, or downloadable report, while generative AI has been used to determine which books on a BookLooks.org list should be removed (Pendharkar n. pag.). Sometimes the origins and methodology of a list are obscure, as was the case with the 16-page table Matt Krause (Chair of the Texas House Committee on General Investigating) sent to the Texas Education Agency, attached to a demand for information on copies held in Texas schools and funds spent on them. For Danika Ellis, though the dominance of material on rights, sex education, and LGBTQ+ topics in Krause’s list indicate an attempt to identify books on these topics, the apparent absence of a filter for content and inclusion of evidently accidental entries suggest it was generated by a keyword search of a library catalogue.

Krause’s letter also illustrates the chilling effect of today’s volatile legislative environment. In addition to the specified books, he demanded information about any other books that “address or contain,” *inter alia*, HIV, sexuality, or anything that “might make students feel discomfort [...] because of their race or sex,” this last phrase taken from Texas HB 3979 – a 2021 law that prohibits teaching the *1619 Project* and specific concepts (CRT, as it is misrepresented by its critics) in the social studies curriculum. While the legal basis for Krause’s demand was uncertain, the letter prompted action.

HB 3979 is an example of what PEN calls “Educational Gag Orders” (EGOs) (Friedman and Tager n. pag.). In 2017, Matthew Fellion and I discussed precursors to the current wave of EGOs – bills like Arizona’s HB

2281, which closed Mexican American Studies in Tucson, and Virginia's "Beloved Bill" (HB 516), a parental rights bill – and suggested that they had "potential to produce more widespread, indiscriminate, and partisan forms of censorship than the more common practice of school boards making judgements about the educational suitability of particular books" (Fellion and Inglis 374). It is too simple to say that EGOs simply "ban" a book or a topic in schools (though some, like HB 3979, name specific texts), but in practice, as Friedman and Tager put it, they "chill academic and educational discussions" (4). HB 2281 did not explicitly prohibit the book *Critical Race Theory*, but when the new law was applied, it was removed from Tucson classrooms; the *Beloved Bill*, which targeted sexually explicit material in broad terms, did not name Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, but the Senate debates treated it as the kind of 'sexually explicit' book for which the legislation was designed (Fellion and Inglis 372-74; 381-99). The removal of *ABAB* from several school district libraries a month after the release of Krause's list (Stroshane, "Censorship" 7.1 67-8; 75-6) despite not actually appearing on it can be seen as another instance of this.

At the time of writing, PEN records 30 new EGOs signed into law since 2021, of which 23 explicitly target K-12 education. Gender, sexuality, pronouns, Critical Race Theory, and Marxism are recurring terms, and the same forms of words are reproduced across bills brought in different states. Such legislation can energize specific conservative constituencies. The Virginia governor who vetoed HB 516 lost his re-election campaign, defeated by a Republican opponent who posted an attack ad starring the parent who lobbied for the *Beloved Bill* (Vozzella and Schneider n. pag.; see Youngkin).

The Return of Obscenity

Modern book challenger discourse asserts an idiosyncratic understanding of obscenity that sidesteps the consensus on constitutionality. Obscenity, in a legal sense, describes an exception to the First Amendment's protection of speech. Since the case of *Miller v. California*, federal and state laws have adopted a three-part test of obscenity. The plurality opinion in *Miller* held that obscenity cases must test:

(a) whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest [...] (b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law, and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. (US Supreme Court, *Miller v. California*, 24-25)

The last of these applies even to modified *Miller* tests, such as those adapted for the special case of minors.

But as Todd Pettys notes, current book challenger discourse asserts “that some of the recently targeted books are obscene in the constitutional sense of the term, such that distributing those books to children falls beyond the First Amendment’s protection” (1007). For Price, the current wave “challenges the basic definition of obscenity itself and seeks to return to an earlier era of criminalized literature” (35) via rhetoric that “equate[s] sexual conduct” in books with pornography, and that treats obscenity and pornography as “interchangeable” (37). Thus BookLook.info’s pledge, “first, we are going after porn in the school libraries” (“Plan” n. pag.), leaves unstated what qualifies as porn. Challengers often justify such imprecision by “invok[ing] formal legal ideas” and “mix[ing] legal and popular notions of obscenity and porn in a way that ignore [sic] the key elements of the law” or, commonly, deploying one element of an obscenity statute but not the whole tripartite test (Price 38). For instance, BookLooks.org attempts to both incorporate and circumvent legal understandings of obscenity:

Some astute critics have opined on the fact our definition for “obscene” mirrors the definition from the *Miller* test but leaves out the wording “taken as a whole.” This is because we are only applying the word “obscene” to instances contained within the work (evaluated in context), not the work as a whole. Again, our rating system is not evaluating obscenity (in the legal sense) for the overall work. (“About” n. pag.)

While BookLooks.org is right to say their rating system is not a measure of the obscenity of a work, they should not imply that it is possible to apply a portion of *Miller*’s language to define obscenity, when all that is

evaluated is a decontextualized quotation. The *Miller* test is predicated on an assessment of the whole work; without assessment of the whole, the obscenity of the work cannot be determined. There is also no justification given for the claim that “most works we rate as ‘No Minors’ (4) or ‘Aberrant [sic] Content’ (5) would likely be considered obscene by most standards” (“About” n. pag.).

Governmental speech is also amplifying the book challenger notion of obscenity. For example, Florida Department of Education media specialist training attends equally to pornography and obscenity when attempting to explain what materials are prohibited in Florida school libraries. The training specifies that materials must be free from pornography (6), but that term not being defined in Florida law, the training turns to the broad Merriam-Webster definition (7). In explaining what kinds of sexual material are considered harmful to minors according to Florida statute 847.001, and therefore prohibited, the training outlines the state’s adapted *Miller* obscenity test, but inserts a note of caution that is not present in the test: trainees are warned that “[t]o protect librarians and media specialists from felony charges, *it must be clear* [emphasis added] that a book depicting nudity, sexual conduct, or sexual excitement does not meet the tenets of ‘Harmful to minors’” (10) and so trainees are encouraged to “[e]rr on the side of caution”(11) when selecting library materials. Trainees should also “carefully” consider any books that have already been “removed or restricted” (26) in other districts and consult “crowd-sourced reviews” (25); without naming challengers explicitly, such guidance directs professionals to their obscenity standards. If Florida’s training nudges librarians towards a broadened standard of obscenity, the message elsewhere is more direct and absolute. Governor Greg Abbott of Texas referred to “pornography” in school libraries and Governor Henry McMaster of South Carolina claimed that specific images in Maia Kobabe’s *Gender Queer* met the statutory definition of obscenity (Price 40). Such statements carry weight.

Confident pronouncements on obscenity encourage claims that librarians, media specialists and educators are distributing pornography. A febrile discourse reduces the complex balancing of students’ First Amendment rights and pedagogical judgements to morality tales. Those who argue the case for texts like *ABAB* face incendiary accusations of

promoting pedophilia and sexual abuse. When MFL supporters read excerpts from *ABAB* and other texts at a North Penn School District board meeting, they made highly charged accusations: was it the Board's intention to "groom" children? If board members found *ABAB* acceptable then they belonged on "a national registry" (Stroshane, "Censorship" 6.4 31). At a Flagler County Florida school board meeting, where protestors with white supremacist and anti-LGBTQ+ banners shouted slurs and, according to observers, intimidated students, one school board member attempted to bring criminal charges, alleging that it was a crime to have *ABAB* in media centers, because schools must be "free from pornography" and not distribute material harmful to minors (Stroshane, "Censorship" 7.1 41-42). Such attempts to bring criminal cases are increasingly common: Price records similar cases brought since 2019 against distributors of *Howl*, *Fun Home*, *Gender Queer*, *Lawn Boy*, and *ABAB* (39-42). The legal process for determining the obscenity of books for children should apply an adapted *Miller* test, as demonstrated in Pettys' recent consideration of *ABAB* as a hypothetical case, which emphasized that "no reasonable reader could say that, taken in its entirety, Johnson's book provokes sexual desire" (1038). So far, when criminal charges have been entertained, the tripartite test has been properly applied. In the case of the criminal complaint against *ABAB*, the Sheriff's counsel referred to the memoir's discussion of social and political issues and advised there was no basis for proceeding (Price 41).

There may be no real prospect of criminal prosecutions in the near future, but how secure would the legal consensus on obscenity be under sustained political pressure? If the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 *Mandate for Leadership* playbook represents the plan for the first 180 days of a new Republican presidency, then the discourse of book challengers will have a prominent place in the government's program. The foreword by Heritage Foundation President Kevin Roberts sketches the problems facing modern America – inflation, drug abuse, the Chinese Communist Party, the "Great Awakening" (citation not given) – and concludes with a breathless clause that conjures the book challenger's nightmare: "children suffer the toxic normalization of transgenderism with drag queens and pornography invading their school libraries" (Roberts 1). His assertion

that pornography is “manifested today in the omnipresent promotion of transgender ideology and sexualization of children,” and “[e]ducators and public librarians who purvey it should be classed as registered sex offenders” pointedly makes no distinction between sexualizing children and acknowledging the existence of young trans people (5). Justice Potter Stewart’s famous refusal to define hard-core pornography in an obscenity case – “I know it when I see it” – will not serve in a context where legislators and those who regulate obscenity are, unlike Stewart, eager to see pornography where there is none. That the parents’ rights movement and its intellectual foundations can so easily construe texts like *ABAB* as pornography demonstrates that the emerging ideas of obscenity and censorship in conservative discourse operate far outside the conventions and legal tests established in twentieth-century obscenity cases.

“Return the books to our library shelves”

Those who contest book censorship are beginning to develop an equivalent response at all levels of government to book challengers’ multi-modal strategy. At local level, groups such as “Defense of Democracy” and “Parenting with Pride” might not have the national profile, funds, or political connections of the parental rights movement, but they are shaping the composition of school boards. In 2022 and 2023, liberal groups such as “Campaign for our Shared Future” trained school board election candidates, with the majority succeeding; candidates endorsed by MFL and the 1776 Project were less successful, so that the anticipated local government ‘red wave’ failed to materialize – leading the *New York Times* to suggest that the culture war “era of education politics is, increasingly, in the rearview mirror” (Stanford n. pag.; Goldstein n. pag.). State governors who especially embraced book challenging, notably Youngkin and DeSantis, have not profited in key elections: in 2023, Republicans lost control of the Virginia state legislature, and DeSantis withdrew from the presidential primaries.

The continued high rates of challenges however motivate an organized response. Among these is the ALA’s new “Unite Against Book Bans” website: an inverted image of a book challenger resource that hosts school

board meeting guidance, a censorship report portal, and toolkits for novice anti-censorship activists, and whose counterpart of the “slick sheet” database collates summaries of challenged books, professional reviews that evidence texts’ significance and educational value, and digital archives of successful resistance to challenges (see ALA, “Unite”; “Résumés”).

One report on *ABAB* in the archive illustrates how library policies and competent reading practices interact to give serious consideration to both challenger concerns and the text. Rockwood Missouri’s Challenged Materials Committee’s evaluation of *ABAB* was structured by an inclusive collections management policy, which considered students’ First Amendment rights and the role of diverse collections: echoing Rudine Sims Bishop’s argument for diversity in children’s publishing, the policy holds that the library “should provide literature that serves as both mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors so students are exposed to books and characters that reflect their own experiences as well as experiences of others” (Rockwood 1). The Committee was required to consider this principle, the whole book, and the challenger’s specific stated concerns (1). Having read *ABAB* in full, the committee members noticed when the challenger’s objections took quotations out of context: “[t]he challenger talked about the abuse, but the disclaimer on this page makes it clear that it was wrong” (4). Prompted by the call for books as mirrors, Rockwood readers noted the value of *ABAB*’s commentary on the lack of Black and queer voices in school libraries, describing Johnson’s message, “You sometimes don’t know you exist until you realize someone like you existed before,” as a “constant throughout the book” that “reflected representation” and could “help the reader become more understanding” (4). Explaining their decision to retain the book without restriction, they wrote collectively: “[j]ust because stories are painful doesn’t mean they should be wiped from the record. [...] We have kids in our school that might need this book” (5). Operating as representative members of their community, the Rockwood readers considered the literary and social merits of the text as a whole, applying their own reasoned judgement of its value for minors.

Following in the footsteps of the students who initiated the Island Trees case and protested Arizona’s dismantling of Mexican American Studies (Fellion and Inglis 223, 390-91), students are in turn developing

a coherent anti-censorship position that considers constitutional rights, the pedagogical value of censored texts, and the disproportionate targeting of books by and about marginalized people. The analysis was expressed succinctly by three Nixa, Missouri students after their school board removed *ABAB* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. Noting that the restricted books were by "non-white and/or LGBTQ+ authors," they called for "exposure to complicated issues and the amplification of diverse perspectives" (Three n. pag.). In an implied rebuttal of the parental rights movement's silence on children's constitutional rights, they insisted: "it is our right to choose what we read. We demand that the school board remove all restrictions and return the books to our library shelves" (n. pag.). Elsewhere, students have used social media, banned book clubs, online wish lists of banned books, and mass distribution drives of challenged texts to organize against censorship (Samuels n. pag.; Natanson, "Teens" n. pag.). Many have testified to the pedagogic and social value of censored texts for minoritized students at school board meetings (Samuels n. pag.; Three n. pag.) and at the House of Representatives Oversight Committee hearings on book bans, where Adunni L. Noibi conveyed the scale of student mobilization:

We fought daily by calling, emailing, and showing up at our state capitol to protest and speak to our representatives. We spent our evenings writing pieces, trying to tell our stories and advocate for books that we found value in. We shouldn't have to do this, but we will continue fighting for our right to learn, grow, and thrive in our schools. (qtd. in "Student Statements" 2)

Such testimonies convey more than a principled opposition to censorship: they make the impact of censorship concrete and chart an emerging anti-censorship student movement.

Students can seek legal remedies, but legal tactics are not without risk. Should a case reach the current Supreme Court, which has recently overturned decisions that were held to be settled law, most notably *Roe v. Wade*, the library's status as a space of free inquiry might be undermined. At the time of writing, students of Escambia County and their parents are joined as plaintiffs with PEN, Penguin Random House, and authors,

including Johnson. One plaintiff's 10th-grade son is interested in books about race and racism, and wants to check out *ABAB*, but the book has been removed from his school library; the original challenge to *ABAB* had objected to sexual content, as is conventional, but also, specifically, "LGBTQ content" (US District Court for the Northern District of Florida, ECF 27, 36). The complaint notes the Escambia removal list's narrow focus on books by and about "people of color and LGBTQ people" and argues that the Escambia School Board has "sided with a challenger expressing openly discriminatory bases for the challenge" (ECF 27, 2). Guided by *Pico*, plaintiffs argue that the Board's "restrictions and removals" of library books "have prescribed an orthodoxy of opinion" that is unconstitutional (ECF 27, 3). In response, the State of Florida has, in effect, argued against the consensus that the library is a space of free inquiry. It questioned *Pico*'s standing and argued that viewpoint-based restrictions are constitutionally permissible in libraries and particularly school libraries, because "public school systems, including their libraries, convey the government's message," so the question of access to these books should be judged "at the ballot box," not in court; school libraries are "a forum for government, not private speech" (ECF 31-1, 2-3). First Amendment specialists have described this argument as an "aggressive, unprecedented interpretation of the government speech doctrine [...] to justify the politically motivated manipulation of the contents of public school libraries" (ECF 42-2, 2). Should this case proceed to a higher court, the stakes would be high.

Other cases do not have direct bearing on *Pico* but are unpicking elements of new laws. Texas book vendors, who were burdened with the impossible task of assigning sexual content ratings for all books they sold to public schools under HB 900, won at the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, which disagreed with the state's argument that the mandatory ratings were government speech and functioned like cigarette packet informational labels (Albanese n. pag.). In Arkansas, the Central Arkansas Library System (CALS) is the lead plaintiff challenging Arkansas Act 372, which makes librarians criminally liable for distributing content that is harmful to minors. Taking *ABAB* as an example, CALS's executive director posited a scenario in which a sixteen-year-old sought the book outwith the children's section of the library: how would librarians prevent that reader

accessing the book? (Vrbin n. pag.). The Act does not differentiate between younger children and older adolescents, which could prove relevant: if, as Pettys argues, the relevant test of obscenity is whether a reasonable minor would find serious value in a book, by “virtue of the First Amendment overbreadth doctrine,” the hypothetical minor must be “a reasonable older teenager”: their First Amendment rights should not be infringed because a young child would not understand the book the teenager might want to read (1055).

Children’s civil rights were also emphasized in a recent federal initiative against LGBTQI+ discrimination to “address the growing threat that book bans pose for the civil rights of students” (“Biden-Harris” n. pag.). A Department of Education civil rights investigation into Forsyth, Georgia found the school district may have created a hostile environment when it removed books with LGBTQ+ and Black characters, which was the first time the Civil Rights division had made such a finding regarding book removals (Jacobson n. pag.). But at the time of writing, *ABAB* has not been returned to the shelves of Forsyth school libraries. The Department has only directed the school district to explain to students that the books were removed because of sexually explicit content, not the identities of their authors or characters (1). If the federal government is beginning to move against book bans, it is taking only precise and limited action.

Conclusion

A recurring rhetorical move in modern challenger discourse is to deflect accusations of censorship by arguing that library book removals and restrictions are not book bans. Emily Knox argues that challengers “narrowly” define censorship “as the total removal of materials [:] as long as the books are available through some method, no censorship has taken place” (749). Thus, BookLooks.org insists “[w]e do not support ‘banning’ books” because “[a]ny books that may be excluded from school libraries would still be available in public libraries or in stores for interested students to procure with parental consent” (“About” n. pag.). At the US Senate Committee on the Judiciary hearing on book bans, Max Eden of

the American Enterprise Institute ventured an (uncited) “common usage” definition of “banned” as “made unavailable,” implying that because *Gender Queer* was still available on Amazon, it had not been banned, concluding “[b]ooks aren’t being banned, and it’s good that they are [sic]” (Eden 4). At the Congress Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties hearing on book bans, Representative Nancy Mace asked if anything prevented a student who couldn’t find a book in their school library from accessing it elsewhere, through a public library, bookstore, or Amazon? Such arguments fail to consider, as Knox notes, “those who might be harmed by making such materials inaccessible *to them*” (749; emphasis added). As librarian Samantha Hull responded to Mace, a child’s access to transportation, their “financial means,” and their home environment (it is “not always” safe for children to read at home, Hull notes) all determine whether a child can acquire a book that is not in their school library. Claiming that a text’s continued existence in the marketplace disproves the fact of its censorship deliberately overlooks the weakening of the library’s status as a space of free inquiry and the impact of censorship on young readers. The child who can only access *ABAB* through their school library has been affected by censorship even if a child from a wealthier family can purchase *ABAB*.

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The Success of US Literature in Italy During Fascism

Ambivalent Censorship, Market, and Consensus

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the manifold and intermixed ways through which fascist censorship dealt with one of the most remunerative yet problematic literary fields on the Italian book market: US literature. In particular, the purpose here is to demonstrate that the permissiveness that characterizes the fascist management of US literature unveils a subtle and sly attempt to manipulate US books to make them compatible with the fascist national ideology, conversely lightening their subversive and critical potential towards Italy. The article is structured in two parts: the first examines the ambivalent perception of the US in Italy during fascism and its correlation to the national circulation of US literature. By resorting to some significant episodes of book censorship in the translations of Elio Vittorini, Cesare Pavese, and Eugenio Montale, the second part demonstrates how the authorities’ interventions on US books can be interpreted as attempts to adapt US culture and literature to respond to the urgencies of Mussolini’s regime. In particular, the censorial interference dictated the elimination of references to Italy to prevent the Italian readers’ exposure to critical perspectives on the country that could excoriate the national image that fascism was struggling to build. The two sections intersect a quantitative overview of the circulation of US books in Italy and a qualitative analysis of how censorship evaluated books and induced their manipulation via translation.

KEYWORDS

US literature, Fascism, Censorship, Italy, United States

The translation and circulation of US literature in Italy in the 1930s and early 1940s provides a useful case study for observing the different ways in which Italian fascist censorship operated, and the modes the regime used to control content while maintaining an outward appearance of liberalism. This article attends in particular to the censorial interference that dictated the elimination of references to Italy in US publications to prevent Italian readers' exposure to critical perspectives on the country that could excoriate the national image that fascism was struggling to build.

The article is split into two sections: the first consists of a quantitative overview of the circulation of US books in Italy, drilling down into the data in Christopher Rundle's survey (2019) of Italian translations of foreign literature to focus specifically on US texts; the second provides a textual analysis of how translators manipulated texts by neutralizing minimal elements identified as likely to instigate heavier censorial countermeasures if left unchecked. The slightness of these censorial interventions reflects the regime's efforts to disguise its book control, lest this undermines its professed commitment to the liberal supply of cultural goods. The wealth of US literature, especially prose-fiction, translated into Italian in this period in turn reflects the extent to which these works were seen as a cultural reservoir vital to the broader functionalizing of US culture in the service of the regime. Indeed, several studies have suggested that despite the regime's political and cultural opposition to the United States, the circulation of US books was not dramatically affected in the various phases and transformations of the fascist censorial apparatus.

The second part of this article in turn examines three especially significant instances of censorship and self-censorship in the translation of US texts: Elio Vittorini's translation of John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* (1935), Eugenio Montale's translation of Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* (1936), and Cesare

Pavese's translation of John Dos Passos' *The Big Money* (1933).¹ On the one hand, these three cases exemplify a minimalist, preemptive, self-censorial approach (involving, namely, the elimination of references to Italy) intended to protect the marketability of US literature in Italy and render unnecessary further interventions by the authorities (see Fortunato 31). On the other hand, they show the variety and complexity of approaches that characterized the fascist censorship of literary texts. By combining a quantitative observation of Italian translations of US books in the interwar period with the qualitative analysis of the above-named translated US books, this article thus provides a preliminary account of the circulation of US literature under fascism and contextualizes the apparent ambivalence of the regime's dealings with US books and how that related, in turn, to the publishing industry's aspirations to preserve, and define, high literature in the face of massification and competing influences from abroad.

Here, some background regarding Italian publishing is necessary to clarify the unique parameters in which the selection and translation of the texts in question were occurring. Since its inception in the 1500s, Italian publishing has been shaped by the concept of the *collana*, or series – a constellation of texts selected by the editors based on a common theme such as literary style, genre, or author's nationality (see Ferretti and Iannuzzi). Beginning in the early nineteenth century, however, as the ideological vision of the editor played an increasingly prominent role in their curation, the *collane* came to reflect a particular set of political ideals or, more interestingly for our purposes, the editor's idea of what constitutes “good” literature and what role such literature should play in influencing the public imagination and the Italian world of letters (see Ferretti). This ideological vision was reflected in the individual *collane*'s mission statements, generally reproduced in the frontmatter of each volume, and in the editor's expansive introductions, whose historical and thematic contextualization of the individual works also dictated the lens through which they should be interpreted. The first instances of this modern iteration of the *collana* was Giovan Battista Sonzogno's “Collane

¹ All quotes from the original sources are taken from their first edition; all quotes in Italian are taken from their first Italian edition.

degli Antichi Storici Greci Volgarizzati,” launched in 1819, of Ancient Greek classics translated into vulgate (modern) Italian and dedicated “ai Giovani Italiani” (“to Italy’s youth”), and Felice Le Monnier’s “Biblioteca Nazionale” (“National Library”), launched in 1843, which presented the emergent middle classes with a unified, patriotic, vision of Italian literary “excellence” spanning literary periods and genres (see Ferretti; Marchi and Cammarano). By the early twentieth century, the *collana* was playing an important role in both appealing to, and shaping the tastes of, specific audience groups, often with a view to “elevating” and “illuminating” the masses – a project complicated upon the fascist regime’s rise to power. More specifically, a keen awareness that the *collane* editors’ priorities did not necessarily align with the regime saw the latter scrutinize the titles the former selected and the introductions they wrote or commissioned. However, the regime also recognized the value of the *collane* as vessels for projecting an image of the nation as refined, cultured, and alive to shifting intellectual currents and the changing sensibilities of the international literary scene.² In this context, the impetus behind publishing US literature had to do, as well, with communicating a very specific vision of US culture, US literature, and the unique contours of American modernity. The term “series,” then, refers specifically to these *collane*.

The fascist regime’s shaping of Italian national culture has been examined from a range of perspectives since it first became a subject of scholarly enquiry in the 1960s.³ Starting from the work of Renzo De Felice,

² Notably, though well-known editors such as Gian Dàuli and successful writers and poets such as Elio Vittorini, Cesare Pavese, and Eugenio Montale edited many of the *collane* featuring translations of US texts in this period, editors who were less known to the public but highly respected within the industry such as Lavinia Mazzucchetti, Alessandra Scalero, and Maria Martone also played a pivotal role, usually behind the scenes, in championing the translation and publication of US texts.

³ Several studies identify a combination of coercion and thought control in the fascist policies, exerted through the “development and the spreading – in an active or in a passive way – of a discourse containing the elements that legitimize the exercise of power” (Nelis 142), aimed to tailor a fascist sense of nationhood (see Cavazza). For example, Emilio Gentile observes the formation of a national ideology clothed in a religious discourse by sacralizing the cult of *Romanità* (1993). Others explored the construction of aesthetic consensus in the field of architecture (Ghirardo, “City and Theater”; “Architects, Exhibi-

fascism has been analyzed in light of its attempt to strengthen popular consensus by constructing a hegemonic culture.⁴ The last two decades have in turn seen a thorough scrutiny of the contradictory relationship between the circulation of foreign literature in translation in Italy under fascism and the regime's aggressive promotion of the production of national literature and fierce opposition to the importation of books written by foreign authors. Among the several *dispositifs* that operated in this way,⁵ censorship exemplifies the insidious combination of coercion and collaboration. George Talbot and Guido Bonsaver argue that fascist censorship should not be considered as an all-pervasive, tightly coordinated, monolithic form of repression (Bonsaver, *Censorship* 5; Talbot, *Censorship* 7), but rather as a combination of different approaches, policies, and standards. Talbot distinguishes three types of censorial practices: "preventive censorship," which operates as a repressive instrument for the protection of national and military intel; "informative censorship," which designates the examination and control of "everything written by the military and civilian population" (14) to keep abreast of popular feelings; and "productive censorship," consisting of "the construction of positive messages" related to the regime and to what the institutions deemed as acceptable for the Italian audience and how they made it available (15). According to Bonsaver, just as the fascist regime was a vast container within which several visions cohabited, so was censorship "a tool that was taken up and used in many different ways, by different agents, and with different results" (*Censorship* 261).⁶

tions"; Falasca-Zamponi), literature and other arts (Ben-Ghiat; Burdett; Cioli; Bonsaver, *America in Italian Culture*).

⁴ See De Felice; Berezin. As Jan Nelis has it: the regime pursued this aim by obtaining "a certain degree of popular consensus [that] relied not only on coercion, but also on active as well as passive indoctrination" (142).

⁵ In Foucauldian terms, this expression configures fascist censorship as an institution that is part of the apparatus – "a system of relations" established among "discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions" – whose purpose is to maintain the exercise of power (Foucault, "Confession of the Flesh" 195).

⁶ In two decades, fascist censorship underwent a transition from a sub-secretariat to a full-fledged ministry, ruled by different heads (Galeazzo Ciano, Alessandro Pavolini, or Gaetano Polverelli) and constantly overshadowed by Mussolini. See Bonsaver, *Mussolini*

While the censorial measures applied to the nation's cultural outputs varied depending on the medium in question, within publishing, productive censorship was the most prominent.⁷ In his analysis of travel writing published during fascism, Charles Burdett hints at the function of censorship as an instrument not only for regulating the Italian culture industry but also for redirecting popular consensus towards certain cultural initiatives and away from those deemed incompatible with the dominant culture. Burdett is skeptical of a totalitarian and restrictive conception of censorship under fascism and highlights its role in consolidating consensus by adapting the circulation of cultural products to the regime's precepts rather than by preventively intervening at the source. In this sense, Burdett underlines the "essential syncretism" of the fascist doctrine as he acknowledges "the facility with which it incorporated seemingly contradictory elements within the broadest confines of its ideology as well as its ability to mean different things over time to different people" (6). This account is borne out by the fact that the number of foreign texts published under the regime is disproportionately larger than that of the number of books banned without appeal: very often, books merely underwent a process of "adjustment" or what could be called "forced localization."⁸ More specifically, the common practice, in translating, of "localizing" or adapting the text to the cultural context extended, here, to preemptively eliminating offending elements. Publishers and translators frequently chose to censure their own work to preempt the demands of the regime and dodge more repressive censorial interferences (Fortunato 32).

censore; Fabre, *L'elenco*; Ferrando.

⁷ See Berezin; Talbot, *Censorship in Fascist Italy*; Venturini. Bonsaver further notes that preventive censorship was avoided (only occasionally were book stocks confiscated) in order not to penalize the publishers' margin of profit and maintain an active dialogue with them (*Censorship* 43).

⁸ My thanks to editor Elisa Pesce for suggesting the term "forced localization" to extend an understanding of localization as a process that, in Vera Mityagina and Irina Volkova's words, "centr[es] recipients and the task of creating such a text that would meet their pragmatic expectations and preserve its communicative functions" (2) to encompass the obligation to adapt the text to the political exigencies of the local market.

From these analyses, then, censorship emerges as less intent on locking *out* cultural products than on controlling their circulation via a sophisticated system of curation, verification, and manipulation.⁹ Considering the material impossibility and ideological inconvenience of applying a totalitarian model to censorship, the laxity of fascist censorial practices can be interpreted as part of a wider approach intended to filter cultural products and domesticate their disruptive elements to suit the fascist dicta.

Ambivalent Censorship: The Invasion of US Literature During Fascism

The contradictions outlined above broadly apply to the context of all translated literature, yet they are particularly evident in the case of US literature published in Italy during the fascist era, and in the vulgate belief (also popular in the postwar period) that fascist authorities fiercely impeded the circulation of Italian translations of US books – a view questioned by Arturo Cattaneo and the above-mentioned study by Rundle, which suggests the Italian literary market’s receptiveness to US literature in the interwar period despite the regime’s promotion of cultural autarchy (Cattaneo 17; Rundle, *Il vizio* 48). Rundle describes this contradiction as a “peculiarly Fascist ambivalence” characterized by the aperture of a “clear gap [...] between [...] rhetoric and [...] concrete action” (“The Censorship” 41).

This ambivalence reflects the Italian fascists’ broader perception of the United States and their approach to book censorship. Noting the regime’s concomitant appreciation of and aversion to US society’s incarnation of the spirit of modernity, Emilio Gentile argues that the fascist depiction of the US was “neither uniform nor static” and “developed from a nucleus of common stereotypes, through different and even contrasting images, in which positive and negative judgements on American politics, culture,

⁹ For accounts of the productive censorship of Italian texts, see Bonsaver, “Fascist Censorship on Literature”; Talbot. For an account of the productive censorship of foreign texts, see Rundle, “The Censorship of Translations.”

society and customs were to be found side by side or mixed together” (“Impending” 8). Bonsaver likewise identifies Mussolini’s “ambivalent mixture of fascination and reproach” to the US as “characteri[stic of] the outlook of the European educated elite during the interwar years” (*America* 219). These included several Italian intellectuals more or less overtly aligned with the regime, such as Margherita Sarfatti, Gian Gaspare Napolitano, Luigi Barzini, and Emilio Cecchi. The publication of nearly 70 books on the US between 1922 to 1943 demonstrates the fascist interest in the “American myth” even as the ideological and political distance between the two countries grew.¹⁰

The elements of ambivalence detected by Bonsaver in the fascist regime’s overall reception of US culture also characterized the censorship of translations of US works of literature. The most famous example of this is the saga of the publication of Elio Vittorini’s literary anthology, *Americana* (1942), whose publication the Italian Minister of Popular Culture Alessandro Pavolini initially rejected, citing the increasing likelihood of the US joining the conflict on the opposing side (Bonsaver, *Censorship* 221-30; Turi 53-60; C. Pavese 13-18; see also Esposito 122). Though the fascist minister was unequivocal that the anthology was “highly commendable for both its content and presentation,” he noted that publishing it risked “add[ing] more impetus to the fashion for contemporary American literature: a fashion that I am determined not to encourage” (qtd. in Bonsaver, *Censorship* 227). Now, he noted, was “not the time to do the Americans any favours, not even literary ones” (227).¹¹ Pavolini eventually

¹⁰ Some examples: Francesco Ciarlantini’s *Incontro col Nord-America* (1929) and *Al paese delle stelle. Dall’Atlantico al Pacifico* (1931), Fausto Maria Martini’s *Si sbarca a New York* (1930), Mario Soldati’s *America primo amore* (1935), Giuseppe Antonio Borgese’s *Atlante americano* (1936), Margherita Sarfatti’s *L’America, ricerca della felicità* (1937), Luigi Barzini jr’s *O America!* (1938), and Emilio Cecchi’s *America amara* (1939).

¹¹ Translated by Bonsaver. The original letter reads: “L’opera è assai pregevole per il criterio critico della scelta e dell’informazione e per tutta la presentazione. Resto però del mio parere, e cioè che l’uscita – in questo momento – dell’antologia americana non sia opportuna [...]. Non è il momento di fare delle cortesie all’America, nemmeno letterarie. Inoltre l’antologia non farebbe che rinfocolare la ventata di eccessivo entusiasmo per l’ultima letteratura americana: moda che sono risoluto a non incoraggiare.” It is worth

approved *Americana's* publication in March 1942 after Bompiani replaced Vittorini's original "Corsivi" – a selection of introductory texts, each of which was to preface a different section of the anthology, and which Pavolini deemed too admiring of US literature and culture – with a single introduction commissioned to the literary critic Emilio Cecchi that cast the texts in a more critical light.¹² The fact that the selection of texts in *Americana* remained untouched would suggest that whatever problems fascism had with the anthology, they did not involve US literature per se, but rather with Vittorini's literary views and with how US literature, and the United States more generally, was presented to Italian audiences.

A similar ambivalence is evidenced by *Americana's* inclusion of an excerpt from Gertrude Stein's story "Melanctha" (published in *Three Lives*) – a decision that went unchallenged despite its contravention of the racial laws the regime had instituted in 1938 to restrict the circulation of works by Jewish authors (Fabre, *L'Elenco* 14). The excerpt's acceptance followed Einaudi's publication of Cesare Pavese's translations of Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) and *Three Lives* (1909), in 1938 just before the laws came into effect and 1940 respectively, neither of which was censored (Dunnett 105). The fact that the presence of Jewish writers played no part in the most famous episode of fascist censorship of US literature illustrates the complexity of the regime's multilayered policies and approaches to the issue.

The editorial catalogs of the main publishers of the interwar period in turn demonstrate that despite the regime's various efforts to dampen public interest in it, the circulation of US literature in Italy under fascism increased. The figures Rundle provides for the annual number

noting that "add more impetus" is Bonsaver's translation of Pavolini's "rinfocolare la ventata," which is more accurately translated as "fan the flame – a formulation that frames pro-American sentiment as a dangerous and potentially uncontrollable force warranting careful management, and that Bompiani would later echo in his suggestion that replacing Vittorini's enthusiastic introductions to each section with a single, more critical one, one would help "throw water on the fire" (*Censorship* 227).

¹² Qtd. in D'Ina and Zaccaria 43, my translation. To clarify, "corsivi" is the term that Vittorini used to describe his introductory texts, and it was later adopted by literary critics who analyzed *Americana*.

of translations published in Italy in this period certainly substantiate Pavese's notorious description of the interwar period as "Il decennio delle traduzioni" (the decade of translations): of the 13,500 translations of literary works published between 1926 and 1941, 2,500 – nearly 20% – were translations from English, the majority of which from Britain and the US (*Il vizio* 53; 58-59).

As Rundle does not distinguish between books by British and US authors, an analysis of the catalogs of the most active publishers may help quantify the pervasiveness of US literature in translation. In variable amounts, US fiction was included in the catalogs of most of the Italian publishers of the time, either in book series entirely devoted to foreign literature or ones that featured Italian texts as well. However, the extent of their presence was not consistent across the Italian national literary market. For example, of the 55 titles in Einaudi's "Narratori stranieri tradotti" (1938-1962), edited by Pavese and Natalia Ginzburg, only four (7%) were American: Gertrude Stein's *Tre esistenze* (1940), Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1940) and *Pierre o delle ambiguità* (1941), and Henry James' *Ritratto di signora* (1942). Similarly, after Mussolini came to power in 1922, Carabba's "Antichi e moderni" (1912-1935) included only two books by US authors: Washington Irving's *Vita di Maometto* (1928) and Francis Bret Harte's *Gabriele Conroy* (1932). The paucity of US titles in these series indicates that the market for US literature was highly uneven.

US literature's expanding presence in literary series in this period is illustrated by the number of US titles in three series published by Corbaccio between 1929 and 1943: "Modernissima" (1928-1932), "Corbaccio" (1932-1943), and "I corvi" (1933-1939). The first of these, "Modernissima," comprised 19 works, 4 of which were American – including Thornton Wilder's *Il ponte di San Luis Rey* (1929) and Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* (1930). "Corbaccio" listed 43 titles, the majority of which were British but 5 of which were American and included John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1932). Of the 100 titles in "I corvi," 39 were Italian, and three were American: Joseph Hergesheimer's *Lo scialle di Manilla* (1933), Jack London's *Il richiamo della foresta* (1936), and Mark Twain's *Le avventure di Tom Sawyer* (1938).

The proportion of translated US texts in Bompiani's series also reflects

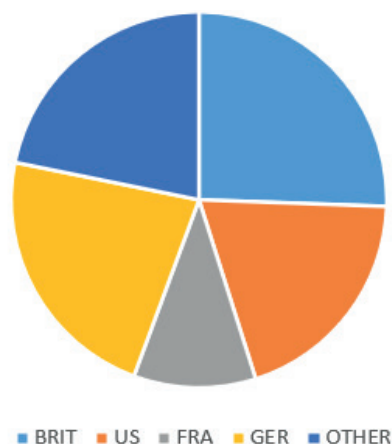
this increase. Of the 35 titles published in its first decade (1930 to 1940), which corresponded to one-third of the series, in “Letteraria,” Bompiani’s foreign literature series, eleven were translations of US books.¹³ Of the thirteen in “I libri d’acciaio” (1930-1935), a series for young readers, three were American: *Io conquisto nuovi mondi* (1930) by Richard Halliburton, *La pepita d’oro* (1934) by Julius King, and *Ricordi di un piccolo pellirosse* (1934) by Charles Alexander Eastman Ohiyesa.

The growing presence of US literature in the Italian book market in this period is further attested by Sonzogno and Mondadori’s catalogs. One of the largest publishers in Milan at the turn of the twentieth century, and as mentioned earlier the originator, in 1819, of the modern *collana*, Sonzogno was also among the first to circulate US literature in Italy on a mass scale through their “Biblioteca universale,” which included books by Poe, Whitman, Twain, Cooper, and Irving. The series “Romantica mondiale” offers another opportunity to quantitatively assess the rising popularity of US fiction: from 1928 to 1938, it hosted 60 US books by three best-selling authors: Zane Grey (16), Jack London (17), and James Oliver Curwood (27). In this same period, Sonzogno also published “Romantica economica,” which was less interested in US authors and aimed, rather, to diversify the publisher’s catalog at the level of plot types, settings, and authors’ prestige (as surmised by its editors). As well as books by London and Curwood, “Romantica economica” included translations of works by writers such as Bret Harte, Rebecca Harding Davis, Edith Wharton, and Booth Tarkington (awarded with the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1919 and 1922).

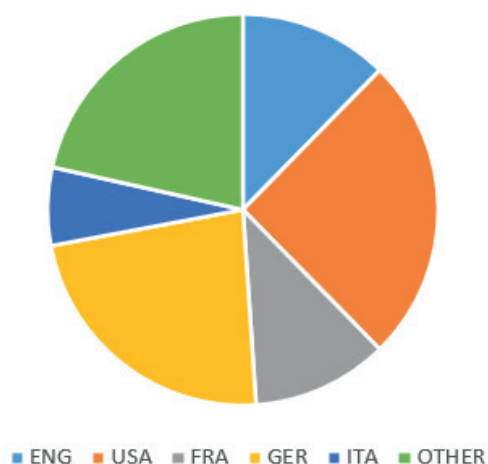
Mondadori, however, was the most prolific publisher of US translations, which were concentrated in three book series: “Medusa,” “Romanzi della Palma,” and “I libri gialli” (see Scarpino). From 1933 to 1942, Mondadori published 26 US books in “Medusa” (1933-1971), promoting authors including Pearl S. Buck, John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, and William Faulkner. US books comprised approximately 19.5% of 133 titles published in the first decade since “Medusa’s” launch. This figure

¹³ The series also published *Cavallo di Troia* in 1942, by Morley Callaghan, whose inclusion in *Americana* despite being Canadian indicates that he was considered American.

seems negligible until one compares it to the percentage, in this same period, of British (22.5%), German (22.5%), French (10%) and all other nationalities (22% total) (Fig. 1). These data highlight the leading literary trends pursued by this book series and demonstrate an equal distribution between the three most represented national literatures.

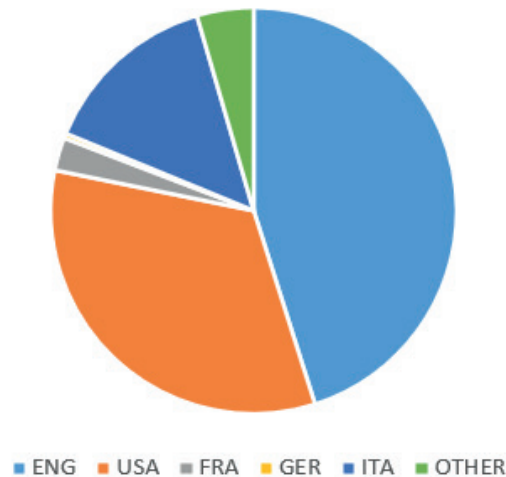


The relevance of US literature is even more evident in “Romanzi della palma” (1932 to 1943). Of its 186 titles, 47 were American, against 43 German books, 23 British books, and 40 titles by authors of other nationalities. As illustrated in Fig. 2, the US represented 25% of the books in the series, followed by Germany (23%), books from other nations (22%), Britain (12%), France (11%), and Italy (6%).



One of Mondadori’s most popular book series, “I libri gialli,” similarly highlights the marketability of US authors in Italy. The series was published

from 1929 to 1943 and included 266 titles, a third (88) of which were translations of American texts. As Fig. 3 shows, with the exception of Italian novels, the representation of other national literatures in percentage terms was extremely small (38). British literature covered 45% of the catalog, while US literature represented 33%. It is worth noting that US and British books in this series were mostly by best-selling authors, contrary to the more varied status of writers published in “Medusa” and “Romanzi della palma.” In the case of British authors, the importance of Edgar Wallace and Agatha Christie is easily graspable (54 and 20 books, respectively); none of the US writers could boast comparable numbers of titles, yet some authors recur as representative of the US noir tradition, such as Erle Stanley Gardner (14), Ellery Queen (11), and S.S. Van Dine (10).



Notably, the increasing number of translations of US books in Italy in this period is evident both within series that explicitly promoted themselves as “literary” and that privileged quality over quantity, and more commercially-oriented series that aimed at the mass market and thus included more titles. That ascent reached its peak with Mondadori’s two broadest-ranging series – whose contents is also the most heterogeneous of the ones that have been discussed, encompassing a wide variety of genres as well as texts by authors of varying degrees of prestige. This analysis confirms that the censorial approach to US literature by the fascist regime was light-touch, and did not particularly limit the circulation of US titles in Italy.

Self-censorship and Self-reflexive Gazes

The expansion of US literature in Italy contributed to the construction of an American mythos that inspired the literary, cultural, and political sensibilities of an entire generation of young writers and intellectuals, providing what Donatella Izzo describes as “a counterweight and antidote to the narrowly provincial and intellectually stifling cultural atmosphere created by Italian fascism” (589; see also Fernandez; Carducci). Beginning with Agostino Lombardo (1961), scholars since the 1960s have identified two important forms of cultural resistance against the regime (see Ferme; Turi) in the translations of US literary texts and literary criticism on US literature by authors such as Pavese, Vittorini, and Giaime Pintor.¹⁴ Echoing Pavese’s oft-quoted words, “During those years, American culture allowed us to watch our own drama unfolding as if on a giant screen” (qtd. in Izzo 590), Izzo suggests that, for the young Italian *americanisti*, America “was first and foremost a utopia – or rather, a heterotopia,” a “real place that took on a radically subversive function when seen as a political alternative to the reality *they* experienced, and capable of acting, quite literally as a self-reflexive mirror” (590; original emphasis). By referencing Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia,”¹⁵ Izzo implies that, through their access to and translation of US texts, these intellectuals contributed to an idea of the US in the popular imaginary that served as an ideological counternarrative to fascism and that influenced, too, the evolution of Italian literature both under the regime and following its collapse (Turi 79).

Izzo’s reading of the first Italian *americanisti*’s conceptualization of the US provides a useful frame of reference for analyzing the logic that underpinned fascist censorship. The “contestatory power of heterotopias,” she notes, “connects the question of alternative spatial configurations with the question of the gaze, [...] and its capacity to effect estranging and self-

¹⁴ I allude to Giaime Pintor 146-47, and Pavese 171.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault defines this notion as “real places [...] that are designed into the very institution of society, which are sorts of actually realized utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed.” (“Different Spaces” 178).

reflexive moves” (588). The regime’s decision to permit the publication of US texts but demand the removal or editing of references to Italy that might encourage Italian readers to draw negative comparisons between Italian and US culture reflects a strategic recognition that though the myth of America could not be eradicated from the public imagination, it *could* be tempered, its parameters circumscribed, and what Izzo describes as its “contestatory power” neutered. The surgical removal of Italy from the pages of US texts provided a means to undermine US literature’s capacity to activate readers’ self-reflexive gaze or encourage critical appraisal of their own context. In this way, the regime sought to curb the potentially subversive elements of US literature, transforming it into a harmless spatial configuration, a place too distant to encourage self-reflection or affect (understandings of) fascist Italy.

The following qualitative analysis reveals these dynamics by drawing primarily on Fabre’s research into the mechanisms of censorship following the 1934 circular letter from Mussolini that tightened the authorities’ control over the editorial industry, and which includes documents relating to the fascist inspection and censorship of over 200 British, French, German, Italian, and American novels (*Il Censore*). Of the 23 (10%) on the list that were American – all of which were from Mondadori’s three main book series – ten were censored and published after the regime’s collapse and nine were blocked, inspected, and released for publication before 1943. The remaining three were inspected and banned following the circulation of Mussolini’s letter, despite having been available in Italy for years. These data suggest that Mondadori’s US translations were not governed by stricter standards of censorship than those applied to their translations of texts from other foreign countries. The data also suggest that these fascist policies tended to target the same themes (anti-war sentiments, abortion, suicide, socialism, race, and moral or religious issues) regardless of the text’s provenance – which in turn indicates that US texts were not more heavily censored, preventatively or otherwise, than books from other countries. For example, the treatment of Hemingway’s unflattering representation of the Caporetto defeat in *A Farewell to Arms* (published as *Addio alle Armi* in 1946) was underpinned by the same logic of the ban imposed on Erich Maria Remarque’s *Im Westen nichts Neues*, (published as *Niente di nuovo sul*

fronte occidentale in 1931). Likewise, Gilmore Millen's *Un negro irresistibile*, originally published in "Romanzi della Palma" in 1932, was censored in 1938 for the same reason as Mura's (Maria Volpi Nannipieri) *Sambadù amore negro* (1934) – namely, its representation of a relationship between a white woman and what was deemed a hyper-sexualized Black character, which violated restrictions on the representation of Black people tightened in the wake of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia (Åkerström 102-08).

While the consistency of the censors' attention to certain themes and topics does not preclude the possibility that the above-discussed books were also censored due to their discussion of, or references to, issues deemed sensitive in Italy at the time, this cannot be said of Hemingway's and Millen's books, which were not published in Italy during the fascist period and thus were not subjected to the cultural distancing measures that are my focus here. The latter, in fact, relied on episodes of micro-(self-) censorship aimed at protecting the national image projected by the regime from critical elements in US texts. Specifically, it entailed the manipulation of translations through omissions or slight changes by translators aimed at rendering books acceptable to the fascist authorities. Several US books translated into Italian in the interwar period were affected by this policy, especially after Mussolini's 1934 circular letter. In what follows, I focus on three emblematic cases of translations preventively manipulated to remove references to the Italian context and cultural image: John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* (1935) and *In Dubious Battle* (1936), translated by Vittorini and Montale, respectively, and John Dos Passos' *The Big Money* (1936), translated by Pavese. The three translators preempted potential issues by consistently manipulating the texts, generating a twofold effect: on the one hand, their choices satisfied the regime's pressing need to contain external criticism of Italy; on the other, by preventing acts of repressive censorship, translators guaranteed that US books continued to enter the Italian book market.

Vittorini's translation of Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* published by Bompiani in 1939 as *Pian della Tortilla* exemplifies this progressive erasure of Italy from translated US book in its elimination of the disparaging remarks about Italian people that punctuate the original text. In Chapter 1, Danny, the drunk protagonist, meets some Italian fishermen: "Race antipathy

overcame Danny's good sense. He menaced the fishermen. 'Sicilian bastards,' he called them, and 'Scum from the prison island,' and 'Dogs of dogs of dogs'" (Steinbeck, *Tortilla* 18). As Dunnnett reports, Vittorini "dealt with Danny's overtly anti-Italian abuse by simply expunging the entire passage, reducing the dialogue to the bare bones of a brief exchange of greetings" (107). Dunnnett observes that the same strategy was applied in Chapter 5, where Torrelli is described as having "the Italians' exaggerated and wholly quixotic ideal of marital relations" (Steinbeck, *Tortilla* 70). Once again, Vittorini eliminated the reference to Italian culture, decoupling the "quixotic idea of marital relations," which he translated as "una concezione donchisciottesca dei rapporti coniugali" (Steinbeck, *Pian* 48), from the Italian connotations Steinbeck had ascribed it. By omitting the original text's caricatural and stereotypical associations of Italians with poverty, drama, and emotional instability, Vittorini's translation prevents potential censorial objections to a derogatory and generalizing representation of the Italian people.

Dunnnett signals a similar procedure with regards to *In Dubious Battle*, translated by Montale and published by Bompiani in 1940 as *La battaglia*. As he writes in a letter to the publisher, Montale erased the only two, and very similar, references to Italy. Where the original text reads "They've got this valley organized like Italy" (Steinbeck, *In Dubious* 156), Montale simply translated as "La valle è troppo organizzata" (Steinbeck, *Battaglia* 232) – literally "They've got this valley too organized". The same sentence appears in a later passage – "Doc Burton was snatched last night. I think he was. Doc was not a man to run out on us, but he is gone. This valley is organized like Italy" (Steinbeck, *In Dubious* 281) – and is translated by Montale in the same, simplified way. Both references to Italy allude to fascism and the regime's repression of mass protest and socialism. Montale emphasizes the rigidity of repressive control by using the adverb "troppo" ("too much") but softens an overt ideologically connoted reference to the Italian political context of the time by removing the adverb's referent (Italy). As he wrote to Bompiani, his interventions were few but targeted: namely, they were aimed, specifically, at eliminating all references to Italy in the target text (Montale, qtd. in Dunnnett 108-09) to shield the Italian readership from a polemic acknowledgment of the illiberal and

antidemocratic order imposed by the regime. More than Vittorini's in *Pian della Tortilla*, Montale's interventions hinder Steinbeck's text's ability to encourage ideological dissent against fascism.

Pavese's translation of Dos Passos' *The Big Money*, published by Mondadori in 1938 as *Un mucchio di quattrini*, confirms the reliance on minimal forms of text manipulation with regards to references to Italy in foreign texts, especially after 1934. That year, Pavese had concluded the translation of *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), which showed great faithfulness to the source text. As Fabre summarizes, when Pavese submitted his translation of *The Big Money*, he wrote to Mondadori that he had erased mentions or allusions to fascism, silenced or reformulated parts where the derogatory terms "wop" and "dago" were used (397-98). In *The Big Money*, the occurrences of the two adjectives designate Italian nationality by shedding a negative light on it, potentially striking the Italian national pride that fascism was keen to promote and celebrate. Pavese proves careful and systematic: he omitted every occurrence of the terms in his translation ("wop" 7 times and "dago" twice). As the following examples attest, Pavese's self-censorial choices do not significantly alter the meaning of the original text, and are in keeping with other translators' management of potential threats to fascists' standards of cultural pride.

In the section "Art and Isidora," Dos Passos writes: "One day at a little restaurant at Golfe Juan she picked up a goodlooking young wop who kept a garage and drove a little Bugatti Racer" (*The Big Money* 123). In one of the "Camera Eye" sections, the original text reads: "What did the elderly wop selling chestnuts whisper to the fat woman behind the picklejars?" (56). In a longer passage in "Charley Anderson," Dos Passos writes: "It wasn't a hotel or a callhouse, it was some kind of a dump with tables and it stank of old cigarmoke and last night's spaghetti and tomatosauce and dago red. What time is it? A fat wop and a young slickhaired wop in their dirty shirtsleeves were shaking him. "Time to pay up and get out. Here's your bill"" (278-79). All these references to "wop" and "dago" are omitted in the Italian translation: "Un giorno in una piccola trattoria di Golfe Juan trovò un bel giovanotto che aveva un'automobile e guidava una piccola Bugatti da corsa" (Dos Passos, *Un mucchio* 1021); "che cos'ha bisbigliato quel vecchio che vende castagne alla grassona dietro i sottaceti?" (1053);

and “Non era un albergo né una casa equivoca, era una sorta di tampa coi tavolini e puzzava di vecchio fumo di sigaro, di spaghetti della sera prima, di salsa di pomodoro e di vino rosso. Qualcuno gli dava scrolloni. ‘Che ora è?’ Un grassone e un giovane dai capelli lustri, in maniche di camicia sporche, lo stavano scrollando. ‘È ora di pagare e andarsene. Ecco il conto’” (1190).

To these examples, it is worth adding one that conveys more overtly political implications. “Mary French” includes an explicit reference to Sacco and Vanzetti. Dos Passos writes: “Her job was keeping in touch with newspapermen and trying to get favorable items into the press. It was uphill work. Although most of the newspapermen who had any connection with the case thought the two had been wrongly convicted they tended to say that they were just two wop anarchists, so what the hell?” (*The Big Money* 361). The translation is faithful except for one crucial detail: the “two wop anarchists” become European: “due anarchici europei” (*Un mucchio* 1279). Pavese operates a stronger self-censorial turn: in addition to protecting the Italian national pride on a local level, the transformation of Sacco and Vanzetti from Italians to Europeans silences those voices in political opposition to fascism that could have drawn on the international notoriety of the episode to attack the fascist brand of Italian nationhood.

These three cases demonstrate the consistency with which Italian translators sought to prevent the censorship or outright ban of US literature by preemptively erasing references to Italy that the regime’s censors would be likely to deem offensive. These included not only critical representations of fascism, but also stereotypical portrayals of Italians, and Italianness, that by enlivening readers to other nations’ perceptions of their culture might, according to censors’ logic, engender critical self-reflection and skepticism towards the image of the nation the regime was intent on projecting.

Conclusion

The quantitative analysis presented in the first part of this article bases the ambivalent relationship that characterized Italian fascism and the cultural perception of the United States on data on the circulation of US books

translated into Italian in the 1930s and 1940s. Whereas censors cautiously monitored the promotion of US culture through literature, the number of works of fiction by US authors published in fascist Italy shows that the censors' aversion to the United States was mitigated by dynamics inherent to the book market as well as by the impetus to build a national popular consensus. Concomitantly, in alignment with the reception of other foreign literatures, the translation of books by US authors highlights an ambiguous combination of approaches and procedures adopted by the fascist censors. While this falls outside the scope of this study, it is worth mentioning that the stealthy mechanisms of the fascist censorial apparatus bear several commonalities with the ways in which the circulation of foreign cultural products in Italy was subject to conditions even under more democratic governments, before and after fascism, such as during the Giolitti's age (Catolfi 1-2) or after the Second World War (see Baldi).

The qualitative analysis in the second part of the article deals with the measures of preventive and productive censorship that publishers and translators adopted to avoid the full censorship of US literature and that led them to manipulate translations to meet the fascist impositions. This resulted in self-censoring translation choices that played down and/or erased the subversive potential of US texts on Italian readers. Italian translators pursued the strategy of systematically eliminating references to the Italian political and cultural scenario. These interventions represented a minimal alteration of the meaning of the source texts, but suggest that the regime endorsed, or at least was not interested in opposing, the reception of US literature as long as books did not (or were prevented from) project(ing) a negative light on Italy and undermine consensus for the regime. By sanitizing the representations of Italy and Italian culture in US literature, translations contributed to metaphorically repositioning (the image of) the United States as too far away for spotlighting the controversies that characterized the Italian context. Whereas the most influential Italian translators of the time perceived US literature as providing a lens through which to observe and understand their own culture, the fascist authorities prompted Italian publishers to minimize the possible forms of criticism of Italy that might originate from US literature.

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Articles

The Ghost Dollhouse of Dixie

Dead Places, Hauntology and the Uncanny in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* (2006) and its 2018 TV adaptation by Jean-Marc Vallée. These works cover the dark parable of Camille Preaker, a Southern émigré who is forced to go back south to face the demons of her story – and of the vaster Southern history. The homecoming turns out to be characterized by a disturbing overlap of time gone and time present – or better, of a past corroding the present – which the series presents in a more distinctively Southern gothic style when compared to the novel. Coherent relations between time and space are disjointed by Camille's past traumas and memories, resulting in a painful existential dislocation and a dialectics of constraint that questions and dismantles the traditional white Southern sense of place, bringing to light the complex conflict between a Southern and a postsouthern reality that results in a renewed ensnarement. To map Camille's hallucinating and painfully concrete descent into the South, the essay analyzes the interconnected roles of time, space, and how they reflect and are reflected by Southern society as portrayed in the novel and series, showing how they project a dead – and deathly – chronotope that encompasses the protagonist's story, the region's history, and its faux-historical resurgences.

KEYWORDS

Gothic, Uncanny, Hauntology, Southern Literature, Sharp Objects

*I've been thinking about making tracks
 But the only road I know
 It's going to lead me back
 I'm stuck in the South*
 (Adia Victoria, "Stuck in the South")

Introduction: Stuck in the South?

As Martyn Bone has shown, the ubiquitous, if underdefined, concept of the Southern sense of place in literature “derives substantially from the Agrarians’ idealized vision of a rural, agricultural society” (vii), and as such, I might add, in its declared segregationism it is chiefly a white, exclusionary, and openly racist construct.¹ The Southern Agrarians’ anti-modern manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930) leaves no doubt about the kind of rural idyll the Vanderbilt group envisioned for their South: a pastoral antebellum reverie not unlike Margaret Mitchell’s revisionist, Lost Cause epic *Gone with the Wind* (1936). Indeed, as Paul V. Murphy has pointed out, “[a]t the heart of Agrarianism was the question not only of *where* do I stand, but also, *who* belongs?” (10; emphasis added). Still, in spite of its purported devotion to a white-devised (when not openly neo-Confederate) cognitive geography, Southern literature written by white authors abounds with examples in which the *genius loci* revered by the Agrarians and their acolytes is questioned and exposed.

Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* (1961) is a good example of a novel set and written in the South that problematizes the relationship between white Southerners and the region’s dominant psycho-geographical landscape. Bone again describes Percy’s novel as “a proto-postsouthern

¹ The Twelve Southerners (also known as The Southern Agrarians) were a group of scholars based at Vanderbilt University who, in 1930, published *I’ll Take My Stand*, a manifesto advocating for an agrarian South against the encroaching industrialization in the region. Among them, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren (who would later distance himself from the group). The collection of essays remains infamous for its romanticized, nostalgic defense of the Old South and the Lost Cause of the Confederacy.

literary representation of a changing social geography” (55), defining its protagonist, Binx Bolling, as a man who rejects “mythical idea[s] of a southern history and identity,” and relocates himself outside the traditional white Southern social geography (64), only to find himself “yearning [...] for an identifiable ‘southern’ traditional culture” at the end of the novel (72). Bolling seems to be stuck in the South. Or, more precisely, in a certain vision of the South. Caught in the process of leaving worn-out and, consequently, dangerous ideological constructs behind, and trying to find new paradigms capable of entrenching the individual in the fast-changing social landscape of the postsouthern age,² he ultimately recedes into its Old-Southern aristocratic roots – a move symbolically equivalent to an abjuration of life, the embrace of a dead space-time and ultimately of death itself.

Following Fredric Jameson’s useful theorization, we could say that Bolling’s cognitive mapping is unable to foster a fully functional “situational representation” (*Postmodernism* 51) because of the interference between conflicting geographies and ideologies – or conversely by their baffling absence. The lack of identification with the Old-South ethos often coexists with the inability, or unwillingness, to reject such metanarrative on the grounds of its capacity to at least provide some sense of belonging, some alignment. This results in a refusal to navigate the disorienting cognitive mapping of postsouthernness, in a failure to go beyond it and discover new meaningful ways of relating to the region’s contemporary social and ideological geography. What arises is an existential paralysis easily seduced by the allures of a mythical past that can reveal itself as a consuming entrapment rather than a safe womb.

In the pages that follow, I focus on this sense of entrapment as it is depicted in Gillian Flynn’s *Sharp Objects* (2006) and its 2018 TV adaptation created by Marti Noxon and directed by Jean-Marc Vallée. These works cover the dark parable of Camille Preaker, a Southern émigré with a history of emotional abuse resulting in a present of self-harm and addiction, who

² A thorough discussion of the postsouthern condition is beyond the scope of this essay. For an in-depth analysis of postsouthernness and its implications for literature see Bone; Romine; Petrelli.

is forced to face the demons of her own past – and the vaster Southern past. A struggling journalist (working for the Chicago's *Daily Post* in the novel, and the *St. Louis Chronicle* in the series), she is sent back to the small town she grew up in, located in the Missouri bootheel, to cover the murder of a young girl and the recent disappearance of a second one (who will soon be revealed to be another victim of a serial killer). There, a broken community and a broken upper-class family await her.

The homecoming turns out to be characterized by a disturbing overlap of past and present – or better, of a past corroding the present – which the series presents in a more distinctively Southern gothic style as compared to the novel. Coherent relations between time and space are disjointed by Camille's past traumas and memories, resulting in a painful existential dislocation that is, somewhat paradoxically, imposed on the protagonist right as soon as she rejoins her Southern locale. The urgent, semi-conscious (and conflicted) need to reconnect with her home, and even to let the native soil undo her, clashes with the urge to break free from the suffocating family and memorial ties she had tried to cut by moving to the urban North, creating a dialectic of constraint that questions and dismantles the traditional white Southern sense of place, bringing to light the complex conflict between a Southern and a postsouthern reality that results in a renewed ensnarement. To map Camille's hallucinatory and painfully concrete descent into the South, I will analyze the interconnected roles of time and space, and how they reflect on, and are reflected by, Southern society as portrayed in the novel and series, showing how they project a dead – and deathly – chronotope that encompasses the protagonist's story, the region's history, and its faux-historical resurgences.

An Ode to Confederate Death

To understand how *Sharp Objects* delves into the dangerous limbo at the intersection of a waning Southern identity and postsouthern alienation, it is useful to focus on its construction of place. Wind Gap, Camille's hometown, is

at the very bottom of Missouri, in the boot heel. Spitting distance from Tennessee and Arkansas [...]. It's been around since before the Civil War [...]. It's near the Mississippi, so it was a port city at one point. Now its biggest business is hog butchering. About two thousand people live there. Old money and trash. (Flynn 3-4)

Although brief, this introduction to Wind Gap already outlines the history of a Southern space that has moved into a postsouthern status. Postsouthernness is intimately related to the shift from a traditional rural society like the one championed by the Twelve Southerners to one largely defined by contemporary capitalist modes of production, to the point that, as industrialization took over, the white genteel rural South re-imagined the region as “as a site of resistance to capitalism’s destruction of ‘place’” (Bone 5).

The quaint town of Wind Gap has left its *Life on the Mississippi* days behind to become an important hub of the meat packing industry. “Find a poor person in Wind Gap, and they’ll almost always tell you they work at the farm,” Camille says, “a private operation that delivers almost 2 percent of the country’s pork. [...] For the sake of full disclosure, I should add that my mother owns the whole operation and receives approximately \$ 1.2 million in profits from it annually. She lets other people run it” (Flynn 62). Wind Gap is thus a completely dis-placed town: the traditional land-based Southern ethos has been swept away by industrialization – and Camille’s family is the main force behind this change.

Adora Crellin, Camille’s neurotic and unaffectionate mother, is a wealthy industrial capitalist that nonetheless refuses to acknowledge herself as such, as the rejection of her role as head of the operation reveals. She lives instead in a delusional Old-Southern aristocratic world she created within the walls of her mansion, a house “replete with a widow’s walk, a wraparound veranda, a summer porch jutting towards the back, and a cupola” (28) – a virtual antebellum relic. It is an enclave of a time long gone, but also a space paralyzed by trauma: the history of the South and the story of the Preaker-Crellin family coexist, frozen within these rooms.

Camille sinks into her mother’s real-life diorama, a twofold reconstruction of both a faux-idyllic family life and a quasi-mythic

Southern past. These interwoven dimensions have a common provenance in loss. In fact, Adora's obsession with a time lost has been exacerbated by the loss of her second daughter, Marian, to a mysterious sickness. Her desperate determination to keep at least a trace of her existence alive pushed her to turn her home into a shrine. Interestingly enough, this memorial embalming goes *pari passu* with Adora's efforts to preserve her family's (and Wind Gap's) Southern identity, whose disappearance is compared, tellingly, to undergoing a trauma comparable to that of losing her own child. Adora's impossible desire to stop the passing of time and death itself is clearly projected on to her house, and more specifically on her most prized possession: an ivory inlaid floor she inherited from her great-great grandmother. "It was supposed to last forever," Adora says, "and it has, just... Things fall apart awful quick" ("Closer" 29:48). We learn that the floor has also been featured in a magazine, where it was described as "The Ivory Toast: Southern Living from a Bygone Time" (Flynn 234), making it a synecdoche for the Preaker-Crellins' and Wind Gap's memorialization (or rather, mummification) of the past.

Just like Adora's house, the town is presented as having a strong Southern heritage – a feature only suggested in Flynn's novel but thoroughly developed in the series with interesting results. The first mayor of Wind Gap was Millard Calhoon (Zeke Calhoon in the series), a Confederate hero who

shot it out with a whole troop of Yankees in the first year of the Civil War over in Lexington, and single-handedly saved that little Missouri town. (Or so implies the plaque inside the school entrance.) He darted across farmyards and zipped through picket-fenced homes, politely shooing the cooing ladies aside so they wouldn't be damaged by the Yanks. (20)

A tongue-in-cheek description of a farcical hero, but "a hero nonetheless" (20): precisely the kind of obscure historical figure upon which a small town can build its mythical past, in order to participate in the Lost Cause narrative and to escape the anonymous netherworld of the rural Midwest lurking outside of this Southern enclave.

Wind Gap's Southern roots and the Preaker-Crellin family gain even more historical depth in Noxon and Vallée's adaptation. The series cleverly elaborates on the novel's often sketched-in elements of Southernness, and in doing so it works more as a complementary piece than as a straightforward adaptation. This is especially evident in a scene from the TV show that does not figure in Gillian's novel. In episode five, we witness the much-anticipated celebration for Calhoun Day, held in Adora's backyard and proudly sponsored by her. The Crellins' house is already a quintessentially Southern Gothic mansion replete with columns, halls and corridors in which Camille's painful memories materialize as ghostlike apparitions. But the narrator's ghosts are not the only specters haunting this place. Adorned with Confederate flags and populated by people dressed as soldiers, Southern gentlemen and Southern belles all sipping mint juleps and acting as perfect and perfectly fake plantation aristocrats, the house turns into a sunbathed phantasmagoria straight out of the Civil War.

The story behind Calhoun's Day is told by Camille:

Zeke Calhoun, our founding pedophile, he fought for the South. His bride, Millie Calhoun, she was my great, great, great grandvictim or something. She was from a Union family. One day the Union soldiers come down here to collect hubby dead or alive. But brave Millie, who is with child, she refuses to give Zeke up. She resists. But it's how she resists that people in this town just love. The Union soldiers, they tied her to a tree. Did horrible things to her. Violations. But Millie never said a word. Lost the baby, the end, applause. ("Closer" 25:12)

It is quite revealing that, in celebrating their heritage, the Preaker-Crellin family and the town of Wind Gap are actually restaging a traumatic event that, from a hermeneutical point of view, turns into a metacommentary of sorts revealing where the town really stands.³ W.J. Cash sardonically

³ My use of the term "metacommentary" is mediated from Fredric Jameson, who, comparing its function to Freudian psychoanalysis, defines this hermeneutical process as "a laying bare, a restoration of the original message, the original experience, beneath the distortions of the censor" (Jameson, "Metacommentary" 16); the "censor" being in this

writes that the Southern woman was considered “center and circumference, diameter and periphery, sine, tangent, and secant” of all Southern affections (86), and as such came to be identified “with the very notion of the South itself” (116) by the white dominating class. Cash also writes about the “rape complex” (115) that developed around the Southern white woman, a delusional paranoia in which the plantation aristocracy sublimated its own ongoing demise after the Civil War.⁴ Adding this scene to the original plot, Vallée and Noxon lay bare how the reenactment of the grisly (and maybe invented) scene of Millie’s violation, the apex of Wind Gap’s annual rejuvenation of its Southern ties, is a celebration that, following Cash, is better understood as a glorification of the death of the Old South. Behind the allegiance with the rural antebellum ethos lies then an unconscious devotion to necrosis, a renewed connection with a space and a time that are not simply gone, but dead; or better, deadly.

Charles Reagan Wilson writes that “‘sense of place’ as used in the South implies an organic society [...]. Attachment to a place gives an abiding identity because places associated with family, community, and history have depth” (1137). A definition that echoes Eudora Welty’s “Place in Fiction,” where the writer posits that “place has a more lasting identity than we have, and we unswervingly tend to attach ourselves to identity” (42), also adding: “[i]t is by knowing where you stand that you grow able to judge where you are [...]. Sense of place gives equilibrium; extended, it is sense of direction too” (54). In light of these considerations, it is possible to see how Camille, Adora, and Wind Gap as a whole participate in the construction of a sense of place, and of an identity, rooted in death, and able only to replicate death. The rape of Millie Calhoun then becomes not only an archetype for the Preaker-Crellin family’s long history of administered

case the white agrarian discourse on Southern history.

⁴ Cash talks about the rape complex in conjunction with the abolition of slavery, clearly marking it as a racist fantasy enabled (or empowered) by African American emancipation, as “white anxieties about black autonomy articulated in paranoid scenarios” (Donaldson 262). But he also points his pen at the Yankee as the root cause of such widespread fears about rape. It is possible to say, then, that *Sharp Objects*’ rape scene directly addresses the Union’s “violation” of the Southern aristocratic sense of sovereignty embodied by the Southern woman.

and self-inflicted harm, but, thanks to the symbolic overlap of the white woman with the antebellum South, an arche-trauma that Adora, Camille, Amma (Camille's teenage half-sister), and everyone else in Wind Gap, endlessly revive and re-inscribe into the present.

Focusing on the character of Amma proves useful to elucidate how *Sharp Objects* is not so much depicting a social geography helplessly stuck in a death cycle, but one actively and enthusiastically consecrating itself to it. The story's final plot-twist reveals Amma as the killer behind the girls' murders, making her the most evident perpetrator of the deathly atmosphere surrounding Wind Gap. Her symbolic role in the novel as the main incarnation of a new South haunted by an unescapable death drive is suggested by the role she plays on Calhoun Day. Always provocative and rebellious, Amma drops acid with her friends before jumping on the garden stage to impersonate the main character of the performance: Millie. We watch her, pupils dilated, as she seems to take pleasure from the awkward (and disturbing) simulated rape that the schoolchildren portray on the scene for the delight of the public. The great gusto with which she brings back from the past her ancestor's violation is a clear sign of the psychological short-circuit through which the Preaker-Crellins and Wind Gap reaffirm their Being-in-the-Southern-world. In the now clear connection with the death of the Old South, which is only ostensibly commemorated but actually consigned to its grave, her total abandonment to this yearly reiteration of past trauma acquires all the traits of an uncanny repetition.

As Sigmund Freud's seminal "Das Unheimliche" elucidates, the "compulsion to repeat" is precisely one of the mechanisms capable of generating the feeling of the uncanny, and, more relevant for the sake of this discussion, this compulsion is strong enough to override the pleasure principle (238), revealing itself as the expression of a deep-seated death drive. Freud will expand on this idea in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, but the grounds of his theorization of the death drive are already laid out in nuce in "The Uncanny." At this point, Amma's heartfelt acting, and Wind Gap passionate involvement with Calhoun Day are better reframed as a white Southern *jouissance* barely disguised as a triumph of antebellum virtue.

In the TV series, the frailty of this disguise is subtly reinforced by bad

acting and ambiguity. When the brave maiden is freed by the fearless Zeke Calhoun and his Confederate soldiers, the actors form a front-stage choir to sing the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* – a strange choice indeed since the lyrics of the song were composed by Julia Ward Howe, active anti-slavery activist and fervent Union supporter (her husband Samuel was among the Secret Six who supported John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry). Or better, a choice that once again points at the true meaning of the play: to celebrate a funeral for the Old South. But still, people don't seem to notice what the reenactment is hiding and cannot help participating in it. Even Camille, who is clearly and sardonically detached from the event as her previous remarks make clear, chooses to dress up and blend in nonetheless, and, in spite of her disenchantment, she also appears to be fascinated by the play. No one seems to be immune from the hidden desire for destruction sublimated in the scene.

A close reading of the Calhoun Day scene is necessary to highlight how *Sharp Objects'* postsouthern locale expresses a sense of place entirely defined by death: the story of Camille's family and the town of Wind Gap is unconsciously bent on the self-eradication of life from a place that was ideally congenial to their thriving as descendants of the mythical rural South. Calhoun Day reveals the precarious condition of Wind Gap as a town unable to exist in a postsouthern space. Its inhabitants' frail grasp on their actual present highlights the disjointedness of the chronotope they inhabit, demonstrating in turn how this society's response to the changing Southern geography is not only the desire to retreat into a mythical past, but to self-destruct. This clumsy, kitsch festival from a maladjusted little town, barely veneering the desire for death that lies at its core with a thin layer of nostalgic revisionism, is the most powerful image of the characters' alienation from the contemporary South, the profound uncanniness of their historical, spatial and ontological condition.

Southern Hauntologies

Having taken a close look at what I believe to be a key-scene in understanding *Sharp Objects'* relationship to the South, let us now go back

to its chronotope – or, more generally, its storyworld – to see how both the novel and the series depict white Southern society as trapped in an inescapable existential paralysis. I previously defined *Sharp Objects*' post-South as a hybrid space equally composed of a Midwestern post-industrial reality (more tangible in the novel than in the series) and sudden openings upon an antebellum undertow that is both dormant and powerful at the same time in the way it shapes the characters' lives, or better, in the way it swallows them up in a past that turns into a tomb. The symbolic role of Amma as the designed sacrificial victim through which the death of the antebellum South is enacted demonstrates how the character is haunted by her ancestor's story. But, as I mentioned before, the whole town seems to be haunted by the ghosts of its past, turning the story into an uncanny phantasmagoria that repeats itself, directed towards its own demise. It is a South defined by its "submission to empty repetition of past cultural modes," by the performance of "past citations of what signifies southernism" (Anderson et al. 5).

Neither the novel nor the series express a solid sense of the here-and-now, something that might be expected from the supposedly pastoral chronotope projected by the Old-Southern rural vision that Wind Gap so enthusiastically promotes. The "organic fastening-down," the "grafting of life and its events to a place" that Mikhail Bakhtin associates with the idyll (225) is, in fact, inverted in a perverse incarnation of itself since the only thing that is actually grafted on to this place is death. If the "blurring of all the temporal boundaries" Bakhtin writes about (225) somewhat resembles Wind Gap's time out of joint, there is no trace of the reassuring ahistoricism that characterizes pastoral landscapes: as Calhoun Day makes abundantly clear, cyclicity here merely signifies necrosis and oblivion.

Flynn's novel is already imbued with this gothic atmosphere of entrapment, mainly exemplified by the continuous and tormenting presence of a history that reappears in the present interrupting its linear unraveling. But it is once again Noxon and Vallée's series that makes this haunting of history explicit. The series demonstrates a desire to fissure the characters' reality, and it does so through the continuous disruption of a coherent timeframe by the intrusion of Camille's past – and especially of memories of her dead little sister Marian – in the form of ghosts that suddenly appear

in Adora's mansion. Silent, peripheral, these figures nonetheless inhabit the protagonist's present with a weight that is sometimes heavier than that of some of the flesh-and-blood characters.

Camille is suspended between the world of the dead (dead people and dead moments) and the world of affairs, between the Midwest (be it Chicago or St. Louis) and the South, but she is not the only one suffering from this suspension. Her mother too lives in what, borrowing from Jean-Paul Sartre's definition of *The Sound and the Fury's* temporality, we could describe as a "vitesse glacée" (67), a paradoxical frozen speed in which time moves forward without actually progressing. Paralyzed by the trauma of having lost her second child, and unable to relinquish the delusional masquerade of aristocratic Southernness she has built all her life around, she too demonstrates a precarious hold on reality.

Mother and daughter, so cold and distant throughout most of the story, are joined together by "a refusal to adjust to what current conditions call 'reality,'" an attitude that makes them both "outcast[s] in [their] own time" (Fisher, *Ghosts* 24). It is the failed mourning of the family's dearly beloved younger member, reflected in the general failure to mourn the death of traditional Southern society, that causes this existential dislocation and the subsequent obsession with death. Mark Fisher calls this attitude a "hauntological melancholia," brought about by the refusal to "give up the ghost" (as is the case with Adora and her dead daughter), or conversely to the ghost's reluctance to give up on us (*Ghosts* 22) – exactly what happens with Camille, haunted by the specter of her dead sister. As long as such dialectics is at play, the characters are denied the full possibility of both a present and a future, trapped in patterns of sterile, destructive repetition. And, although Flynn's story is more closely focused on the Preaker-Crellins and the toxic relationship they establish with one another, Vallée and Noxon's vital addition to the plot in the form of Calhoun Day allows us to safely affirm that this same logic characterizes Wind Gap's relationship with its history and its locale.

Sharp Objects' narrative, then, belongs to a hauntological storyworld, to a space-time marked by "anachronism and inertia" caused by the "slow cancellation of the future" (*Ghosts* 6). I am not interested here in elaborating the manifold implications of hauntology as first analyzed by Jacques Derrida

in his *Specters of Marx* (1993), but rather I would like to focus specifically on Mark Fisher's time-oriented take on this concept. Still, in both Derrida's and Fisher's approaches, hauntology is inextricably related to the crumbling down of a master narrative that deprives society of a discernible telos, whose absence in turn causes the vanishing of a cultural and historical trajectory. The narrative Derrida and Fisher mourn is one offering an alternative to late capitalism's onslaught on contemporary society, and, although the Old South certainly did not express a leftist (still less a Marxist) resistance to contemporary modes of production, the hauntological cancellation of the future is still able to describe this culture's reaction to industrialization. Building on Derrida, Fisher describes hauntology as arising specifically in conjunction with neoliberal democracy's "end of history" (using Francis Fukuyama's definition), with the inability to see another way forward when all the other paths towards the future have disappeared. In the case of the South, the Agrarians' rejection of capitalism, and their anachronistic resurrection of ruralism in the face of modernization, not only instilled in the white aristocratic South the fearful realization that their world had come to an end, but – again – engendered a desperate need to retreat into a past that whose actual dimension had been blurred and transfigured into the realm of myth.

It is the inability of this myth to function as a proper haven – no matter how distorted – from the inevitable fall into the displacement of the post-South that transform the delusional antebellum reverie in which Wind Gap aspires to exist into a gothic trap from which death is the only way out. Let me reference Calhoun Day's flimsy *mise-en-scène* one last time in order to emphasize how the *Sharp Objects*' series seems to be acutely conscious of the cultural contradictions of the culture it depicts. As I have mentioned before, the little festival is already a flickering trace of the town's past, but this does not stop the people from being emotionally involved in it. Throughout this faux-historical reenactment, the camera focuses on the people of Wind Gap: together with people dressed in full Confederate uniforms and ethereal Southern belles with parasols, we can see regularly dressed women and men, stereotypical rednecks wearing Ray-Bans and sleeveless shirts adorned with the Stars and Bars, and policemen overseeing them all. Reading this scene through the lenses of hauntological

melancholia makes the town's resurrection of the past even more artificial than it already is, exposing not only the Southern sense of place Wind Gap is trying to conjure up as a cheap prop in an irrevocably modernized world, but the whole operation as factually unable to even function as a temporary escape from the present.

In fact, according to Fisher, to actually classify as hauntology, an "existential orientation" needs to somehow reveal itself as such, not allowing for the "illusion of presence" (*Ghosts* 21), but actually laying bare the melancholic, retrospective attitude that characterizes it. In other words, a proper hauntological melancholia – like the one I believe characterizes *Sharp Objects* – always comes with metacognition. Fisher writes how the perfect example of hauntological melancholia is the crackling of a vinyl record. "Crackle makes us aware that we are listening to a time that is out of joint. [...] We aren't only made aware that the sounds we are hearing are recorded, *we are also made conscious of the playback systems we use to access the recordings*" (21; emphasis added). The hauntological drive of *Sharp Objects*, which already manifests itself in the series (and the novel) through the persistence and repetition of dead olden days in the characters' everyday life, is further reinforced by the opening titles, in which blurred cuts from Camille's past and present are appropriately set to the retro music of a crackling vinyl. Transferring the music metaphor Fisher uses to a properly cultural-historical dimension, the deliberate way in which the series insists on the disingenuousness of Wind Gap's dreams of the Old South further brings into focus their true reality as the expression of "the South of a consumption-based economy – the South of the museum, the reenactment, the themed space and the tourist destination" (Romine 5). In light of this consideration, the death drive at the heart of *Sharp Objects* I have discussed in the previous section can also be understood as the symptom of a contemporary South that, forced to exist in an era dominated by capitalistic modes of consumption and deprived of a direction forward, is now trying to devour itself in an effort to get out of out of this cul-de-sac.

Reprise and Conclusion: A Pretty Uncanny Little House

Through the story of Camille and the intertwined history of her family and of the town of Wind Gap, *Sharp Objects* suggests that “going back home” – be it the protagonist’s mundane journey or the town’s desperate spiritual search for its true dimension – is sometimes synonymous with undoing. The overlap of death and home is quite clear when it comes to Adora and her warped sense of motherhood: the only way through which she seems capable of showing affection for her daughters is to care for them when they are sick. “I turned back over, let my mother put the pill on my tongue, pour the thick milk into my throat, and kiss me,” a sick Camille recounts, reporting a truly unexpected gesture of love from her otherwise glacial mother (Flynn 248). But, in yet another disturbing twist, the novel reveals how Adora suffers from Munchausen syndrome by proxy: she is the one responsible for her younger daughter’s death and for the frequent illnesses that befall Amma throughout the story, and she almost kills Camille too – a fate that the protagonist seems to embrace before being saved by the police. Just like Wind Gap and its obsession with the antebellum South, the only attachment Adora can develop is one steeped in death.

The compulsive repetition of her daughters’ poisoning makes Adora another example of the uncanny death drive from which Wind Gap cannot escape. But, as Freud (and Fisher after him) posit, together with repetition, the other main process at the heart of the uncanny is doubling (Freud 234; Fisher, *Weird* 9). And, to make *Sharp Objects*’ descent into uncanniness complete, the murder mystery that the novel uses as an excuse to explore family and cultural trauma is a particularly meaningful example of doubling. Amma’s beloved dollhouse, a painstakingly faithful reproduction of her mother’s mansion, gives us one last, powerful spatialized symbol of the inextricable connection that Wind Gap, and the Preaker-Crellins in particular, have with death.

While Camille’s relationship with the place she inhabits is antagonistic (at least, up to a certain extent) and Adora’s is delusional, Amma’s is mimetic. This ability to perfectly blend in with her surroundings reveals a rather sophisticated cognitive mapping of the Old-South phantasmagoria she moves in and is in turn expressed in her obsession with meticulously recreating her

living space in the sophisticated dollhouse she plays with nonstop. “[S]he worked on her Adora dollhouse most hours of the day” (Flynn 313), Camille says. “The dollhouse needed to be perfect, just like everything else Amma loved” (320). Amma is clearly too old to really care for dollhouses (she is already into sex, drinking, and drugs, looking way more uninhibited than her older sister), but she still spends hours refurbishing her own to turn it into a perfect double of the mansion. Given her unflinching dedication, we could say (after Fisher) that the uncanny for her is not simply a feeling, but rather a mode of perception and a mode of being (Fisher, *Weird* 9).

The dollhouse, already an inherently uncanny element because of its being a doppelgänger of the story’s main setting, hides a secret so frightening that the series (but not the novel, that adds a short epilogue to the revelation) abruptly ends when Camille, looking into it, realizes that the replica of her mother’s prized ivory floor has been built by Amma with the splinters of the teeth she pulled out of her victims’ mouths after she strangled them. The solution of the murder mystery had been hidden in plain sight for all this time. A philologically accurate reification of the Freudian *unheimlich* – an element both familiar and different from itself – the dollhouse turns the resurging traces of the past that haunt Wind Gap into actual human remains: ossified, grotesque, and lacerating symbols of an ineluctable, devouring connection with a sense of history – and more generally a sense of place – out of which only a house of horrors can be built.

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

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ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS

Gertrude Stein, Genius, Modernism, Fascism, Genealogy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

George Washington was fairly famous because he wrote what he saw and he saw what he said. And this is what I do. And so what do I do. I say he wrote what said he did. (168)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Franchising the Golden Arches in Italy

A New Perspective on Americanization¹

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Abstract

The article discusses whether “Americanization” is still a viable concept to historically investigate Euro-American relations, and how the related process has changed in an era of growing global integration, multipolarity and competition like the one opened by the rise of the “Neoliberal order” in the 1970s-1980s. It does so through the case study provided by the arrival of McDonald’s in Italy and the debate on the country’s Americanization during the 1980s. By framing McDonald’s export of its franchising formula within the growth of Italy’s franchising industry, the article casts light on new forms of American hegemony.

KEYWORDS

Americanization, McDonald’s, Franchising, Italy

In a 2023 policy brief analyzing the effects of the war in Ukraine on US-Europe relations, foreign policy experts Jana Puglierin and Jeremy Shapiro argue that we are again witnessing “the Americanization of Europe,” given

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Italian to English are mine.

that “since the 2008 financial crisis, the US has become ever more powerful relative to its European allies” (n. pag.). By reviving a seemingly outmoded expression, their paper solicits a reflection on whether Americanization is still a viable concept to historically investigate Euro-American relations. In an era of growing global integration, multipolarity and competition like that opened by the rise of the neoliberal order in the 1970s-1980s (see Gerstle), does it still make sense to speak of the Americanization of Europe? And, if so, how has the Americanization process changed?

The article addresses such issues through the analysis of the arrival of the McDonald’s restaurant franchise in Italy and the debate on the country’s Americanization during the 1980s. The goal is to cast light on new forms of American influence, considering McDonald’s export of its franchising formula within the growth of Italy’s franchising industry. The underlying idea is that franchising provides a key to addressing unexplored aspects of the Americanization of Europe at a time of growing globalization. It follows my invitation to look at Americanization as pertaining more to American control over distribution systems than to its influence over production and consumption patterns.

Reinventing Americanization

Historians have extensively spoken of Americanization to analyze the evolution of US influence over Europe in the twentieth century. They have mostly looked at the post-World War II decades, proposing different interpretations of the process, but agreeing on the fact that the Cold War provided the ideal context for the propagation of American ways. The intensification of the historiographical debate on the Americanization of Europe during the 1990s mirrored both developments endogenous to academia and changes in society. On the one hand, the growing interest in the influence of American culture in Europe was consistent with the “culturalist turn” undertaken in Cold War studies and, in general, in historiography since the 1980s (Berghahn 120; Johnston 290). On the other hand, the Americanization debate reflected the triumphalist rhetoric following the US victory in the Cold War, with its emphasis on soft

power. At the same time, the scholarly discussion on whether Europeans had been Americanized signaled renewed anxieties over forms of US cultural colonization. As De Grazia notes, “the momentum to define the EU as a repository of deeply held European beliefs and values grew over the 1990s” (“Soft Power United States” 33), bolstering Europe’s ability to present itself as a peer competitor both at the geopolitical level and in terms of the appeal of the “European Dream” (Rifkin 3; see Reid).² It followed the historiographical tendency to deflate Americanization and to rather underscore, in Rob Kroes’ popular expression, Europeans’ “selective appropriations” and re-invention of American models.³

The appropriation thesis paralleled new scholarly attention to globalization as both a process and an analytical tool. Since Theodore Levitt popularized the term in 1983, globalization has progressively replaced Americanization in the public discussion on the effects of global market integration. The reasons for this are, in part, to be found in the strengths and limits of the Americanization process. As the Cold War facilitated the transnational diffusion of American models and products, it also contributed to speeding up a globalization process which would eventually make “the grounds for American hegemony less evident” (De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire* 460). Likewise, the military shield provided by the US during the Cold War favored the economic and political reemergence of the EU and Japan as macro-regional competitors, thereby undermining America’s leadership even within the Western Bloc (see Garavini; Miller). Moreover, the economic crises of the 1970s produced a “shock of the global” order, opening the way to US-led financial globalization, but also producing greater global interdependence and competition than ever (see Ferguson et al. 351). As the US appeared on its way to win the Cold War, the global dominance of American products, firms and capital was crumbling and the global order was increasingly multipolar.

² It was in this context that the EU first elaborated its own “normative power” (i.e. exercise of leadership through norms-making) as an alternative to US soft power.

³ Despite the considerable scholarly support for the “selective appropriation” thesis, historians have variously extended this argument. Emphasizing instances of creolization, Richard Pells has even argued that the Americanization of Europe is “a myth” (xiv).

Scholars of globalization have questioned the very idea of Americanization to rather embrace a new, “post-modern,” emphasis on cultural hybridity (see Kraidy). Supporters of growing global heterogeneity have opposed the interpretation of either Americanization or globalization as top-down homogenizing processes, proposing instead new conceptualizations. Ulrich Beck spoke of “cosmopolitanization,” arguing that “the concept of Americanization is based on a national understanding of globalization” (16-18). Robertson similarly claimed that “in so far as the notion of Americanization is used to mean American cultural homogenization, the argument is far from clear” as “the US is becoming ever more heterogeneous” (“Rethinking Americanization” 261). This point of view is in line with his popularization of the term “glocalization,” which he understood “as the best interpretative category” to make “explicit the heterogenizing aspects of globalization” (“Globalisation or Glocalisation?” 191).⁴

The growing interest in globalization (or in its glocalization variant) seems therefore to have long overshadowed that in Americanization, acknowledging it, at most, as “the most recent chapter” of a longer globalizing process (Kuisel, “The End of Americanization” 603) or as the US way to cope with it (see Ninkovich). Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, several scholars have repeatedly argued for the end of the American century (see McCoy; Bacevich; Mason), while the 2008 economic crisis triggered an ongoing debate on the decline of the US-led neoliberal order (Stiglitz n. pag.; see Gerstle). The exhaustion of the cultural turn in the social sciences, by the early 2000s (see Bonnell and Hunt), similarly contributed to spreading the idea that “the concept of ‘Americanization’ may no longer be as useful as it has been when trying to understand American-European relations during the Cold War and in the decade after 1990” (Berghahn 130).

And yet, the fact that America appears as the recurrent subtext of the debate on globalization’s impact is telling.⁵ In this respect, Shapiro and

⁴ The term “glocalization” originated from the Japanese notion *dochakuka*, which means adapting farming techniques to local conditions. It first entered business jargon during the 1980s, but only became popular in the 1990s (see Roudometof).

⁵ See the way in which anti-globalization movements have recurrently targeted the US,

Puglierin's claim parallels David Ellwood's call not to underestimate the US' enduring ability to offer "soft power assets which the rest of the world *must* come to terms with" ("Taking Soft Power Seriously" 309). Likewise, Kuisel argues that excessive emphasis on hybridization risks overlooking the fact that everywhere people continue perceiving and consuming (or rejecting) products and imageries as American. He thus contends that Americanization represents "a research field that still has much to tell us if it is reinvented" ("The End of Americanization" 603).

But how can Americanization be reinvented? Kuisel's proposed definition of Americanization as "the historical transfer of American-style consumer society and mass culture to Europe" ("The End of Americanization" 605) seems in line with most of the literature on the field. This has foregrounded an understanding of Americanization as a US-led process of consumption expansion or as a metaphor for a larger modernization process (see De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*; Ellwood, *The Shock of America*). Most scholars have tended to focus on Western Europeans' exposure to American consumerism and their diverse reception of American goods and lifestyles during the Cold War (see Stephan; Wagnleitner; Cavazza and Scarpellini). Some relevant exceptions include the works of Charles Maier, Mary Nolan, and Bruno Settis, who have examined the twentieth century exportation of American models of industrial production, from the US "politics of productivity" to the spread of Fordism in Europe.

Foregrounding consumption plays, nonetheless, into the hands of hybridization supporters. As a result of the growing integration of global markets, since (at least) the 1980s, globally circulating consumer products are no longer predominantly American given that US corporations have largely moved their production abroad, and American consumer culture is increasingly influenced by transnational imports. Reinventing Americanization requires looking elsewhere: as the US became more subjected to globalizing forces, it also became more able to act as a globalizer. In this respect, Freedman notes – relative to food globalization

or, as Barber notes, the fact that "the debate over whether America or Japan has seized global leadership is conducted in English" (128).

– that the export and diffusion of “diverse and mixed-up dining practices” is largely carried out “via American heterogeneity” (84).

Moving the focus from how products, capital, and ideas are received and consumed to how they are distributed might offer a useful framework to understand how Americanization changed in the transition from “the American century” to globalization. This includes looking at franchising as an American method of distribution whose international diffusion, from the 1970s, has been instrumental in globally spreading American products and practices – including McDonald’s – while becoming a major American export and soft power asset in itself.

Franchised McDonaldization

In his famous *Fast Food Nation*, journalist and author Eric Schlosser underscores how fast food “has proven to be a revolutionary force in American life” contributing to “transform not only the American diet, but also the landscape, economy, workforce, and popular culture” (3). The history of the McDonald’s Corporation is so deeply intertwined with the development of American modern society that scholars have recurrently employed it to make sense of US domestic politics and foreign relations, from Marcia Chatelain’s analysis of the connection between the fast food industry and the evolution of US racial capitalism to considering the spread of McDonald’s “as a proxy for the impact of America’s pop culture” or evidence of the US cultural hegemony over the “McWorld” (Eckes and Zeiler 215; see Barber). Perhaps more famously, George Ritzer has spoken of the “McDonaldization” of the world as “the process by which the principles of the fast food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society, as well as the rest of the world” (1). While not equating McDonaldization to Americanization, Ritzer acknowledges their interconnection, envisioning the former as “chiefly a homogenizing process” (Ritzer and Stillman 37-40). As with Americanization and globalization, though, glocalization supporters have contested this view, emphasizing instances of hybridization.⁶

⁶ The most relevant work, in this respect, is the volume edited by James Watson on

Whereas framing McDonaldization in terms of cultural imperialism or glocalization, both parties have focused on McDonald's standardized food offers and production methods. Neither has considered McDonald's exportation of the business strategy that allows combining conformity to standardized procedures and the possibility for local adaptations, as franchising. This conversely represents – I argue – a core American constituent of the McDonald's System, one that has remained unaltered over time and space. It consequently provides a key to comprehending the chain's Americanizing impact and the reason why, despite its increasingly glocal character, McDonald's has continuously been associated with America.

Although McDonald's is among the companies that have profited the most from franchising, the fast food chain did not invent this business practice, nor was McDonald's the first American firm to export franchising. Various definitions of franchising as “a method of distributing goods or services,” “a contractual method of organizing a large-scale enterprise,” or “a business relationship,” (Dicke 2; Birkeland 2), franchising is yet to be extensively examined by historians. Except for Dicke, the few scholars that have briefly considered its history have done so in connection to a franchise company, tracing the origin of the practice to the development of America's first large corporations, in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁷ However, franchising took hold only in the early twentieth century, when it became a key factor in the growth of major firms like Coca Cola, General Motors and Ford.

These early franchises represented a form of product franchising in which the parent companies marketed their outputs through licensed retailers. The emergence of a McDonald's-like “business format franchising” came only in the 1920s-1930s, when the Sun Oil Company extended franchising to the service industry in order to develop some brand recognition for its retailers. In this format, franchisors sell both “the opportunity for business

McDonald's in East Asia.

⁷ Despite the French origin of the term and the reference to the Middle Age practice of granting special rights in exchange for services, modern franchising is a nineteenth-century innovation with no direct relation to earlier uses of the term. Singer Sewing Machine Company and McCormick's Harvester Company are considered the first to have outsourced the distribution of their products through a nationwide network of retailers.

ownership” (Dicke 4) and a whole system comprising trademarks, know-how, operating methods, managerial assistance, and advertising. The ensuing postwar expansion of the US franchising industry was inherently related to “the development of America’s modern economy,” since it applied the principles of standardized mass production to the service industry while maintaining a strong emphasis on entrepreneurship (154). In this context, firms like Howard Johnson’s, KFC, Dairy Queen, and McDonald’s brought franchising into the fast-food industry, contributing to making it “a ubiquitous feature of the American landscape” (1). As Chatelain notes, franchising rapidly became “big business in America, because it may be the most American idea in the world,” as “it entails the promise that anyone can become a business owner” (18).

It was on this assumed promise that Ray Kroc built the McDonald’s System. Looking for a way to balance entrepreneurship, individual autonomy, and corporate conformity to standards, Kroc considered franchising “the perfect example of capitalism in action,” and “an updated version of the American Dream (172; also qtd. in Burck 121).⁸ Just as much as the McDonald’s brothers’ “Speedee System” (i.e. a new method of preparing food relying on assembly line techniques to streamline food service), franchising was essential to McDonald’s formula – even more so as Kroc transformed the Golden Arches into a real estate empire, tying the franchise contract to the execution of a store lease.⁹ Franchising was thus Kroc’s chosen strategy to expand first across the US, then also worldwide. In the words of former McDonald’s Board member, Bob Thurston, it was the chain’s solid network of local franchisees that sustained the “feeling that we can figure out how to do business in almost any country” (qtd. in Love 463). At the same time, McDonald’s franchising formula served to present the chain’s expansion in terms of Americanization. As John Love

⁸ The average cost of opening a franchised McDonald’s restaurant has always been high, contradicting the promise on which its democratic capitalism rests. Today McDonald’s Italia demands an initial investment of €250.000.

⁹ In 1980, the US Court for the Eastern District of Virginia ruled in favor of this provision (*Principe vs McDonald’s Corporation*), giving legitimacy to McDonald’s evolution into a real estate company.

notes, the opening of McDonald's restaurants overseas meant "exporting abroad something that was endemic to American life:" a new method of retailing that had become "the centerpiece of American industry" (415).

By the time of McDonald's first international ventures, at the turn of the 1970s, there were 1200 franchisers in the US, which were generating approximately \$100 billion in sales (Marling 164).¹⁰ As franchising expert David Kaufman underscores, despite franchising's development in the 1950s, it was from the 1980s that the practice experienced an "explosive growth," with "the globalization of American franchise networks" (n. pag.). More and more American corporations – just like McDonald's – resorted to business-format franchising to expand their reach, addressing calls for greater flexibility and taking part in the post-industrial shift of the US economy (see Priore and Sabel). In this regard, it is worth highlighting how, among the reasons for franchising's international growth, is the way it fits some of the characteristics of the neoliberal order that emerged in the 1970s-1980s. These included the growing financialization of the US economy, greater emphasis on free market liberalism, the international expansion of multinational firms, the increase of foreign direct investments, market deregulation, and, as a result, greater than ever global interdependence (see Sargent; Stein). The ideological underpinnings of this new era combined entrepreneurialism and advocacy for minimal state intervention with neoconservative thinking and support for institutional mechanisms to impose market discipline (see Gerstle; Slobodian).¹¹

In this context, business format franchising, with its combination of conformity to standards and space for individual initiative, was perfectly tuned in with both aspects of neoliberalism's driving ethos, namely conservatism and entrepreneurship. In 1988, a report commissioned by the

¹⁰ Lack of regulations favored franchising's quick expansion. It was only in 1978 that the first US federal legislation on franchising was approved.

¹¹ As both Slobodian and Gerstle argue, despite neoliberalism's emphasis on privatization, the establishment of a neoliberal order relied on governments' regulatory power to enforce the rules of economic exchange. Relatively to franchising, this trend is exemplified by the fact that, while resistance to its regulation was grounded on securing free enterprise, franchises often resorted to government-backed loans via the Small Business Administration.

US Department of Commerce positively underscored the renewed growth of American franchising after the setback of the 1970s, noticing franchisees' "competitive edge over other small business entrepreneurs" (Kostecka 1). As Manuel Castells argues, during the 1980s large corporations managed to remain "at the center of the structure of economic power in the new global economy" by changing their organizational structures (168). This included the growing use of subcontracting arrangements. By allowing "fundamental changes to take place at a speed rare among large corporations" (Love 450), franchising represented "an intermediate form of arrangement" between large firms and small businesses (Castells 174), a formula adapted to the post-industrial transition toward more flexible production systems.

Moreover, the kind of controlled flexibility guaranteed by franchise contracts matched the need to address the progressive segmentation of American and international consumer markets. Outsourcing the costs for the parent company's expansion meant greater resources for marketing and advertising. Franchising sets standards defining a uniform brand identity while enabling adaptations to different transnational target-groups. The establishment, through franchising, of a network-based form of organization is also consistent with what sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have called "the new spirit of capitalism" (35). In this regard, Ciafone has shown – relatively to Coca Cola – how franchising has become a fundamental feature of global capitalism because it combines the externalization of material production with centralized control over immaterial resources (2-11). This cultural logic inherent to franchising has enabled global franchises to depict themselves as responsive to localizing pressures and, thus, as "glocal" entities. To the extent to which glocalization implies "the distribution of products or services intended for a global market but customized to conform to local laws" (Chander 169), franchising is also an American practice that perfectly fits in with glocalization.

At least from the 1970s-1980s, then, franchising effectively answered the need, *vis à vis* growing localizing pressures and globally integrating markets, to combine strategic adaptations to different transnational contexts with the continuous exportation of American cultural and economic practices – which included the "internationalization of U.S. franchise

systems” (Walker and Etzel 39). The analysis of the Italian case will cast light on some of the effects of this development in a country that, while proving hard to win over to McDonald’s fast food offer, enthusiastically embraced franchising.

The Case of Italy

McDonald’s arrival in Italy, in the mid-1980s, took place rather late compared to the rest of Western Europe and amid Italy’s “second economic miracle,” when the country experienced a new phase of economic expansion and consumer goods became available to the entire population. The chain’s commercial penetration both rested on and encouraged developments that were significantly altering the country’s social and economic fabric. These included the growth of Italy’s service sector, the introduction of legislation on part-time labor, as well as greater youth and gender emancipation, with an increasing number of women working outside the home and the emergence of new youth cultures. McDonald’s impact in Italy must hence be framed within the broader expansion of the country’s fast food industry. The first Italian fast food chain was Burghy, created in 1982 by the public group GS and bought by Luigi Cremonini (Italy’s largest meat producer) in 1985. In the first half of the 1980s, Italian newspapers continuously reported the opening of fast food outlets, especially in Northern Italy and Milan, which *Il Corriere della Sera* dubbed “Burger City” in 1984 (Purisiol 28). Significantly, several public commentators interpreted the phenomenon as both a sign of the changing times and “emulating the US” (Salvadori 9). The franchisees who opened McDonald’s famous Piazza di Spagna restaurant, in Rome, could consequently argue that the chain met the growing demand for outdoor eating outlets created by Italy’s expanding service industry (Bartolini 19). At the same time, McDonald’s followed the path traced by other fast food chains, like the American Wendy’s or the Italian Burghy, to seize on the “sandwichmania” (Salvadori 9) of the Italian youth. Young Italians’ enthusiasm for fast food was exemplified by the emergence of the so-called *paninari* movement. These were upper-middle class teenagers, notably hanging out in fast food outlets, whose fascination

with American consumer culture became iconic through movies and TV shows like *Italian Fast Food* or *Drive In* (see Morando).

Despite the seemingly favorable context, McDonald's conquest of Italians' stomachs proved problematic and slow. The chain struggled with Italians' resistance to changes in their foodways and in the urban layout of their historical city-centers, which were quickly transformed into cultural strongholds against the invasion of Americana (see Crisanti). Whereas many opponents of the Golden Arches broadly contested the "fast food invasion," they often distinguished between the "more enjoyable and cozy" Italian fast food outlets and – in the words of Italian director Carlo Vanzina – McDonald's "Americanizing" effect (Lampugnani 19). In 1988, McDonald's Italia's president, Ernest Mathia, enthusiastically anticipated the opening of 45 outlets within three years. Failing to meet that goal, in 1994 the chain had opened 23 restaurants (Resca and Gianola 51; Corradino 7). If anything, the large public controversy generated by the arrival of McDonald's triggered a wide range of Italian responses, from the launch of the Slow Food movement to crafting several Italian alternatives to the Golden Arches. These included chains like "Italy & Italy" and Burghy, both owned by Cremonini's Inalca group, which was by far the leader of the Italian fast food market.

To face difficulties head on, McDonald's was compelled to progressively Italianize itself, extending the implications of its franchising formula. It partially did so in the 1980s by adapting the interiors and offer of its Italian outlets to better suit local tastes, which meant including *caprese salad* in its menu or paving with *sanpietrini* the entrance of its Roman restaurants. The full Italianization of the chain would however start in the 1990s, when McDonald's established several partnerships with other Italian franchises like Upim, and when it entrusted an Italian businessman, Mario Resca, with the management of its franchising network. McDonald's Italianization was not simply the result of a top-down corporate strategy, but also a response to local pressures. The widespread opposition to the Golden Arches in the mid-1980s, alongside the more rapid growth of its Italian imitators signaled the need to resort to local franchisees to better address local demands. Resca did so by more extensively relying on Italian managers. McDonald's eventual breakthrough in Italy occurred in 1996,

when it took over Burghy: for the first time ever, the chain expanded through the acquisition of a competitor (Taino 1).

On the one hand, then, McDonald's trajectory in Italy confirms how its success depended on the ability to combine conformity to corporate standards with significant adaptations (e.g. including Italian foods or adapting its outlets to its Italian locations) – an ability that rested on its franchise structure. On the other hand, even among McDonald's early enthusiasts, like the *paninari*, the chain's appeal seemed to originate not as much from the Americanness of its food or origin, as from the Americanness of its system, that is from the overall franchised experience that the chain offered (i.e. its self-service formula, affordable offers, modern atmosphere). In this respect, Italian journalist Claudio Bernieri significantly noticed that the *paninari* went looking for an American experience just as much in "Italy & Italy" as in McDonald's (38).¹² To examine McDonald's participation in the growth of Italy's franchising industry, it might therefore be more useful to evaluate its Americanizing influence than to look at the number of its restaurants or how many Italian chains started selling hamburgers and French fries. It is telling that, as public commentators discussed McDonald's effects on Italian society, they also reflected on its franchising formula, envisioning it as an American recipe to update "slow and conservative types of Italian business initiatives" (Tornabuoni 1).

To be fair, the history of Italian franchising anticipated McDonald's arrival. According to Assofranchising (i.e. Italy's largest franchise association), a few Italian companies pioneered franchise contracts as early as 1970, identifying Gamma d.i. – a retail corporation – as the Italian forerunner of the practice.¹³ In the course of the 1970s, a few references to franchising appeared in Italy's major newspapers, mostly about clothing and food retailers (Sollazzo 7; "La catena del fresco" 14). By the end of the decade, the list of franchised chains in Italy included a diverse group of Italian, American, and European firms, from Standa and Upim department

¹² The Burghy in Piazza San Babila, in Milan, was the most famous gathering spot of the *paninari*.

¹³ To be fair, the Italian Buffetti and Coca Cola's Italian branch had already built their franchised networks in the early 1950s.

stores to Benetton, Avis car rental, and Bata footwear company (“Il Franchising” n. pag.).

The mid-1980s marked a turning point in the history of Italian franchising. By 1985, major companies like the Grimaldi real estate group, Stefanel fashion stores, and Coin and Rinascente department stores all joined the franchising club (Passerini, “Un matrimonio d’interesse” 3). The rapid “boom” of “Benetton’s empire” was likewise ascribed to franchising as “the commercial backbone of the company” (Bullo 19; Panara 44); while the opening of Italy’s first fast food chains, Burghy and Kenny Fast Food, sanctioned the extension of franchising to the food service industry, with Howard Johnson’s and McDonald’s as explicit models. In this regard, we have seen how McDonald’s franchising set an example that proved, at times, more influential than the chain’s food offer. Between 1985 and 1986, several trade fairs, experts and business conferences – from the first “Salone del franchising” at the Milan Trade Fair in 1986 to the “guide to franchising” compiled by Walter Passerini – gave growing space to franchising as a fundamental strategy to renovate Italian industry. In this context, the persistent lack of legislation both favored the expansion of the practice and engendered calls for caution (Passerini, “I patti chiari” 3).¹⁴ Driven by the food, fashion, and retailing sectors, franchising definitively exploded in the second half of the decade, to the point that 1988 was labeled “the year of franchising” (Zellolli 2; Passerini, “Un’idea” 17). By then, there were over 200 franchisors and 10.000 franchisees in Italy (“Speciale Franchising” 24).

Overall, the growth of the Italian franchising industry – like in the US – mirrored broader transformations in the country’s socio-economic structure. Rather than being a mere American import, franchising was actively embraced and adapted by numerous Italian companies. It must be noted, however, that as it spread across Italy, franchising was recurrently perceived as a practice “traditional to the US:” to be selectively appropriated, but originally American nonetheless (Valabrega 13). A

¹⁴ During the 1980s, the Italian Franchising Association introduced a standard contract and a code of regulation, but compliance with either was not mandatory. The first law to regulate franchising in Italy came in 2004.

quick dive into the press of the time reveals the US as the main point of reference in the public discussion on franchising and its impact on the Italian economy. Even the competitiveness of Italian franchises like Benetton and Stefanel was tested in the US on the grounds that “right there the future of the franchising formula is at stake” (Ottaviani 8). It is likewise notable that, in one of the earliest studies on Italian franchising, in 1990, scholar and entrepreneur Pierfranco Devasini saw US franchising as the cause of the rapid development of European franchising in the 1970s and 1980s. These considerations must be addressed critically, as they largely refer to perceptions. They nonetheless point to unexplored forms of Americanization.

Perhaps more importantly, franchising was often functional to the growing popularity of American products and lifestyles. Not only did an increasing number of American companies – just like McDonald’s – rely on franchising to enter the Italian market, but even several Italian franchising firms appropriated American symbols to leverage Italians’ enthusiasm for Americana. The way in which Italian brands like Naj Oleari and Mandarina Duck became essential features of the *paninari*’s iconic American style is indicative of this. Moreover, the recurrent tendency to tie the chain’s expansion to a celebration of its franchising formula speaks to how McDonald’s presence, the spread of franchising, and Americanization often went hand-in-hand in the collective imagination. Considering franchising as Kroc’s “most phenomenal idea,” Italian journalist Enrico Franceschini depicted the chain’s managers as “truly American Midwesterners,” tuning in on the mythical lure of America’s West as a metaphor for the US entrepreneurial spirit (24). Likewise, the public description of Italian franchising pioneers like Luciano Benetton, Luigi Cremonini, or Carlo Stefanel mirrored that of Ray Kroc, praising them as ingenious self-made men (Ottaviani 8; Binachin 22; Della Rovere 11). Alongside the new business concept, came therefore a whole narrative centered on American notions of individual entrepreneurship and free initiative. Although Italian franchising predated McDonald’s, it is telling that Assofranchising envisions the chain’s arrival as “a milestone for the introduction of franchising in the food service sector” (“I brand storici” n. pag.).

At the peak of Italy's franchising-mania, in 1988, Italian intellectual Giorgio Bocca explicitly referred to McDonald's to argue that franchising was a "kind of rampant cloning of America, an Italian duplication of the American way of life" (7). According to him, the development of Italy's franchising industry was indicative of broader social and cultural changes, including the emergence of an "integrated Italian service sector" and the transformation of the country's "commercial middle class." He thereby intertwined franchising, Americanization, and larger modifications to the country's social and "industrial structure" (7). As early as 1985, Italian sociologist Giuseppe De Rita had similarly highlighted Italy's progressive transition toward a sort of "distribution capitalism," signaling the growing "importance of post-productive factors" and urging the creation of larger "distribution networks through franchising" (qtd. in "Chi controlla la distribuzione" 36). The growth of franchising also pointed to the increased "possibility to start one's own business" and thus to the enlargement of Italy's entrepreneurial class (Zelloli 2). Or, to quote Thomas Friedman, it is only when a country "has a middle class big enough to support McDonald's" that "it becomes a McDonald's country" (n. pag.). It can thus be argued that McDonald's participated in changes not only to Italians' habits, but also to the make-up of Italian society.

The enlargement of Italy's franchising industry also created the conditions – as it did elsewhere in Western Europe – for the international export of many Italian brands, and thus for a response to Americanization. Several Italian firms resorted to franchising to penetrate the US market and to compete with American brands both nationally and internationally. The symbol of this greater Italian competitiveness was, predictably, Benetton, which by 1988 had opened 371 licensed stores in the US and whose franchising formula was defined by an uncommon degree of flexibility. The rapid expansion of Benetton's franchising network made it both an object of interest for American scholars and a target for some of its US franchisees (Lenti 15). In 1988, fifteen of these undertook legal actions against the Italian group, contesting "the lack of territorial rights for Benetton retailers" (Brown n. pag.). The lawsuits were unsuccessful, but they managed to have the US Federal Trade Commission investigate Benetton's infringement of the norms of US franchising (Saulino 55).

Overall, Benetton's success was considered exemplary of the growing potential of European firms to selectively appropriate American strategies to "challenge superannuated American chains on their own turf" (De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire* 460). As early as 1986, economic experts like Joanne Legomsky were speaking of the "Europeanization of American retailing" (61). A few Italian commentators similarly believed that Italian companies could compete and even outpace US corporations by combining the recipe of American franchising with their own "design and creativity" (Gianola 12). And yet, as Kuisel notes, "adaptation, in the form of imitation, runs the risk of advancing rather than resisting Americanization" ("Debating Americanization" 102). If, on the one hand, the expansion of franchising in Italy matched the selective appropriation theory, on the other hand, it testified to persistent forms of Americanization. Despite, in fact, the increasing ability of European firms like Benetton to challenge American products' dominance over their shared transatlantic marketplace, the invoked Europeanization of American retailing ultimately rested on the application of an American method of distribution.

Conclusion

During the 1990s, the McDonald's Corporation embraced a more radically glocal approach, showing greater willingness to adapt its offer and layout to the various contexts in which it operated. There consequently seemed to be increasing grounds to claim that the chain was no longer a force of Americanization. McDonald's glocal turn revived the warning expressed in the 1980s by the firm's International President, Steve Barnes, according to whom "if we go into a new country and incorporate their food products into our menu, we lose our identity" (qtd. in Love 435). And yet, the chain's continued reliance on franchising to expand its reach – which meant allowing for adaptations – was part of preserving the McDonald's System intact. The Italian case shows that McDonald's franchising can have an even greater impact and more rapid diffusion than its fast food offer while being similarly associated with America. Franchising was fundamental to the spread of American products and itself an American export which

significantly altered how commodities and services were distributed in the marketplace. As such, it contributed to shifting the US influence over global markets from the realm of consumption to that of distribution. Rather than a new kind of Americanization, this marked a new phase in the history of the process. Resorting to franchising implied some conversion to American ways, but also their adaptation to local cultures, and hence the coexistence of Americanizing and localizing processes. As Kroes argues, Americanization “is not a zero-sum game,” but “a matter of cultural syncretism” (348).

In the 1990s, support for franchising became part of American foreign policy: the Department of State’s sponsorship of studies informing American companies about overseas franchise opportunities granted official recognition for franchising as an instrument of US soft power. Today, US firms top global and European franchising rankings, with American fast food chains leading the way. And even though “the shelves of Walmart are now stocked by China” (Sargent 61), it is still via Walmart that many Chinese products globally circulate, since the American retailer holds on to “its title as the biggest retailing operation on the planet” (Debter n. pag.). In this regard, Marco D’Eramo has argued that, while many American companies have outsourced their production, “this has not meant that they have lost control over that part of the economy” (14). They rather exercise “a new model of dominion,” which rests on America’s control over the mechanisms regulating global flows of products and services.

To conclude, the analysis of McDonald’s impact in Italy has purposely been framed within the expansion of the country’s franchising industry during the 1980s. Foregrounding franchising as a key American component of the McDonald’s System has served to cast light on the evolution of the Americanization process *vis à vis* growing globalization, while maintaining its relevance as a research field to investigate Euro-American relations. It also represents an invitation to address more extensively the relation between Americanization and globalization through the examination of America’s influence over global distribution networks.

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“Between the Key of Hope and the Atonal Slash of Nothingness”

Musical Meaning in Richard Powers’ *Orfeo*

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the phenomenon of musical meaning in Richard Powers’ *Orfeo* (2014) through the lens of intermediality and philosophy of music. I am interested in the protagonist’s recurring motto – “music doesn’t mean things. It *is* things” (69, *passim*) – as a conceptual cue to investigate both his conflicted musical identity, and the ways in which it reflects on the novel’s broader context as well as on its implied message that music is capable of signifying something other than itself.

KEYWORDS

Intermediality, Musical meaning, Musical narrative, *Orfeo*, Richard Powers

Introduction

In his autobiography, Igor Stravinsky claims that music is “essentially powerless to express anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind,

a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature,” adding that “*expression* has never been an inherent property of music” (53). The Russian composer’s ideas fall within the scope of what is generally known as musical formalism: that is, the view that music is incapable of expressing emotions (let alone representing non-musical or extramusical content), and that “musical meaning lies exclusively within the context of the work itself” (Meyer 1). Before Stravinsky, musical formalism had already been established by Austrian musicologist Eduard Hanslick who, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, claimed that the only objective possibly attributable to music, a “self-subsistent form of the beautiful” (17), is the creation of a patterned sequence of sounds without any extramusical correlate: “The [musically] beautiful is not contingent upon, or in need of any subject introduced from without, but [...] it consists wholly of sounds artistically combined” (66). From this standpoint, music would thus possess no meaning, if by meaning we intend, as Charles Sanders Peirce suggests, the constellation of mental representations elicited by a signifier conventionally associated with a segment of reality, or an abstraction thereof (31). That instrumental music has no capacity to (more or less) unequivocally denote or refer to an external object, entity, thought, or concept as language does would apparently legitimate Hanslick’s and Stravinsky’s philosophically negative positions. However, as proposed by interpretive semiotics, communication is a much more complex phenomenon than a straightforward, interference-proof transmission of content from a messenger to an addressee. Peirce defines the sign “as anything which is so determined by something else, called its object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately [*sic*] determined by the former” (80-81). For semiosis (the production of meaning) to occur, interpretation on the receiver’s end is essential, as also noted by Umberto Eco in his theory of signs: “Substitution (*aliquid stat pro aliquo*) is not the only necessary condition for a sign: the possibility of interpretation is necessary as well” (43). The message, as Lawrence Kramer puts it, “does not consist of an item that is neatly packaged and transmitted” (“Speaking of Music” 23). Even making sense of the simplest lexical units relies on the activation of multiple decoding functions that are always rooted in subjective interpretation. If Hanslick and Stravinsky are right, how could

we explain, then, that music is written, performed, listened to, and talked about for reasons other than mere contemplation of beauty? What would the rationale be for film soundtracks, tonal painting, and ritual music? Additionally, one cannot simply ignore that music has been granted, at least for the last three centuries, its own intellectual domain and metalinguistic apparatus, founded as it was on aesthetic as well as affective qualities (Grant 39-40).

Particularly since Modernism, literature has featured an “increasing number of authors [...] who purport to approach ‘the condition of music’ in their writings” (Wolf, “The Role of Music” 294): E.M. Forster, Aldous Huxley, T.S. Eliot, Thomas Mann, Toni Morrison, and Jennifer Egan are just a few notable examples. Among writers who seem to find in music a steadfast source of inspiration is Richard Powers. He has authored three novels overtly dedicated to the subject: *The Gold Bug Variations* (1992), *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), and *Orfeo* (2014). Emily Petermann coined the term “musical novel” – or at least claimed its theoretical autonomy – to designate those fictional narratives that make quite a consistent use of music as a structuring device. As Petermann points out, “a musical novel [...] is musical not primarily in terms of its content, but in its very form” (2). While I consider Petermann’s theorization of this literary category not only a fit descriptor for works such as Morrison’s *Jazz* – a book which the author, as she openly admits in the preface, conceived as an attempt to imitate the namesake genre’s techniques and mechanisms – but also a seminal contribution to the field of musico-literary studies in general, its scope fails to account for those novels in which music integrally sustains the narrative at the content-level and suggests alternative epistemic pathways for both characters and reader.

Asked about the role of music in his writing, Powers states that it

has to do not just with taking music as an organizing principle or approach or set of concerns, but with using music itself as the primary subject matter of a novel. I did that with the three novels that are called my music books. In those novels, I tried not just to put into words the effect of sound on makers and listeners but also to depict music as a cultural activity, as a social act, a historical act, a political

act, and to use music not just as the window dressing, the color, of the story but for the story matter itself. (“A Conversation” n. pag.)

Drawing on theories of intermediality and philosophy of music, my study investigates the meaning of music in Richard Powers’ *Orfeo* by demonstrating that musical narratives function just as efficaciously at the level of content. Taking as a conceptual and textual cue a recurring phrase in the novel – “music doesn’t mean things. It *is* things” (Powers, *Orfeo* 69, passim) –, I intend to explore the protagonist’s conflicted musical identity, and how it interacts with the novel’s broader context as well as with *Orfeo*’s implied message that music, contrary to a misleadingly literal interpretation like those already mentioned, is in fact capable of producing meaning.

Orfeo’s Musical Thematization

Equally inspired by the Orpheus myth and the case of Critical Art Ensemble founder Steve Kurtz, *Orfeo* tells the story of Peter Els, a 70-year-old retired avant-garde composer. Following decades of obscure compositions, Peter wants to encode a string of music into the DNA of a substantially harmless bacterium (*Serratia Marcescens*) “to break free of time and hear the future” (Powers, *Orfeo* 2).¹ After the death of his dog, Fidelio, Peter naively calls the police who, noticing his suspicious-looking lab equipment, alert the Joint Security Task Force about the presence of “bacterial cultures in the house” (43). When the FBI raid his house, Peter panics and leaves town, thus encouraging the media to feed the public a sensationally distorted image of the composer, now renamed “Biohacker Bach” (265).

Set “in the tenth year of the altered world” (1), *Orfeo* contrapuntally intersperses Peter’s suspenseful westward escape across the country with a series of flashbacks that function as a window into the composer’s musical

¹ Throughout the novel, italics are always used to signal the characters’ direct speech, except for the prologue (narratively framed as an “Overture”), from which the above quote is taken.

past, from childhood until the beginning of his bioengineered project. Fusing tropes and motifs typical of the road novel (Fernández-Santiago 126) and the Bildungsroman, Powers elects music as the novel's primary thematic surface within which the two narrative trajectories interlock. The myth of Orpheus serves as the book's predominant intertextual reference. Peter's entire career can be described as intrinsically orphic: his mission to "*scribble down the tune that would raise everyone he ever knew from the dead*" (Powers, *Orfeo* 221), "to write music that would twist your gut" (235) and achieve "*the restoration of everything lost and the final defeat of time*" (210), are evocative not only of Orpheus' attempt to bring Eurydice back from the dead, but also of his power to move even the Maenads to tears (Ovidio, tenth book, lines 45-48). The recontextualization of the myth also functions "as a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance" (Eliot 175) to the chaotic plurality of post-9/11 America, which Powers attempts to reproduce by designing a story structurally arranged around the interplay between genetics, surveillance tactics, and (of course) music. These themes are experienced in the novel "as recollections, unsuspected connections, or spontaneous and unpredictable occurrences" (Fernández-Santiago 144).

All that it takes to set the story in motion is Els' dog's sudden death and the inadvertent call to 911 the protagonist places without thinking about the suspicions that his DIY biology lab would raise with the police. Peter's new passion for genetic manipulation is clearly indebted to the real case of Steve Kurtz, an American artist specialized in anticonformist, biotechnological art creations. Kurtz was investigated in 2004 for a project that involved the "testing for the presence of genetically altered genes [...] in store-bought groceries" (Sholette 53), and even though all initial charges of bioterrorism were dropped, Kurtz was indicted for the "alleged mishandling of bacterial samples purchased from a scientific house supply" (53). Here, music acts as the cohesive agent of a novel that is concerned with both the perceived weaponization of art (Powers, *Orfeo* 91), as a disruptive force "through the underworld of the contemporary culture of fear" (Powers, "A Fugitive Language" n. pag.) and the story of an (anti)

hero trying to bring something back from the dead with the sole aid of his musical craft.²

Peter's musical passion dates back to his childhood years. Even flunking a clarinet competition at seven does nothing but consolidate his commitment to music: after his mother tells him that it was ok to perform the way he did, "[h]e pulls free of her, horrified. *You don't understand. I have to play*" (Powers, *Orfeo* 15). At college, Peter "[falls] in love with chemistry. The pattern language of atoms and orbitals made sense in a way that little else but music did. [...] The symmetries hidden in the columns of the periodic table had something of the Jupiter's grandeur" (31).³ To the future composer, however, the two disciplines are nothing but "each other's long-lost twins [...]. The structures of long polymers reminded him of intricate Webern variations [...]. The formulas of physical chemistry struck him as intricate and divine compositions" (57). The isomorphic relationship between science and art, here represented by chemistry and music, clearly hints at that same network of equivalences that Stuart Ressler identifies between Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and molecular biology in *The Gold Bug Variations*. In Powers' first musical novel, Ressler, "a mind that looked for the pattern of patterns" (*Gold Bug* 195), heuristically reaches the conclusion that Bach's music and DNA mirror each other: "After intensive, repeated listening, I could hear the first suggestion of what had covertly fascinated me. The strain separated like an independent filament of DNA [...]. I had found my model of replication" (194).

When Peter listens to Mozart's *Jupiter* for the first time, what he experiences is "a trapdoor open[ing] underneath" his feet, while "the first floor of the house dissolves above a gaping hole" (Powers, *Orfeo* 17-18). The connections between the mathematics of the piece and the notes themselves are not only heard as "the maps back to that distant planet" (19) that Peter had momentarily set foot on, but clarify no less importantly the reason why Peter sees chemistry and music as "each other's long-lost

² See Reichel ("Musical Macrostructures") for an in-depth analysis of the structural analogies that the novel borrows from music (from Monteverdi's opera *L'Orfeo*).

³ "Jupiter" is the popular name which Mozart's Symphony no. 41 in C major, K. 551 is usually known as.

twins" (57). "Interconnectedness," a signature trait already rehearsed to great effect in Power's oeuvre – especially in *The Gold Bug Variations*, *Galatea 2.2* (1995), *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), *The Echo Maker* (2006), and *The Overstory* (2018) – is, according to Alexander Scherr, "one of the leading philosophical and aesthetic principles of his fiction" (283), in which "different discourses, different temporal or conceptual frames jarringly meet, overlap, or interpenetrate" (Ickstadt 28). This semantics of interconnection echoes Tom LeClair's notion of systems novel. Building on a number of systems theorists, LeClair postulates the systems novel as a typically postmodern literary alignment to a broader paradigm shift from mechanical philosophy to a more comprehensive epistemology rooted in the natural sciences (6-8). Quoting social theorist Anthony Wilder, LeClair conceptualizes a literary genre that parallels the "radical change in the theory of knowledge," in which "the new territory staked out by any one discipline, science, or movement cannot be comprehended except in relation to all others" (7).⁴

While the kind of novels that, according to LeClair, inhabit a cultural region "that asserts the efficacy of literature and leads readers to contest and possibly reformulate the mastering systems they live within" (1) are usually massive, both in terms of intellectual range and material size, *Orfeo* is decisively less imposing than its two musically inflected predecessors. However, with its 350 pages, it still participates in the same transgression of disciplinary and medial boundaries common to LeClair's systems narratives. Moreover, by bridging the gap between science and art at the

⁴ The inextricable link between systems and meaningful relationality – which echoes Ishmael's thoughts in Melville's *Moby-Dick* about there not being any "quality in this world that is what it is merely by contrast" (850) – interestingly dovetails with the interconnective quality inherent to musical discourse that Powers' *The Gold Bug Variations* and *The Time of Our Singing* bring to the fore. In the former, Franklin Todd argues that "the trick to listening [...] is to hear the pieces speaking to one another" (395); in the second of Powers' musical books, which focuses on music as an integrative, driving force to unveil and overcome racial boundaries (Reichel, "Fictionalising Music" 148-49), Joseph Strom assumes that "a piece was what it was only because of all the pieces written before and after it. Every song sang the moment that brought it into being. Music talked endlessly to itself" (Powers, *The Time of Our Singing* 58).

beginning of the novel, the unfolding story is better equipped to present the reader with several instances of textually mediated musical experience, to which German intermediality scholar Steven Paul Scher gave the name of “verbal music,” a technique that applies to “any literary presentation (whether in poetry or prose) of existing or fictitious musical compositions: any poetic texture which has a piece of music as its ‘theme’” (149). Other than fictionalizing a musical work through the use of verbal signifiers, according to Scher, “such poems or passages often suggest characterization of a musical performance or of subjective response to music” (149).

Verbal music is thus any portion of text which attempts to capture in words a musical piece through a character’s or narrator’s own (emotive, psychological, analytical) reaction to said music. It “aims primarily at poetic rendering of the intellectual and emotional implications and suggested symbolic content of music” (152). Decades later, Wolf would describe Scher’s notion as “a form of covert musical presence in literature [...] which evokes an individual, real or imaginary work of music and suggests its presence in a literary work by referring to it in the mode of thematization” (*Musicalization* 64). Thus, the significance of verbal music lies in its power to “supply what is tendentially absent in music: a referential content” (63; emphasis added).

The novel’s first major episode of such fictionalized music occurs when Peter, after the death of Fidelio, “looks for something to play for his dog’s funeral. He lands on Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder*: five songs lasting twenty-five minutes” (Powers, *Orfeo* 28). Before introducing a linguistic rendition of Mahler’s music, the narrator provides a brief account of the compositional backstory of the song cycle. *The Songs on the Death of Children* are based on five of a group of more than 400 poems written by Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866) – also titled *Kindertotenlieder* (1833-1834) – following the death of two of his children by scarlet fever. “The story would stay with Peter better than the details of his childhood” (33): during his convalescence from a severe hemorrhage, Mahler decides to set five of Rückert’s poems to music (Carr 98), but to Alma, Mahler’s wife, the content of the songs is too morbid, Gustav being a father of two himself: “For God’s sake, don’t tempt fate! But tempting fate was music’s job description” (Powers, *Orfeo* 34).

And fate was tempted indeed, because a few years later Alma and Gustav's eldest daughter would also die of scarlet fever (Reik 315).

The description of the effects produced on Peter Els – voiced through the novel's third-person narrator – by Mahler's first song, "Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgehn" (the English title is "Now the Sun Wants to Rise So Brightly"), is strikingly evocative: "At first, there's only a thread of frost spreading across a pane. Oboe and horn trace out their parallel privacies. The thin sinews wander, an edgy duet built up from bare fourths and fifths" (Powers, *Orfeo* 34). The alternating major and minor modes of the opening song are imbricated in a dialectical interaction between "bright and dim, peace and grief, like the old hag and lovely young thing who fights for control of the fickle ink sketch" (34-35), with the final thrills of the glockenspiel "throwing off glints from a place unreachable by grief," a grief most likely symbolized by the key reverting to D minor.⁵ The second song oscillates between "clarity and cloud" too, while "the cadence on the dominant" of the third one (the dominant being the fifth degree of a scale; since the referenced song is in C minor, the dominant note would be G) feels like "the sound of false recovery" (37). The cycle ends in a "storm," slightly after what "felt like the first flash of real light in the whole cycle" (37), as the glockenspiel makes its final comeback to express a "funeral chime, a light in the night" (38).

Powers deploys the technique of verbal music for other musical works that find their way into the novel and that resonate with the protagonist's experience, including Olivier Messiaen's *Quatour pour la fin du temps* (*Quartet for the End of Time*, 1941).⁶ While Mahler lends dignity to Fidelio's burial, Messiaen contributes to highlight Peter's condition as a victim of political

⁵ Although widely adopted during the Baroque period and by no means an irrefutable paradigm, according to the musical theory of affects, D minor was originally associated with melancholy and "humorous brood" ("Affective Musical Keys" n. pag.).

⁶ Another piece that figures in the novel and that further frames the ominous climate of fear around Peter is Dmitri Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony* (1937). Shostakovich composed the symphony in response to a harshly negative review of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (1934) that appeared in *Pravda*: "From the first minute, the listener is shocked by deliberate dissonance, by a confused stream of sound. [...] To follow this 'music' is most difficult; to remember it, impossible" ("Muddle" n. pag.).

powers beyond his control. The framing device for the presentation of the verbally rendered piece is a course on twentieth-century classical music that the protagonist regularly teaches at an assisted living facility. After giving an outline of the tragic, historical circumstances of the piece – Messiaen composed the eight-movement quartet during his imprisonment at a German concentration camp in 1941⁷ – Powers sets out to sketch a suggestively accurate transcription of the work. The eight movements of the quartet sound like a “whirling solar system [that] would take four hours to unfold its complete circuit of nested revolution”; the piano “descend[s] in waterfalls of chords,” while the “violin and cello, in a unison chant, wander as far from this camp as imagination can reach” (115). “[B]urnt in the crucible of the war,” the final movement emerges “out of a cloud of shimmering E major chords – the key of paradise” (117). As stated by the composer himself, “the piece was directly inspired by [...] Revelation” (qtd. in Rischin 129) with the objective to guide “the listener closer to infinity, to eternity in space” (129). To achieve such a spiritual communion between time and music (the temporal art par excellence), Messiaen resorted to *fermata* (that is, a long pause to stretch a note or a rest), which, according to music professor Michel Arrignon, is “symbolic of eternity, but eternity in all of its horror – in the abyss” (60). The profoundly synesthetic nature of the quartet, in its combination of light, colors, motion and material that one can read in both the novel and the composer’s own program notes, clearly exhibits the narratively relayed susceptibility of music to produce meaning.

Towards Peter’s “Great Song of the Earth”

If Mahler’s tragic songs are an appropriate soundtrack to Peter’s dog’s funeral, offering the protagonist (and the reader) a chance to reminisce about the moment when he first heard the piece, it is also true that Mahler’s music paves the way for a “pedagogical parricide” (Powers,

⁷ 1941 is also the year Peter was born.

Orfeo 92). After meeting in the early 1960s with Matthew Mattison, an extravagant music teacher described as a “study for a bust in tomorrow’s Museum of Iconoclasm” (93), Peter is eventually convinced by Mattison that “Mahler was a not a real composer,” and that “the point of music is to wake listeners up,” not “move [its] listeners” (94). The two men fight for weeks over their initially differing conceptions of music and its functions, with Peter trying “to revive the once-audacious inventions of the past and make them dangerous again,” and Mattison “dismiss[ing] his études as pretty sentiment” (95). It is around this moment in the protagonist’s life and artistic journey that he begins to develop his personal theory of music, arguing that “music doesn’t mean things” but “is things” (69), a refrain-like slogan which frequently recurs in the novel. Yet, Peter is torn between his romantic pieces and the destructive power of “modern music,” in Adorno’s terms, or, to use the narrator’s words, “between the key of hope and the atonal slash of nothingness” (Powers, *Orfeo* 69). Els feels himself creeping “between camps like a Swiss diplomatic courier,” as he tries to make a choice between “radiant versus rigorous, methodical versus moving” (96); indeed, later in the novel he is also accused of being “a damn centrist” (139). Peter’s early work is frowned upon by his colleagues and mentors, who all agree – coherently with the countercultural climate of the time – that “[a]rt was combat, an exhausting struggle” (91), and that composers should neither be seeking from the public an emotional response, nor treat music as a representational medium. Eventually, Peter “learn[s] how to weaponize art” (91), guided by the same principles professed by Kurtz and the Critical Art Ensemble, whose major goal was to creatively “re-invent new ways of responding critically to contemporary social and political reality” (Sholette 52).

The protagonist’s struggle also reflects on his relationship with two other characters, Maddy Corr and Richard Bonner. Peter meets his future wife, Maddy, at the audition for an unconventional song cycle inspired by Jorge Luis Borges’ fiction. Their marriage, however, lasts only a few years, because Peter, too invested in composing the score to an avant-garde street theater piece to salvage a relationship already strained by his out-of-state commuting, has already chosen music over everything else: “Music was pouring out of him, music that danced and throbbed and

shouted down every objection. Composing was all he wanted to do, all he *could* do, and he would it now with all he had” (Powers, *Orfeo* 211). The work, titled *Immortality for Beginners*, had been commissioned to Peter by his long-time Mephistophelian partner in crime Richard Bonner, an eccentric choreographer with whom he would collaborate again for the only work that Peter managed to get some recognition for – *The Fowler’s Snare*, an operatic adaptation of the religious uprising of Münster (1534–1535) which eerily foreshadowed the 1993 Waco massacre.⁸ Richard is the one who charges Peter with being a musical centrist who “*will never make anything but steamy, creamy, lovely shit*” (217), which sounds peculiar considering that *Immortality* was met with mixed reactions at best: “*The Times*,” we read, “admired the choreography’s giddy novelty and called the music of thirty-nine-year-old Peter Els evasive, anachronistic, and at times oddly bracing. But this reviewer admits to leaving after an hour and fifty-three minutes” (216).

It is possible to think of the triadic connection between Maddy, Richard and Peter as a corollary of a quasi-Hegelian dialectics, as the characters respectively seem to embody thesis (tonality), antithesis (uncompromising avant-garde music) and synthesis (Peter’s inner musical conflict). When Maddy remarries, Peter learns that at the wedding “the music was straight-up Mendelssohn” (215). Here, Mendelssohn implies not just the traditional wedding march that he wrote in 1842, but also indexically signifies the kind of music that Spanish philosopher José Ortega Y Gasset condemned as qualitatively inferior compared to the music of Stravinsky or Debussy: “To prefer Mendelssohn over Debussy is a subversive act: it is tantamount to celebrating the inferior and violating the superior. The honored public that applauds the ‘Wedding March’ and boos the great modern composer’s ‘Iberia’ is guilty of artistic terrorism” (242).⁹

⁸ The “Waco Massacre” was a fifty-one-day siege initiated by the FBI following a failed raid by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) against the Branch Davidians, a fanatical religious group cult led by David Koresh whose headquarters were located near Waco, Texas (Monroe n. pag.).

⁹ “Preferir Mendelssohn a Debussy es un acto subversivo: es exaltar lo inferior y violar lo superior. El honrado público que aplaude la ‘Marcha nupcial’ y silba la ‘Iberia’ del egregio moderno ejerce un terrorismo artístico” (translation mine).

Peter narratively exemplifies that aesthetic locus where diverging musical concepts and beliefs are continuously negotiated: tradition and innovation, tonality and atonality, romanticism and serialism. The fact that music welcomes such a diverse host of (here deliberately simplified) polarities only attests to its synergic, cross-domain quality. As British musicologist Philip Tagg points out, music is “a meaningful system of non-verbal sound” that

lets us mix elements from any of the six domains of representation into an integral whole. It's an activity allowing us to represent combinations of signals from its constituent domains in one symbolic package rather than in merely linguistic, social or somatic terms. (66)¹⁰

Despite his hubristic compositional method falling upon obscure, post-classical music for just “a handful of listeners” (Powers, *Orfeo* 211), Peter is not immune to regretting his musically determined life choices. Unable to see “why he ever signed on for the full Faust ride,” Peter comes to realize “that what the world really needs is a lullaby simple enough to coax a two-year-old to lay down her frantic adventure each night for another eight hours” (182). While his works fully subscribe to the principle that “music doesn't mean things,” thus reverberating Hanslick and Stravinsky's ideas, Peter's imaginative predisposition to musical interpretation does challenge the “superiority of being over meaning in music” (Balestrini 21) implied by his own slogan.

If taken at face value, Peter's dictum that music is in no condition to produce meaning would leave little to no room for interpretation, unless his mantra is read against his bacteriological experiment. A few weeks before Fidelio's death, Peter experiences an Emersonian moment of clarity at the park, where, after scraping some mud off of his shoes, he reckons that those “billions of single-cell organisms” living in the dirt must have “encoded songs, sequences that spoke to everything that had ever happened to him” (Powers, *Orfeo* 332): all around him, sound “was pouring out of everywhere”

¹⁰ These domains are the emotional, (gross) motoric, (fine) motoric, linguistic, social and physical (Tagg 64).

(332). It is precisely “in that moment the idea came to him” (333). Peter is familiar with musically transcribed strings of DNA, a phenomenon which Ross D. King and Colin G. Angus had already described as “protein music” (251) in a 1996 article published in the journal *Bioinformatics*. Protein music is fundamentally “the analysis of protein sequence information using [...] the sense of hearing to analyse data” (251). But the “real art,” according to Peter, “would be to reverse the process, to inscribe a piece for safekeeping into the genetic material of a bacterium” (333). Genetically spliced music paves the way for Peter’s *magnus opus*, a music beyond the idea of music itself: invisible, unhearable, ethereal; in other words, “his great song of the Earth at last – music for forever and for no one...” (333). “With luck,” ponders Peter, “during cell division, the imposter message would replicate for a few generations, before life got wise and shed the free rider. Or maybe it would be picked up, inspired randomness, and *ride forever*” (142). The idea of a virtual music endlessly replicating and circulating “into the biosphere, where it will live and copy itself for a while” (359) is a nod to Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” where at the end of verse 6 the poet writes that “All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier” (*Leaves of Grass* 35, lines 129-30). The connection to Whitman is explicitly instated by Powers, who has Peter incorporate the poem’s sixth stanza into the lyrics of one of his early compositions: “He had the perfect text, the end [sic] of Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself.’ [...] He studied the words for days, listening to the sounds contained in them” (Powers, *Orfeo* 61-62).¹¹ The image of the soil rich with millions of species that the composer wipes off from his shoes is also evocative of other lines from Whitman’s poem – “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles” (*Leaves of Grass* 89, lines 1339-40) – which are directly quoted in the novel (Powers, *Orfeo* 242, 311, 315). These lines precisely touch upon the motif of regeneration and life’s endless cycle that is particularly distinctive of the poem’s concluding stanza. In the words of Ed Folsom and Christopher Merrill, Whitman eventually “dissipates into

¹¹ The last line of the stanza is hinted at in multiple other passages of the novel (61, 64, 68, 106, 130, 238, 369).

the landscape, where we will find him nowhere and everywhere, growing from the grass he loves, composted into the dirt beneath our 'boot-soles.' Every atom belonging to him now as well belongs to us and to the living world around us" (*Song of Myself* 184).

Peter's music has semiotically gone full circle: his bacteriological composition bears now so direct a meaning, that the music ends up being the very thing it is supposed to stand for, in this case, life's endless proliferation – or, to put it differently, immortality. Such coincidence between matter and meaning differs greatly from the recursive self-signification endorsed by Hanslick, who claimed that “[o]f music it is impossible to form any but a musical conception, and it can be comprehended and enjoyed *only in and for itself*” (70; emphasis added). In fact, besides offering interesting solutions such as the sound-based data analysis mentioned above, the ‘DNA-music’ equivalence – a fruitful epistemological correspondence in *The Gold Bug Variations*; a concrete (however intangible the composition may be) communion between notes and genes in *Orfeo* – allows to directly engage with the debate of how meaning is generated through analogies. Cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter argues that “using th[e] image of ribosome as tape recorder, mRNA as tape, and protein as music” leads to identifying

some beautiful parallels. Music is not a mere linear sequence of notes. Our minds perceive pieces of music on a level far higher than that. We chunk notes into phrases, phrases into melodies, melodies into movements, and movements into full pieces. Similarly, proteins only make sense when they act as chunked units. (525)

Yet, Peter's transcendently musical defeat of time comes at a price. Towards the end of the novel, after meeting with Richard (now an Alzheimer's patient participating in a clinical trial), Peter sets up a Twitter account choosing the username “@Terrorchord,” under which he will post a series of tweets “proving that he was this year's fugitive” (Powers, *Orfeo* 350). It is Richard who first recommends that Peter should indulge the nation's accusations of terrorism and “say that it's all out there, spreading. [...] *An epidemic of invisible music*” (346). Only at this point in the narrative

does the reader realize that the ambiguous quotes and aphoristic excerpts scattered throughout the text and signaled by a change of font are Peter's serialized, digital confession. Eventually located at his daughter's house by the FBI after being on the run for days, Peter defyingly embraces the idea of death and starts rushing towards the agents waiting outside, as he holds a "bud vase [that] will look much like lab glassware in the dark" (369).

Conclusions

Unable to unwaveringly choose either side of the debate concerning musical meaning, Peter Els opts for a musical experimentation that, if anything, only strengthens music's perceived capacity to prompt a combination of interpretive responses on the listener's part. As Nassim Balestrini remarks, "[E]ven if Els's DNA notation concentrates on what he considers music's essential being, he cannot escape the subjective meaning that the composition has for him, for Maddy, and for Sara," (25) – Peter's daughter –, as well as for the fictive American public (who overinterprets Peter's musical harmless bacteria as a terrorist threat) and even for the novel's empirical readers. To elucidate his statement that "music is unable to express anything at all," Stravinsky added that if music succeeds in communicating something outside itself, it is only "an additional attribute which, by tacit and inveterate agreement, we have lent it, thrust upon it, as a label, as a convention" (53-54). Although meaning (especially of a musical kind) is always highly dynamic and dependent on context and personal experience, there is no sufficient cause to dismiss the possibility of an intersubjectively shared extra-sonorous supplement.¹² Despite music's lack of a comparatively immediate referential component, "addressing the nonverbal, communicating indirectly what cannot be directly conveyed by words, is one of the most traditional functions of language, and one of the

¹² The universality of music lies not so much in a sort of metaphysical, univocal signification common to multiple cultures as in the fact that every culture seems to make and listen to music, as confirmed by Theodor Gracyk: "While it is false that music is a universal language, music-making is a universal human activity" (174).

richest in terms of technique" (Kramer, *Musical Meaning* 14), a lesson that Powers aptly appropriates through the textually fecund incorporation of twentieth-century art music, including Mahler and Messiaen.

Mahler's grief-stricken song cycle and Messiaen's transcendental, time-arresting composition allow Powers to qualify Peter's seeming conviction "that music doesn't mean things," thus establishing a poignant connection between their sonic meaningfulness and the diegetic circumstances of their textual reproduction. In my opinion, the musical works that are extensively thematized in the novel engage in a feedback loop of reciprocal connotations with Peter's life stages – an operation that serves to emphasize the signifying capability of music in what can be seen as a triangulation between sound, written text and narrative context. In regards to the relationship between written word and music, Joseph P. Swain maintains that "when a different set of words is applied to music and the fit seems apt, it means that the new text provides a context that is still appropriate and whose meaning is well within the semantic range of the original music" (142). In the verbal music passages of *Orfeo*, the text is indeed complementary to the contour, tonal content, and other attributes of the music reproduced, whose "potential meanings" are thus actualized "out of vast semantic ranges of those pieces" (141).

By turning to music "not just as the window dressing" (Powers, "A Conversation" n. pag.) but making it the cultural, existential, psychological and political drive of the story, *Orfeo* redefines Petermann's category of musical novel, demonstrating that fictional narratives may not only find in music a productive arsenal of "structural analogies" to organize their "textual materiality" (Wolf, *Musicalization* 58), but can also distillate music's most profound meaning. Thus, *Orfeo* enacts that "most traditional functio[n] of language" (Kramer, *Musical Meaning* 14), and convincingly explores the "many different ways of bringing actual pieces of music into a fictional story" (Powers, "A Conversation" n. pag.). Through a variety of strategies to substantiate the discrepancy between the protagonist's refrain and the interpretable quality that the narrative (both at the discursive and diegetic levels) assigns to music, Powers successfully addresses "the question that [Peter's] whole life had failed to answer: How did music trick the body into thinking it had a soul?" (*Orfeo* 330).

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What is Left of Human Nature?

Posthuman Subjectivity in Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* and its radical challenge to the neoliberal concept of humanity. Throughout Western thought, the human has been hierarchically positioned in relation to the non-human realm. This symbolic structure has not only supported human dominance over animals and the natural environment, but has also perpetuated sexist, racist, classist, homophobic, and ethnocentric assumptions within human society. Drawing from the ideas of post-structuralism, deconstructionism, ecology, and feminism, Russ challenges traditional assumptions by blurring boundaries between humanity and the environment, culture and nature, and human and non-human entities (animals and machines), as well as between men and women.

While the novel primarily addresses the problematic definition of female subjectivity, both individual and collective, it also presents an alternative concept of human subjectivity in general. Russ's text presents a view of human nature as a process rather than a stable entity, which can be interpreted as anti-essentialist. This perspective anticipates some of the key aspects of critical posthumanism.

The main category in the representation of this alternative subjectivity is hybridization, which Russ identifies as a principle of poietic and narrative composition that informs the entire novel. This strategy operates on three interconnected levels: thematic hybridization, conveyed through hybrid figures such as the cyborg, android, female man, and transgender character; ontological hybridization, conveyed through the trope of parallel universes

commonly found in science fiction; and linguistic and narrative hybridization in the text's postmodern style. At the first level, I focus on the role of technology as an instrument of hybridization and historical change through its capacity to transform the human body. At the second level, I demonstrate how Russ's use of the multiverse narrative challenges Western ontology by rejecting the traditional idea of a unitary essence as the foundation of reality and instead embracing a vision that anticipates the relational ontology of philosophical posthumanism. At the third level, two stylistic strategies are employed to express a new subjectivity: the uncertain and shifting identity of the narrative 'I' and the blurring of the boundaries between the author and the characters. Identity is thus understood not as a fixed and uniform entity but rather as a dynamic process of composition and reconfiguration of fragments.

KEYWORDS

Utopia, Human nature, Posthuman, Joanna Russ, Science Fiction

In his pioneering exploration of the genre, Brian Aldiss contends that science fiction's essence lies in the quest for "a definition of mankind and his status in the universe" (30). However, as numerous scholars have emphasized, science fiction achieves this by delving into diverse manifestations of the human condition, constructing worlds based on alternative assumptions. This departure from conventional norms prompts a critical examination of human nature, a concept historically enmeshed in hierarchical frameworks within Western thought. This hierarchical view, deeply ingrained in humanism and liberalism, has perpetuated discriminatory ideologies that marginalize groups based on gender, race, and class.

Many theorists such as Marshal Sahlins, Leon Kamin, Richard Lewontin, Steven Rose and Sherryl Vint have highlighted universality and individuality as the core of liberal humanism. Universality often entails the belief in fundamental human rights and freedoms that are inherent to every individual simply by virtue of being human. However, the claim for the universal has often been critiqued for its failure to acknowledge the diverse experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups, such as women and non-white individuals, whose exclusion challenges the notion of a universal human essence.

In liberal humanism, individuality is highly valued as it recognizes the importance of personal freedom, self-determination, and the pursuit of one's interests and aspirations. However, as highlighted by Sahlins

in his critique of liberalism as possessive individualism, the concept of individuality can be problematic when it leads to a narrow understanding of society that prioritizes self-interest and competition over communal well-being and solidarity. This perspective views individuals as isolated entities, disconnected from broader social contexts and obligations, which can undermine the cohesion and collective welfare of society.

The shifting discourse surrounding human nature in the twentieth century reflects a multiplicity of perspectives across disciplines, fostering a contentious dialogue that challenges traditional notions (see Fuentes; Visala). This discourse intersects with the emergence of philosophical posthumanism, a framework critiquing traditional human representations. Francesca Ferrando characterizes critical or philosophical posthumanism as “a post-humanism, a post-anthropocentrism, and a post-dualism” (103). Recent advancements in technology and life sciences have led scholars like Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti to advocate for a post-anthropocentric view, where the human subject is redefined as inherently interconnected with non-human entities. This reconceptualization expands the notion of subjectivity beyond the individual, emphasizing its distributed nature across various agents, objects and contexts. Braidotti characterizes the posthuman subject as a relational, material, and vital process: “[p]osthuman subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building” (49). Rather than stemming from some inner essence, the subject is embodied and interconnected with networks of relationships with other subjectivities, both human and non-human, organic and inorganic.

This evolution in thinking about human nature resonates with the transformative potential of science fiction. A number of scholars have examined the close relationship between science fiction and various expressions and currents of posthuman thought. Simona Micali, Pramod K. Nayar, Sherryl Vint and others have highlighted the ways in which many science fiction works, particularly those that have been most commercially successful (especially films and TV series), offer a representation of the human subject that is marked by what Nayar and Vint have named ‘popular posthumanism’. The latter “retains the key attributes of the human – sensation, emotion and rationality – but believes that these characteristics

might be enhanced through technological intervention. This implies that traditional views of the human persist in popular posthumanism: it only seeks an enhancement of the human” (Nayar 18). Many science-fiction classics, from Heinlein to Asimov, from Philip Dick to Ballard, and most cyberpunk works fall into this groove. Although authors such as Theodor Sturgeon and Clifford Simak departed from this model to some extent, it was above all the feminist writers at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s who proposed convincing narrative representations of an alternative subjectivity. The works of Ursula K. Le Guin, James Tiptree Jr., Marge Piercy, Samuel R. Delany, Suzie McKee Charnas, and others can be considered in this connection. In particular, through the form of critical utopia, as Tom Moylan formulated it, feminist science fiction has been able to imbue the radical contestation of the humanist subject with a positive connotation.

By deconstructing traditional gender roles and offering alternative subjectivities, such feminist narratives fashion aspects of posthuman subjectivity. For many years, critics have acknowledged the pivotal influence of Joanna Russ’s works on the emergence of feminist science fiction (see LeFanu; Cortiel; Mendelsohn; Jones). I will concentrate my analysis on Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (hereafter *TFM*), a renowned feminist science fictional utopia, arguing that it presents a vision of human identity that defies essentialist binaries and embraces fluidity and hybridity. *TFM* visualizes a female humanity realized in the absence of men in Whileaway’s utopia which is placed within the framework of a multiverse of which it constitutes only one parallel universe alongside three others. In fact, *TFM* is structured in four worlds, each inhabited by the novel’s protagonists Jeannine, Joanna, Jael and Janet, who turn out to be versions of the same subject. The plot can be summarized as the protagonists’ journeys to their respective universes and their eventual meeting. Initially, Janet travels to Joanna and Jeannine’s universes, while it is only later in the novel that Jael reveals herself as the main architect of their meeting. This revelation occurs when she summons them to her own universe, unveiling her plan to seek allies in the fierce battle of the sexes in which she is engaged.

Through the deconstruction of traditional gender roles and the construction of alternative subjectivities, Russ’s novel navigates themes of fluidity, hybridity, and interconnectedness. By rejecting binaries and embracing complexity, *TFM* offers a visionary exploration of human and

non-human relationships, contributing to broader discussions within philosophical posthumanism and feminist theory. “One would think science fiction,” Russ stated, “the perfect literary mode in which to explore (and explode) our assumptions about ‘innate’ values and ‘natural’ social arrangements, in short our ideas about Human Nature, Which Never Changes” (*The Image of Women* 206). Science fiction possesses the dual capacity to deconstruct and construct. As noted by scholars such as Sara LeFanu and Brian Attebery, feminist science fiction boldly questions conventional notions of femininity and identity, while also providing pathways for the creation of new subjectivities. *TFM* operates adeptly on both fronts. On the one hand, it exposes the mechanisms of ideological construction surrounding women and the social practices that reinforce such constructs, thereby deconstructing the notion of woman as a cultural artefact. On the other hand, through its science fiction characters and worlds, Russ constructs an alternative image of women that challenges macho stereotypes and embodies a worldview characterized by a critical reappropriation of feminine values and attitudes, aligning with the perspective of the second generation of feminism.

Although the novel primarily deals with the problematic definition of female subjectivity, both individual and collective, it provides an alternative idea of human subjectivity *tout court*. Drawing on the theme of role reversal and locating itself in the tradition of the feminine utopia, it shuns rigid distinctions and seeks to challenge essentialist binarism traditionally attributed to Western thought. This crucial goal is clearly outlined in the author’s presentation at the Khatru Symposium:

One of the best things (for me) about science fiction is that – at least theoretically – it is a place where the ancient dualities disappear. Day and night, up and down, “masculine” and “feminine” are purely specific, limited phenomena which have been mythologised by people. They are man-made (not woman-made). Excepting up and down, night and day (maybe). Out in space there is no up or down, no day or night, and in the point of view space can give us, I think there is no “opposite” sex – what a word! Opposite what? The Eternal Feminine and the Eternal Masculine become the poetic fancies of a

weakly dimorphic species trying to imitate every other species in a vain search for what is “natural.” (qtd. in Smith and Gomoll 38)

Rather than subscribing to the postmodern inclination for the inescapable dissipation of the subject, Russ’s text captures the subject both as a fluid, composite, and hybrid entity, as well as an ongoing process. The main category in the representation of this alternative subjectivity is hybridization, which Russ identifies as a principle of stylistic and narrative composition that informs the entire novel. This strategy operates on three levels: thematic hybridization, conveyed by a set of hybrid figures, such as the cyborg, the android, the female man of the title, and the transgender character; ontological hybridization, conveyed by the trope of the parallel universes, highly frequent in science fiction; and linguistic and narrative hybridization in the text’s postmodern, anti-romantic style. The three levels are closely interconnected and continually refer back to each other, shaping a radical questioning of gender categories through a strictly anti-essentialist conception of human nature.

Hybrid Figures: Contrast the Man and Dissolve the Woman

Thematic hybridization consists in the production of hybrid figures, especially narrative agents, but also entire cultural universes. The first hybrid figure is, in fact, the utopian society of *Whileaway*, constructed as the most typical of feminist utopias: a society based on the exclusion of men. Taking an all-female world as an emblem of hybridization may seem paradoxical. In fact, the eradication of the male gender, which implies the dissolution of a patriarchal gender system, is an extremely fruitful narrative premise for creating mixed subjects in which the categories of masculine and feminine are blurred and almost lose their essence. This solution is articulated in two of the four worlds that structure the novel’s fictional society.

Russ employs the multiverse as a trope that challenges patriarchal ideology, by highlighting the formative and performative role of culture in relation to the natural datum. The social articulation and material conditions of each world produce different female subjects. The central role of the socio-cultural context in shaping female personality is stressed by

devising the four protagonists as variants of the same genotype in different time continuums.

As also pointed out by Jeanne Cortiel (160), Russ articulates her narrative multiverse through “generic discontinuities” (Jameson 254), relating each universe to different literary genres. Jeannine’s and Joanna’s worlds can be classified as mimetic since they replicate the empirical world. They are conveyed through narrative forms, such as alternative history and autobiography, which are fully relatable to the realistic mode. In contrast, Jael’s and Janet’s worlds belong to science fiction as they present situations that are completely different from reality, based on different ontological and epistemic paradigms.

Marilyn Hacker’s study on Russ highlights how realist and mainstream fiction depicts the struggles of female subjects dealing with present circumstances (5-10). The solutions to their oppressive situations are limited to existing within the current societal framework, leading to individual choices such as conformity, madness, death, or departure. In fact, Russ’s “realist” worlds stem from her portrayal of contemporary gender inequality, sexual repression, and cultural discontent. The characters of Jeannine and Joanna exemplify the predicament of women under patriarchy, where the available options are to conform to male-defined femininity or to strive for independence akin to men. Jeannine represents the former, inhabiting an alternate reality where women are further oppressed due to an historical context where the Great Depression never ended, World War II never occurred and the economic growth that facilitated women’s liberation doesn’t exist. Joanna, on the other hand, symbolizes the rejection of patriarchal ideals. In a setting reminiscent of the late 1960s, she initially resists conformity through passive means, attempting to maintain her own survival within an oppressive environment.

In contrast, the other characters, belonging to the science fictional worlds, are examples of emancipated women. Jael exists in a society where women and men live separately and are engaged in a fierce battle of the sexes. Her environment fosters a unique female subjectivity, showcasing women’s capability in traditionally male-dominated roles and challenging stereotypes of female vulnerability. She is, in fact, an ethnologist and skilled warrior. Janet, On the other hand, represents the potential of liberated women in a society without men. Free from gender-based constraints,

women like Janet can define themselves and exhibit the full range of human behaviors, including violence.

In both science fiction worlds, technology is closely linked to new possibilities for women and has a crucial role in shaping alternative subjectivities. By emphasizing the political and metaphysical implications of power in shaping human beings' material existence, Russ rejects any naïve approach to technology as an intrinsically progressive means of sociopolitical transformation. The novel draws upon the ambivalent discourses of technology, as both a danger to nature and humanity and as an enhancement of human agency.

The human body's transformative capacity positions technology as an instrument of hybridization and historical change. As Donna Haraway argued, this challenges pre-established identities and conventional distinctions, not only concerning gender identities but also the dichotomy of nature and culture (149-154). Technology clearly emerges as a metaphor for culture in Jael's universe. Its creative potential is illustrated with subtle irony in the different practices of designing human body that are implemented in the Manland and Womanland societies. The difference lies in the political use of this potential. On Manland, technology plays a conservative role in that it is the instrument for preserving gender hierarchies. Through biological manipulation, Manland maintains the gender system despite the absence of women. Following the anatomical clues provided by the women of Womanland, men transform the genital and hormonal apparatus of male infants, turning them into a complement of women. More than anatomical accuracy, what is at stake is the recreation of a subordinate subject that allows men to exert control. As a tool for preserving the gender system, technology here confirms the artificiality of gender and once again exposes its political nature, showing how it is both the product and the basis of certain power relations.

Yet technology is also presented as a means of women's emancipation and liberation. In this sense, *TFM* aligns with Firestone's belief that the technological capacity of late capitalism can liberate women from what she deemed their biological limitations (196-202). Indeed, the symbol of this possibility is Jael's own body. Jael is a cyborg with a set of steel teeth and retractable claws. These prosthetic weapons equip her for the war of the sexes, thus allowing her to counter the diminished image of women

implemented in the gender system. Here, technology is a tool for women's empowerment.

Indeed, Jael's technological body symbolizes women's anger against oppression. However, the subtle interplay with generic discontinuities reveals that technology ultimately preserves the gender system in *Womanland*, albeit in a reversed manner. In Jael's world, technology is an instrument of power, a means that confirms and reinforces gender divisions and the separation between technology and nature. Jael's body is in a sense a functional necessity for war, an instrument of struggle rather than liberation. In fact, the dystopian scenario of the unrestricted war between men and women also involves nature. We see a desolate landscape, ravaged by war and polluted. Portions of unspoiled nature do exist in *Womanland*, but they can only be gleaned from rare hints. The window of her apartment is a digital screen reproducing images of a rural landscape, which is emblematic of the pervasive dominance of technology over nature in Jael's world. Furthermore, technology has the capacity to completely replace nature by the fact that, although Jael describes herself as "old-fashioned," she uses an android as a sexual companion in an explicit reversal of traditional roles: now the man is reified and reduced to a mere instrument of pleasure. The capacity of technology to produce subjectivities and bodies is here used to reproduce and reinforce relationships of domination and hegemonies. Jael, in fact, reproduces the essentialising patriarchal system but reverses its terms. She believes that all men, without exception, are stupid because "it's in their blood" (Russ, *TFM* 170), that is, it is in their nature. The construction of masculinity is based on the same binary logic with which patriarchy constructed the idea of femininity. The android Davy plays the ancillary role typically assigned to women in the patriarchal system. He is Jael's housewife and sex slave, lacking his own consciousness and will. By featuring this universe as a dystopia Russ criticizes this degeneration. As Darko Suvin suggests, dystopian literature primarily serves to highlight the dangers of socio-political tendencies by taking them to extreme consequences (394-96). Here, the dystopian form serves as a warning about the perils of unrestrained anger, particularly the risk of perpetuating sexual oppression that feminist movements aim to eradicate.

In contrast, the absence of men on *Whileaway* enables a unique portrayal of technology. Russ illustrates how linking women and technology

challenges the ideological association of woman and nature, materially reinforced by women's exclusion from science and technical domains. Susana Martins accurately points out that

despite the emphasis on ecology and rural living on Whileaway, “nature” as a concept – as in human nature, or, more precisely, female “nature” – will not provide the resources for political change in *The Female Man*, because nature is culturally figured as that which does not change; it is the essential, the eternal. Redefining what counts as “female nature” seems to require the historicized and forward-looking connotations of technological development, even if such development functions only as metaphor. (410)

The novel, however, does not simply let women enter the realm of science but changes the traditional conception of science, specifically by rejecting the system of desubjectivization of technology and science, which aims to purify them from the partialities of their bodies. The invention of the ‘induction helmet’ is a telling case in this regard. This invention offers new connections between human and nature, but more importantly, it redefines the boundaries of the self, or rather, it generates a self with mobile borders that exist, according to Bruno Latour’s formula, in a network of human and non-human actors. Women wearing the induction helmet “run routine machinery, dig people out of landslides, oversee food factories (with induction helmets on their heads, their toes controlling the green peas, their fingers the vats and controls, and their back muscles the carrots, and their abdomens the water supply)” (Russ, *TFM* 51). Through association with machines, women’s bodies and minds can become intertwined with technological and organic entities. Additionally, the use of machines can extend their capabilities for action and perception. This tool allows for the operation of multiple machines and the management of large plots of land by a single person. This implies an expanded perception of nature and an extension of the self to the prosthetic body, that becomes part of the acting subject in carrying out the work.

The combination of the situated body and technology gives substance to the idea of a composite subjectivity distributed among multiple actors who play the roles of subject and object in combination. Susana Martin has

captured the ontological scope of this hybridization, interpreting it as a forerunner of posthuman thought: “the realms of the human and the non-human [...] do not occupy distinct, exclusive categories: all objects are quasi-objects and all subjects are quasi- subjects – products of both nature and culture” (408). In essence, the human is viewed as a technonatural, inherently hybrid entity; it appears to function as a boundary that connects rather than separates natural and technological entities. The *Whilewayans*' integration of their bodies and minds with computers and various machines evokes the concept of humans as actors within a vast organic, technological, and informational network. This connection serves not only for carrying out heavy physical labor but also for engaging in intellectual and creative pursuits. Particularly, the elderly find solace in immersing themselves in virtual reality, seeking respite from the fervor of youth. The younger individuals “are tied in with power plants” (Russ, *TFM* 76) and are equally proficient in working with animals, plants, and machinery, as Janet explicitly states: “I’ve supervised the digging of fire trails, delivered babies, fixed machinery, and milked more moo-moo cows than I wish I knew existed” (2). Older individuals, on the other hand, primarily engage in academic research and artistic creation, as they have “learned to join with calculating machines in the state they say can’t be described but is most like a sneeze that never comes off” (53).

Computers offer a temporary escape from daily reality, allowing individuals to delve into abstraction and meditation. However, Russ's novel transcends conventional divisions between the human and non-human by merging characteristics of both the biological and the virtual. While cyberpunk literature often depicts access to virtual reality as a complete disembodiment, representing it as a liberation from the limitations of matter, Russ reverses this perspective. The analogy of ‘a sneeze that never comes off’ deromanticizes and desacralizes the myth of virtual reality, equating the abstract and intellectual with the material. This blurring of traditional conceptual borders, such as spirit/matter and mind/body, challenges preconceived notions and prompts a reevaluation of the human-machine relationship.

Ontological Hybridization: The Trope of Parallel Universes

The element that has most attracted the attention of readers and critics is Whileaway's all-female utopian society. *TFM* visualizes a female humanity living in the absence of men. However, Whileaway is placed within the framework of a multiverse of which it constitutes only one parallel universe alongside three others.

Parallel universes have been used in science fiction to explore the nature of reality, create speculative cosmological models, and imagine the consequences of historical events that deviate from their actual course. The concept that reality is an ongoing creation of alternate universes aligns with the narrative theory of possible worlds. Umberto Eco characterizes a narrative text as a world-creating machine that generates possible worlds whenever a character contemplates or makes a decision, even in a fictional universe based on the one-world model (136-40). As Marie-Laure Ryan has pointed out, science fiction adopts the plurality-of-worlds model as the underlying structure of the fictional world, establishing a direct relationship with the multiverse as a theme (634). In the case of *TFM*, we should more appropriately speak of divergent alternative universes. As stated in the text:

Every choice begets at least two worlds of possibility, that is, one in which you do and one in which you don't: or very likely many more, one in which you do quickly, one in which you do slowly; one in which you don't, but hesitate, one in which you hesitate and frown, one in which you hesitate and sneeze, and so on. To carry this line of argument further, there must be an infinite number of possible universes (such is the fecundity of God) for there is no reason to imagine Nature as prejudiced in favor of human action. Every displacement of every molecule, every change in orbit of every electron, every quantum of light that strikes here and not there – each of these must somewhere have its alternatives. (Russ, *TFM* 6)

Parallel worlds are, therefore, connected to each other: they usually coincide with our world until a major transformation or countless small shifts trigger separation and differentiation, generating an alternative timeline.

This challenges the traditional Western ontology of a unitary essence as the foundation of reality, thus aligning itself with the relational ontology of philosophical posthumanism. According to the theory of parallel universes, reality is fragmented and composed of multiple alternatives. “The main purpose of most science fiction stories,” Renato Giovannoli points out, “is not to describe an alternative world, but to postulate the simultaneous existence of some, if not all, worlds, and to evaluate the consequences of contacts that may be established between them” (367, trans. mine). Francesca Ferrando argues that the multiverse challenges a universe-centric perspective and problematizes the notion of a single universe (169). It also materializes the dissolution of strict binaries, dualistic modes, and exclusivist approaches.

Russ's use of this trope embodies the plural unity or unitary plurality that distinguishes the new materialistic monism and relational ontology described by Braidotti, Haraway, and Ferrando. According to Braidotti, “Monism results in relocating difference outside the dialectical scheme, as a complex process of differing which is framed by both internal and external forces and is based on the centrality of the relation to multiple others” (56). Relational ontology rejects the reductionist principle that views reality as made up of independent, separate parts and fragments that mechanically come together to form larger systems. Instead, it prioritizes the internal relations between parts, considering them as the foundation for their identity. “It's possible, too, that there is no such a thing as one clear line or strand of probability, and that we live on a sort of twisted braid, blurring from one to the other without even knowing it, as long as we keep within the limits of a set of variations that really make no difference to us” (Russ, *TFM* 6). The different parallel worlds interact and converge into a single multiverse. Thanks to the protagonists' journeys, the parallel worlds overlap and partially intersect, representing reality as a site of exchange and dynamic interaction between multiple worlds in what can be defined as an ontological fibrillation.

The novel's lack of clear explanation regarding the physical means of inter-universal travel and the moment of crossing the threshold between universes contributes to theorizing a posthumanistic relational ontology. The protagonists are abruptly transported to another world without any explanation. For instance, Janet's arrival in Joanna's world is described as a

sudden appearance on Broadway. Similarly, Joanna finds herself suddenly transported into Jeannine's world, as she says: "I got stuck with Jeannine" (83). These movements and appearances occur thanks to teleportation, suggesting a fluid reality composed of interconnected worlds.

The fluid state of the multiverse is exemplified not only by the journeys of the four J's from one universe to another, but also by the intersection of their identities, the sudden and unexpected transformation of one character into another during a given action. The most significant example is the cocktail party scene, in which Joanna and Janet merge into one character after being molested by a man. Another example of character overlap occurs in Jeannine's universe. After isolating herself during a family reunion, Jeannine is scolded by her brother for her gloomy mood. The action seems to be the typical male oppression of women, but when her brother, in a form of physical imposition, grabs her by the wrist to take her back to her relatives, there is Janet on the scene. She reacts promptly, with verbal and physical self-assertion.

The sudden and abrupt teleportation, along with the merging of selves from different space-time continuums, bears a striking resemblance to Ferrando's description of the post-human multiverse:

More than parallel dimensions, optically separated from each other, the posthuman understanding of the multiverse would be envisioned as generative nets of material possibilities simultaneously happening and coexisting, corresponding to specific vibrations of the strings, in a material understanding of the dissolution of the strict dualism one/many. The identity of one dimension would be maintained under the conditions of a specific vibrational range, and by the material relations to other dimensions, in a multiplication of situated affinities and convergences. (178)

This ability to preserve the difference of the multiple in unity makes the trope of the multiverse a particularly apt metaphorical resource for expressing the notion of plural, relational, and ever-forming subjectivity, which, in the novel, is embodied in the fractured identities of the characters.

Narrative-Linguistic Hybridization

The cognitive theory of parallel worlds is turned into a poietic principle so as to justify the novel as a postmodern pastiche made of different styles, tones, literary and discursive genres and, most of all, the fragmentation of the narrative I and of the figure of the author. These sophisticated formal devices acquire a strong political significance in Russ's text: literary postmodernism is charged with eminently political meanings, becoming the literary and aesthetic category for a revolutionary and specifically feminist political agenda. The experimental use of language is used as an anti-logos weapon, to use Sally Robinson's words (105), in order to dismantle patriarchal discourses and ideology. The novel constructs an alternative language to the patriarchal one, based on linear logic, cause-and-effect relationships, a precise and unambiguous definition of categories and entities through the principle of non-contradiction. In contrast, *TFM* breaks all the formal rules of fiction. It has no beginning-middle-end, no clear relationship between author and characters, and above all no clear relationship between text and meaning.

Two intertwined strategies are of paramount importance in prospecting a new female subjectivity: the uncertain and shifting identity of the narrative I and the blurring of the frontiers between the author and the characters. If, on the one hand, the massive recourse to first-person narration represents the female claim to take the floor, to speak for herself in order to define the self and the world from her own perspective, on the other hand, the narrating self is internally split, made fluid and changeable. The novel continually sows doubt about the reliability of the narrating self and the status of the entire narrative, so that the reader must constantly question who is speaking, who is making the claims, whether the speaker is trustworthy, and whether and on what basis the truth claims are acceptable. The main effect of this narrative solution is to disrupt the notion of the unitary subject with a well-defined identity.

The narrating self is internally fractured as it is occupied by different identities from time to time. In the final section of the novel, the narrators seem to have collapsed completely onto each other: "We got up and paid our quintuple bill; then we went out into the street. I said goodbye and went off with Laur, I Janet; I also watched them go, I Joanna; moreover,

I went off to show Jael the city, I Jeannine, I Jael, myself" (Russ, *TFM* 212). The first-person narrative is thus not the vehicle for expressing and constructing a single identity, but rather becomes a position of power shared by multiple psychological instances. In keeping with the premise of the ontological plurality of universes and their intersection, the entire narrative is fragmented and dispersed.

The process of one subject being possessed by another and abruptly replacing it in the action has a definite direction and function in this text. It is mainly Janet and Jael who 'possess' the other protagonists. For instance, in the episode of the cocktail party there is a merging of Joanna and Janet in one subject. It seems that there is only one woman in the room, a woman split between two consciousnesses – one performing the Joanna-actions which comply with gender stereotypes, and one performing the Janet-actions which break them. The purpose of this narrative strategy is to demonstrate how the alternative representation of women, marked by rage and utopia, functions in developing a new female subjectivity that can serve as a model for all of humanity.

Just as there is no hierarchical relationship between the four protagonists, who are alternative versions of the same subject, so the privilege of the authorial voice, characteristic of the bourgeois and patriarchal novel, is constantly undermined by several strategies. First, through meta-commentaries that involve the author and reveal the process of composing the story. Second, by blurring the boundaries between author and character and the very logical relationship between the creator and his creature. Especially in the third part, the character of Joanna is confused with the author Joanna Russ, not only by the coincidence of names, but also by her character traits and life experiences. By transforming the author into a character and making her interact with the other characters, she breaks the hierarchy between the two figures, with the character descending from the author in a unidirectional relationship of production.

It is no longer the author who has the exclusive prerogative of creating the character's identity, but the character acquires an almost autonomous status that actually contributes to the formation of the author's personality. Catherine McClenahan suggests that the four protagonists represent different aspects of the author's personality (116). The plot of the text centers around Joanna's transformation into "the female man," and the

other characters represent different stages of this process. The narrative complicates the relationship between the characters of Joanna and Janet. In a section in which she assumes the narrative voice of Joanna speaking to Janet, she disguises and claims authorial prerogatives with statements such as "I made her up.... Oh, I made that woman up; you can believe it ... I imagined her" (Russ, *TFM* 30-31). Yet, another statement immediately makes this distribution of roles uncertain: "After I called Janet, out of nowhere, *or she called me*" (29; emphasis added). The author creates the character, but the character also creates the author.

The status of author is disputed between Joanna and Jael. In fact, the latter plays a decisive role in the creation of Joanna. Jael presents herself as the material author of the shifts between the universes of the other protagonists. She is therefore responsible for their meetings and reunions. Her role as a demiurge who arranges the situations in which the characters will find themselves, makes her the hidden engine of the plot, thus partially assuming the prerogatives of the author. Before revealing herself by taking the place of the narrator in the eighth part of the novel, she declares, "I am the ghost of the author and know all things" (166). Indeed, before she enters the scene, Jael is a kind of ghost, a spiritual presence that accompanies the protagonists' actions, haunts buildings and places, and possesses the gift of omniscience because of the technique of interdimensional travel. When they find themselves together in Manland, the connection between Jael and Joanna is further confused. "Oh, I couldn't, says the other Jael" (180).

This formal feature voices a new conception of female subjectivity. Identity is understood not as a fixed and uniform entity but rather as a dynamic process of composition and reconfiguration of parts and fragments. The new female subject is multiple, with a mobile and constantly changing identity. For its fractured identities as well as for the literary techniques deployed, *TFM* is one of the most effective literary expressions of the postmodern critique of essentialism and its theories about the unity of the subject. The novel also tries to figure out a possible unity through Jael's interpellation to the other characters to join the struggle, yet they respond differently to this request, each according to her personality. The dispersive fragmentation of the selves is held together by common political goals. This form of a cooperative but differentiated unification is a narrative dramatization of Haraway's concept of coalition by affinity.

Haraway argued that any definition of a unified political subject in the feminist movement must consider the differences that exist among women. Haraway proposed an active alliance-building strategy based on affinity, rather than an identity politics that assumes political uniformity and unity of purpose. This can be achieved through sharing a particular ideology or working towards specific political goals. "This identity," Haraway states, "marks out a self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship" (*Cyborg Manifesto* 156). The diversity resulting from the multiplicity of resistance actions is seen as a political asset: the general strategy of tactical separatism is broken and fragmented, allowing for different actions and opposition strategies depending on the different conditions (social, psychological and cultural) the four Js.

The novel focuses more on the process of constitution of the subject than on its final outcome, suggesting that this unity is fluid and evolving. The novel itself is thus a political act. Postmodern narrative techniques extend beyond the mere linguistic play of traditional forms and are imbued with a specific set of political values. Contrary to Barthes' assertion in "The Death of the Author," for Russ writing is not the "destruction of every voice" (*Image* 142) but the space for the expression of silenced voices, the different facets of the female psyche that are silenced and repressed in patriarchal culture. Her writing becomes a space for the expression of women as embodied subjects facing systemic social oppression. Rather than erasing subjectivity, *TFM* provides a platform for the emergence of alternative subjectivities. Through its hybrid figurations and narrative forms, the novel encapsulates the subject as a fluid, multi-faceted entity constituted in and by a network of evolving relationships.

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FORUM
AISNA at 50

AISNA at 50

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Dedichiamo questo Forum di *RSAJournal* al cinquantesimo anniversario della fondazione dell' AISNA – già celebrato ufficialmente con una Sessione Speciale del Convegno Biennale di Narni nel settembre 2023. Abbiamo voluto raccogliere anche in forma scritta alcuni degli spunti emersi durante quella occasione, allargando ulteriormente lo sguardo a un bilancio sull'impatto di questo importante mezzo secolo di storia dell'Associazione.

Abbiamo quindi chiesto ad alcune colleghe e colleghi che negli anni hanno in prima persona contribuito all'evolversi dei molteplici aspetti dell'attività dell'Associazione di aiutarci a fare il punto su questi primi cinquant'anni di attività. Con un'introduzione dell'attuale Presidente, Leonardo Buonomo, e contributi di Valerio De Angelis, Daniele Fiorentino, Donatella Izzo, Giorgio Mariani e un pezzo collettaneo di Lorenzo Costaguta, Stefano Morello e Virginia Pignagnoli, cerchiamo in questo Forum di contribuire a una rivisitazione storica e critica del ruolo dell' AISNA nella promozione degli American Studies in Italia e internazionalmente.

Concludiamo il Forum con un contributo, e un ricordo, di Maurizio Vaudagna, stimato studioso e membro dell'Associazione scomparso nel 2023, che ha dedicato vari momenti della sua ricerca a delineare una storia della disciplina degli American Studies in Italia e in Europa. L'estratto che ripubblichiamo, parte di un lungo saggio uscito nel 2007 su *Storia*

della Storiografia (n. 51) – che ringraziamo per la gentile concessione – arricchisce di ulteriori dettagli il bilancio che abbiamo cercato di tracciare di questi primi cinquant'anni.

NOTA BIOGRAFICA

Andrea Carosso è docente di Letteratura Americana presso il Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere e Culture Moderne dell'Università di Torino, dove è presidente del corso di laurea magistrale in English and American Studies e delegato alla mobilità internazionale. Recentemente ha co-curato *Coastlines, Oceans and Rivers of North America: Encounters and Ecocrises* (*Iperstoria* 19, estate 2022); *Family in Crisis? Crossing Borders, Crossing Narratives* (Transcript, 2020); *Family and the Media* (IJMCP, 2019) e *Arabi e musulmani d'America* (Ácoma, 2018). È autore di *Cold War Narratives. American Culture in the 1950s* (2012), *Invito alla lettura di Vladimir Nabokov* (1999), *T.S. Eliot e i miti del moderno. Prassi, teoria e ideologia negli scritti critici e filosofici* (1995).

Introduzione

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Ripercorrere la cinquantennale storia dell' AISNA, inserendola nel più ampio contesto della storia degli Studi americani in Italia, è particolarmente importante nello scenario attuale, in cui sono state ridefinite le discipline accademiche a livello ministeriale e sono stati oggetto di discussione, ancora una volta, i requisiti per l'accesso all'insegnamento nelle scuole medie e superiori. Quello che emerge nitidamente dai resoconti di Donatella Izzo, Daniele Fiorentino, Giorgio Mariani, Valerio De Angelis, Lorenzo Costaguta, Stefano Morello, Virginia Pignagnoli, e il compianto Maurizio Vaudagna, è il ruolo cruciale che l'americanistica italiana ha svolto nell'indagare la complessità di un paese, gli Stati Uniti, che, sebbene onnipresente nell'immaginario collettivo, rimane scarsamente conosciuto. Viene inoltre messo in giusta evidenza il considerevole contributo degli Studi americani in Italia allo svecchiamento e all'internazionalizzazione della ricerca scientifica e, più in generale, della cultura del nostro paese.

¹ Leonardo Buonomo è Presidente dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Nord-Americani (AISNA), 2022-2025. (NdR)

Partendo dagli anni Trenta, il decennio delle traduzioni e della nascita del mito americano, Donatella Izzo sottolinea come fin dagli esordi gli studi sulla letteratura nordamericana siano stati espressione di modernità e anticonformismo rispetto all'ambiente conservatore dell'accademia italiana. Ci ricorda inoltre che, affiancando alla produzione scientifica una rilevante attività pubblicistica ed editoriale, le studiose e gli studiosi di americanistica hanno saputo raggiungere un pubblico ben più ampio di quello universitario, anche grazie all'attenzione dedicata a prodotti culturali fino a non molto tempo fa considerati poco accademici, come la musica popolare, le serie televisive e i fumetti. Per la sua propensione alla critica ideologica (radicata, in particolare, nella tradizione marxista), l'americanistica italiana, soprattutto dalla seconda generazione in poi, si è contraddistinta per innovazione e originalità anche rispetto alla sua controparte statunitense.

Nel suo intervento, Daniele Fiorentino ripercorre la storia dell'AISNA, mettendone in evidenza il carattere interdisciplinare, la vocazione internazionale (testimoniata dall'immediata adesione all'EAAS), e gli stretti rapporti di collaborazione con il Centro Studi Americani e la missione diplomatica degli Stati Uniti in Italia. Fiorentino opportunamente ricorda il contesto geopolitico degli anni Settanta, periodo quanto mai delicato nei rapporti tra Italia e Stati Uniti, in cui si colloca la fondazione dell'AISNA, per poi soffermarsi su alcune tappe fondamentali della sua evoluzione, quali la collaborazione con il CSA nell'organizzazione dei seminari di letteratura e storia degli Stati Uniti, la creazione della rivista *RSA Journal* e, più di recente, il riconoscimento al contributo delle nuove generazioni di studiosi e studiose, con la costituzione del Graduate Forum e la promozione delle sue attività.

Giorgio Mariani si concentra sul carattere essenzialmente transnazionale dell'americanistica italiana (come di tutte le americanistiche "straniere"), in quanto veicolo di mediazione culturale, nonché di diffusione di testi d'oltreoceano, a prescindere dalla lingua impiegata. Pertanto, osserva Mariani, non c'è nulla di provinciale nell'uso prevalente della lingua italiana nei primi decenni, una scelta dettata dall'esigenza di consolidare la posizione della disciplina nel panorama nazionale. In seguito, come dimostrano le politiche dell'AISNA (tra cui spicca l'adesione alla IASA nel

2005), si assiste a un progressivo orientamento verso l'internazionalizzazione e soprattutto alla ridefinizione degli Studi americani come disciplina globale, un processo a cui le studiose e gli studiosi del nostro paese hanno partecipato in misura sostanziale. La sfida per le americaniste e gli americanisti in Italia, secondo Mariani, è di conciliare l'esigenza e il desiderio di raggiungere un pubblico sempre più ampio, pubblicando su riviste internazionali e scrivendo monografie in inglese, con il loro ruolo di "traduttori culturali".

Lorenzo Costaguta, Stefano Morello e Virginia Pignagnoli traggono un bilancio delle attività del Graduate Forum, fondato nel 2009 con l'intento di dare una voce alla componente più giovane e non strutturata dell'americanistica italiana, in linea con quanto previsto da numerose associazioni internazionali, tra cui l'EAAS. La crescente visibilità del lavoro delle giovani generazioni è stata resa possibile, come ci viene giustamente ricordato, dalla creazione di un sito web dedicato (nel 2012, poi sostituito dal sito tutt'ora operante, nel 2017), dal fruttuoso dialogo con i rappresentanti di analoghe formazioni di altri paesi, dall'organizzazione di tavole rotonde, giornate di studi e convegni (il primo nel 2018) e dalla fondazione della rivista *JAm It!* nel 2019. Fondamentale è stato il riconoscimento del Forum, una volta dotato di *governance*, come organo dell'AISNA a cui l'Ambasciata degli Stati Uniti riserva la dovuta attenzione anche in termini di finanziamenti.

Nell'estratto (da un ampio saggio) che abbiamo l'onore di ospitare, Maurizio Vaudagna, scomparso nel 2023, ci descrive da par suo i tratti salienti della seconda generazione di storici degli Stati Uniti, la prima formata da studiose e studiosi che nella ricerca e nell'insegnamento, individuavano negli Stati Uniti il principale e, in molti casi, l'esclusivo campo di interesse. Affacciatasi nel mondo accademico nel periodo delle contestazioni studentesche e delle battaglie per i diritti civili, questa generazione si distinse da quella che l'aveva preceduta per lo sguardo critico con cui esaminava la storia, la politica e le istituzioni degli Stati Uniti. Questa tendenza, con una maggiore accentuazione ideologica, si è ulteriormente intensificata, nota Vaudagna, nella successiva generazione.

Pur nei limiti del poco spazio a loro disposizione, le autrici e gli autori dei seguenti contributi delineano con efficacia i primi passi, l'evoluzione, i

momenti salienti e i tratti distintivi dell'americanistica italiana, poco meno di un anno dopo il cinquantesimo anniversario dell'associazione che la rappresenta, l'AISNA. Così facendo, ci aiutano a comprendere la rilevanza di questo traguardo e a prepararci per il futuro degli Studi americani in Italia.

NOTA BIOGRAFICA

Leonardo Buonomo è Professore Ordinario di Letterature Anglo-Americane presso l'Università di Trieste. La sua principale area di specializzazione è la letteratura americana del diciannovesimo secolo, con un focus sulle relazioni culturali transatlantiche e sulle opere di Nathaniel Hawthorne e Henry James. È autore di *Henry James Writes New York: Identity, Masculinity, Authorship* (Palgrave Macmillan, di prossima pubblicazione) e curatore di *The Sound of James: The Aural Dimension in Henry James's Work* (EUT, 2021). Nel 2019 è stato Presidente della Henry James Society ed è attualmente Presidente dell'AISNA.

Miti necessari

Note sugli Studi di letteratura americana in Italia ieri e oggi

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La preistoria dell'insegnamento della letteratura americana in Italia è ormai universalmente nota: è il famoso "decennio delle traduzioni", come lo chiamò Cesare Pavese, che dà luogo al cosiddetto "mito dell'America" negli anni Trenta, un mito nutrito al tempo stesso di letteratura e di politica, e soprattutto ispirato da un'idea di stretto rapporto fra le due dimensioni. È in virtù di questo stretto rapporto che, durante il fascismo, i traduttori traducono, gli editori pubblicano, e i lettori leggono la letteratura proveniente dagli Stati Uniti. E, retrospettivamente, si può forse ipotizzare che in questo stretto rapporto – in una storia percepita di "politicizzazione" della letteratura – stia anche in parte, da un lato, il motivo del perdurante interesse per la letteratura degli Stati Uniti nel nostro paese, dall'altro, la radice delle resistenze che l'insegnamento di tale letteratura ha incontrato, e continua incredibilmente a incontrare tutt'oggi, a livello scolastico e accademico, nonostante il fatto che la gran parte della letteratura tradotta, per non parlare della musica, dei prodotti di intrattenimento e delle narrazioni visive, continuino a provenire dagli Stati Uniti.

Qui occorre forse un esercizio di immaginazione storica. Non bisognerebbe mai dimenticare, infatti, che l'interesse per la letteratura americana

è stato inizialmente, e sotto certi aspetti ha continuato a essere anche dopo la sua istituzionalizzazione universitaria, un interesse *anti*-accademico, coltivato in polemica contro le concezioni più antiquarie e sterilizzate degli studi letterari, facendosi strada a stento in una cultura all'epoca presuntuosamente e provincialisticamente eurocentrica (della quale si vedono ancora le tracce fino ad oggi). Non deve ingannare il fatto che la prima generazione fondativa, quella che ha creato l'americanistica italiana come disciplina universitaria, si sia dedicata a scrittori oggi considerati ipercanonici (e per giunta, entrambi morti sudditi britannici), come Henry James (di cui Agostino Lombardo, incaricato del primo insegnamento universitario di Letteratura angloamericana, attivato all'Università di Roma nel 1954, tradusse e introdusse *Le prefazioni* nel 1956) e T. S. Eliot (cui Claudio Gorlier, primo titolare di una cattedra di Letteratura angloamericana nel 1967, alla Ca' Foscari di Venezia, aveva dedicato la sua tesi di laurea). In un'accademia italiana spesso riluttante, ancora nel Secondo dopoguerra, ad abbandonare il suo impianto ottocentesco, dedicarsi allo studio della letteratura americana – come hanno ribadito in più occasioni i protagonisti di quella stagione – significava abbracciare la modernità. Scrittori come James ed Eliot, negli anni Cinquanta italiani, portavano ancora con sé lo spirito dell'avanguardia, l'idea di un rinnovamento radicale di forme, concezioni estetiche, percezioni e pratiche della letteratura – un'idea trasmessa del resto anche dai classici frequentati dalla prima generazione americanistica, come Melville, o come Thoreau e Emily Dickinson (cui Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli dedicò le sue prime monografie, rispettivamente nel 1954 e nel 1963): autori ottocenteschi eppure incommensurabili rispetto alla tradizione italiana. All'idea della coltivazione del nuovo si lega anche, del resto, l'attenzione alla letteratura americana contemporanea: è del 1960 *Il nuovo romanzo americano: 1945-1959*, con cui Marisa Bulgheroni interviene su una materia recente e ancora non storicizzata (e lo stesso avverrà con *I Beats*, 1962). Questo lavoro, per Bulgheroni come per Gorlier e Lombardo, si affiancava a una costante attività editoriale e pubblicistica, volta a promuovere la letteratura americana contemporanea anche presso il pubblico extra-universitario, attraverso la consulenza a case editrici e gli articoli e le recensioni su grandi quotidiani e riviste: due facce diverse di un'attività culturale a tutto tondo, che del resto ha caratterizzato anche un americanista della genera-

zione accademica di poco successiva, come Sergio Perosa. È proprio Perosa a rendere particolarmente esplicita la devozione dell'americanistica italiana a quella che lui stesso in un suo volume designa, riprendendo un titolo di Harold Rosenberg, come "la tradizione del nuovo". Questo orientamento risulta particolarmente programmatico nell'attenzione da lui dedicata a un testo sperimentale come *The Sacred Fount* di James. Era il 1963, l'anno del Gruppo 63 e della neoavanguardia: sfide diverse ma non del tutto irrelate, rivolte a una cultura nazionale percepita come complessivamente attardata.

L'attenzione alla letteratura contemporanea è stata presente fin dall'inizio nell'americanistica italiana, ed è stata accompagnata dall'attenzione a una vasta gamma di prodotti culturali, media e linguaggi – dalla canzone al cinema e dalla televisione al fumetto – in modo certamente più precoce e in un grado probabilmente ineguagliato (almeno fino ad anni recenti) rispetto ad altri campi disciplinari. Mentre l'americanistica letteraria si consolidava accademicamente, e continuava ad ampliare e approfondire gli studi sui classici ottocenteschi e sulla tradizione modernista a livelli alti e riconosciuti internazionalmente (pochi nomi a titolo esemplificativo: Massimo Bacigalupo e Caterina Ricciardi su Pound, Cristina Giorcelli su William Carlos Williams, Rosella Mamoli Zorzi su James), una parte significativa di essa, a partire dagli anni Settanta, estendeva i propri interessi, ancora una volta in chiave a un tempo letteraria e politica, anche in direzione dell'underground, delle proteste di lavoratori e studenti, del movimento per i diritti civili degli afroamericani, degli indiani e delle altre minoranze etniche, delle frange più radicali del femminismo, del nascente pensiero gay e lesbico. I nomi – da Alessandro Portelli a Mario Maffi, da Bruno Cartosio a Barbara Lanati, da Mario Corona a Liana Borghi – sono noti a chiunque si occupi di americanistica in Italia, anche perché si tratta dei/delle docenti, in piena attività didattica fino a pochi anni fa, che hanno contribuito a formare la più recente generazione di studiose e studiosi.

È del tutto possibile che, per quanto politicamente e ideologicamente critico, anche quest'ultimo approccio possa costituire una prosecuzione, in una chiave diversa, di quella mitologizzazione dell'America come luogo di democrazia e modernità che aveva animato le generazioni precedenti: nella focalizzazione dell'americanistica europea sulla questione razziale, per esempio, Liam Kennedy ha visto una "fetishization of the trope of race"

che proponeva una nuova versione del vecchio eccezionalismo, “through the valorization of American culture as sites of marginality, of dissent” (144-45). Vale la pena di sottolineare, però, quanto questi studi siano stati a un tempo innovativi e autonomi rispetto all’americanistica statunitense: grazie a una radicata tradizione nazionale di riflessione e militanza politica, essi hanno scoperto e valorizzato la molteplicità delle esperienze letterarie e culturali “non canoniche”, precorrendo la spinta revisionistica del “dissensus” e le “canon wars” degli American Studies negli Stati Uniti degli anni Ottanta e Novanta. Qualche esempio: Alessandro Portelli, che si era laureato a Roma con una tesi su Woody Guthrie, pubblica su Guthrie e sulle canzoni del Black Power già fra il 1969 e il 1974, e negli anni Settanta dedica numerosi studi alla letteratura e alla cultura afroamericana. Nello stesso periodo, Bruno Cartosio si occupa di afroamericani e di movimento operaio. Giorgio Mariani, insieme a Paola Ludovici, raccoglie, traduce e analizza testi letterari e politici dei nativi americani già negli anni Settanta. Beniamino Placido pubblica *Le due schiavitù*, in cui analizza fianco a fianco “Benito Cereno” e *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, nel 1975, vale a dire, tre anni prima che esca in rivista il saggio di Jane Tompkins “Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History”. Grazie a una forte tradizione marxista, l’americanistica italiana è insomma incline alla critica ideologica, e dotata di un’ampia gamma di strumenti idonei, già prima che Sacvan Bercovitch, nel suo notissimo saggio del 1986, proponga l’ideologia come categoria cruciale per la comprensione della letteratura e della cultura degli Stati Uniti, e che una serie di concetti gramsciani diventino fondativi per i Cultural Studies tanto nel Regno Unito quanto negli Stati Uniti, contribuendo ad animare quei New American Studies che si affermeranno negli anni Novanta come la nuova sintesi del campo disciplinare.

Gli investimenti letterari, politici e intellettuali che hanno animato il primo mezzo secolo dell’americanistica italiana, quindi, hanno visto – talvolta in parallelo, talvolta con temporalità sfalsate rispetto agli American Studies statunitensi – alternarsi “Americhe” diverse, e subentrare a un eccezionalismo condiviso, una prevalente cifra critica. La critica dell’eccezionalismo americano è stata, del resto, la base concettuale dei New American Studies – si pensi a un libro cruciale come *Cultures of*

United States Imperialism di Donald Pease ed Amy Kaplan, del 1993 –, la cui spinta al rinnovamento dei paradigmi e degli oggetti di studio è stata indubitabile, e il cui influsso è stato forte anche in Italia, anche grazie alla ridefinizione degli American Studies statunitensi in senso internazionale e transnazionale, da un lato, e alla crescente internazionalizzazione dell'americanistica italiana (di cui parla Giorgio Mariani in questo stesso numero), dall'altro.

Tutto questo può ben rientrare, come ha suggerito Winfried Fluck in un suo famoso saggio, nel “romance with America” che ha caratterizzato la storia degli American Studies come campo disciplinare. Quella dell'americanistica è, argomenta Fluck, una “libidinal history”, nella quale ciò che è variato nel tempo sono le narrazioni in base alle quali è stata costruita l’“America” di volta in volta oggetto degli investimenti psichici, politici e intellettuali dell'americanista: narrazioni tradizionali come quella della frontiera e della perenne possibilità di rinascita sociale, o quella della sfida individualista e antiautoritaria, o della potenzialità liberatoria dell'individuo comune; o narrazioni più recenti come quelle incentrate sulla diversità interna, sulla critica al carattere omogeneizzante e costrittivo della categoria della nazione, e sul riconoscimento dell'alterità, capaci di articolare critiche del potere e della disuguaglianza a livelli più capillari di quelli in un primo momento proposti dalla critica ideologica degli anni Ottanta e Novanta, ruotanti intorno alla triade genere, razza, classe e alla categoria politica dell'impero. La posta in gioco di molti dei discorsi oggi più affermati nel *field imaginary* – dagli Animal Studies ai Queer Studies ai Disability Studies – è la questione del riconoscimento, e i New American Studies, nella loro programmatica affiliazione simbolica a qualsiasi forma di subalternità, marginalità e resistenza subnazionale o transnazionale, trasmettono un'idea di pieno riconoscimento dell'alterità e della differenza che costituisce, secondo Fluck, la base di un rinnovato “romance with America”.

Sulla fondatezza delle ambizioni politiche dei New American Studies non è questo il luogo di soffermarsi: un'acuta discussione si può trovare in *Effetti teorici. Critica culturale e nuova storiografia letteraria americana* di Cristina Iuli (2002), che è anche un ottimo esempio di una propensione alla riflessione teorica che ha caratterizzato gli Studi americani in Italia

già dagli anni Novanta del ventesimo secolo. Mi sembra tuttavia che le osservazioni di Fluck possano offrire qualche utile chiave di lettura non soltanto sulla storia della disciplina nel suo complesso, ma anche sui nuovi orientamenti specifici dell'americanistica italiana.

Nel corso dell'ultimo ventennio l'attenzione alla letteratura contemporanea, non solo dentro l'accademia (penso a validi americanisti di formazione accademica attivi nel mondo dell'editoria, come Luca Briasco e Mattia Carratello), è diventata pressoché esclusiva nelle studioso e negli studiosi di ultima generazione, in parte segno della perdurante capacità di interpellazione della "tradizione del nuovo", e in parte, si può presumere, effetto di un fenomeno squisitamente accademico, come la ricerca di "nicchie" meno frequentate da rivendicare all'interno di un campo disciplinare ormai largamente dissodato. Nell'americanistica italiana del ventunesimo secolo, così, in parallelo con il riconoscimento internazionale di studi ben radicati come quelli sulla letteratura afroamericana (due nomi per tutti: Paola Boi e Maria Giulia Fabi), si sono diversificati e consolidati gli studi già avviati sulle minoranze etniche (ultime fra queste, quella araboamericana, che ha acquisito una nuova centralità soprattutto dopo l'11 settembre 2001, e quella italoamericana, a lungo marginalizzata nell'americanistica italiana, ma ormai da qualche tempo oggetto di crescente e agguerrita attenzione). Nel frattempo si sono anche moltiplicati, sulla scorta di interessi teorici ormai stabilmente parte della disciplina, gli approcci e gli orientamenti, con un riconoscibile interesse per i nuovi campi emergenti del ventunesimo secolo: Trauma Studies, Memory Studies, Border e Migration Studies, Queer Studies, Environmental Studies ed ecocritica, Animal Studies, e l'intera problematica del post-umano.

Certo, questa diversificazione d'interessi è segno dell'allineamento ormai pressoché completo, e in tempo reale, dell'americanistica italiana con le linee di tendenza degli American Studies internazionali (largamente legislati, *va da sé*, dall'americanistica statunitense): un fenomeno non privo di ombre e problemi, del quale si è molto discusso nell'americanistica internazionale, e che implica il rischio di un appiattimento e di uno svuotamento proprio di quella internazionalizzazione che a parole tutti desiderano (per non contare il rischio di perdita della memoria storica e della comunicazione culturale con il proprio paese). Riprendendo gli spunti di Fluck, vorrei

suggerire, a questo proposito, che forse quello che superficialmente può apparire (e che almeno in parte può essere effettivamente) un adeguamento intellettuale al modello (e alle mode) dell'accademia statunitense, risponde anche a motivazioni più locali. Queste ci riportano a quanto sostenevo all'inizio sull'intrinseca spinta politica che ha animato fin dagli esordi gli studi italiani sulla letteratura americana, e che continua ad animarli ancora oggi. Il riconoscimento delle identità e delle differenze – di genere, di sessualità, di etnia, di razza –; la riflessione sull'umano e sul non-umano, e la consapevolezza del processo di distinzione fra l'uno e l'altro come – nei termini di Giorgio Agamben – una “macchina antropologica” volta alla costante *produzione del non-umano* attraverso la costante distinzione fra chi merita e chi non merita i diritti umani (34); la consapevolezza della crisi climatica, dei diritti delle altre specie e dell'ambiente, sono molto più avanzate, soprattutto nelle più giovani generazioni, rispetto a un'accademia irreggimentata in gabbie normative strette, e a una cultura (e soprattutto una cultura politica) nazionale in molti casi spaventosamente attardata (per non dire spesso reazionaria). Da questo punto d'osservazione, gli Stati Uniti possono apparire – pur nella consapevolezza di mille contraddizioni – nei termini di un nuovo *romance*, come una cultura dove, anche grazie al conflitto, sia ancora pensabile il progresso, e sulla cui letteratura sia, proprio per questo, tuttora o di nuovo possibile un forte “investimento libidinale”, politico-intellettuale oltre che estetico. Forse, nel momento attuale, l'America è tornata a essere, nelle famose parole di Cesare Pavese, “il gigantesco teatro dove con maggiore franchezza che altrove [viene] recitato il dramma di tutti”, lo “schermo gigante” su cui si svolge un dramma che ci riguarda.

NOTA BIOGRAFICA

Donatella Izzo è Professoressa Ordinaria di Letteratura Americana presso l'Università di Napoli “L'Orientale”. Ha servito come Presidente dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Nord Americani (2005-2007) e della Henry James Society. I suoi campi di ricerca includono la letteratura americana, gli studi americani, gli studi etnici, la teoria della letteratura e la letteratura comparata. È autrice di numerosi saggi e libri, tra cui *Portraying the Lady. Technologies of Gender in the Short Stories of Henry James* (University of Nebraska Press, 2001), e ha curato e contribuito a volumi e numeri di riviste sulla teoria letteraria, le riscritture letterarie interculturali, il campo degli studi americani, la letteratura e la teoria asiatico-

americana, le serie TV americane, il graphic novel negli Stati Uniti e la cultura e la politica delle Hawaii.

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Breve storia dell’AISNA e dei suoi rapporti istituzionali (1973-1991)

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L’11 luglio 1973, Rolando Anzilotti, docente di Letteratura nordamericana nell’Università di Pisa da poco eletto presidente della nuova Associazione Italiana di Studi Americani (AISA), si premura di scrivere al presidente del Centro di Studi Americani (CSA), Franco Valsecchi, per annunciargli la costituzione dell’associazione che prenderà poi il nome di AISNA.¹ In essa Anzilotti riconosce il ruolo svolto dal Centro, ringraziando “per il prezioso aiuto datoci dal Centro Italiano di Studi Americani nei vari momenti della nostra fase organizzativa”(“Lettera a Valsecchi”). Il presidente chiude la lettera assicurando la piena disponibilità a future collaborazioni. In realtà, come riporta anche la carta intestata della missiva di Anzilotti, la sede legale dell’AISA era stata stabilita proprio presso il CSA (nel 1963 con la sua rifondazione l’istituto assunse il nome di Centro di Studi Americani, ma nella carta intestata e nelle missive viene ancora indicato come CISA).

¹ Quasi in concomitanza con la fondazione, si scoprì infatti che già esisteva un AISA a Genova. Verbale Assemblea 1/6/1975, Pescara. Punto 5: “L’associazione ha poi votato la modifica della sigla della Associazione. Delle varie sigle proposte AISNA (=Ass. It. Studi Nord-Americani) otteneva 41 voti; IAAS (= Italian Association for Am. Studies) ne otteneva 16; ASAI (=Ass. Studi Am. In Italia) 8 [...] Pertanto la prima è la nuova sigla ufficiale dell’Associazione”. Archivio Storico CSA, Roma. Serie AISNA Corrispondenza.

Non solo, ma la stessa assemblea di fondazione si era tenuta a Roma il 26 maggio di quello stesso anno sempre al primo piano del Palazzo Antici Mattei o Mattei di Giove, sede appunto del Centro (come spesso ancora oggi viene chiamato il CSA).

L'iniziativa di fondare un'organizzazione di studi americani era partita tempo prima anche grazie alla partecipazione di alcuni membri del Consiglio Direttivo e di alcune funzionarie del CSA come Alessandra Pinto Surdi, che nel corso degli anni sarebbe stata la bibliotecaria di riferimento degli americanisti di tutta Italia. Fu lei per esempio a contribuire sistematicamente con articolate bibliografie ai convegni organizzati dall'associazione, mentre anche grazie all'impulso di Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli, e l'intervento periodico di Agostino Lombardo, entrambi tra i principali giovani animatori della ripresa delle attività del Centro Studi Americani, si cercava di creare una bibliografia generale delle opere di americanistica disponibili in Italia, che era curata appunto da Surdi e dalla dott.ssa Cristina Penteriani. Tutto ciò nel solco di quella tradizione inaugurata alla fine della Prima guerra mondiale che aveva contribuito alla creazione, sempre a Roma, della Library for American Studies e dell'Associazione Italo-Americana (AIA) che avrebbero poi dato vita al CISA.

La fondazione della nuova organizzazione aveva visto la partecipazione di settantasette studiosi e studiosi, in realtà una piccola frazione dei potenziali membri, considerato che nei mesi precedenti ben centonovantaquattro persone avevano manifestato il loro interesse per l'eventuale creazione di un'associazione di area scientifica. I partecipanti all'assemblea di fondazione elessero anche il primo Consiglio Direttivo, originariamente composto di nove membri: un presidente e otto consiglieri. L'elezione rispecchiava l'intenzione fortemente interdisciplinare dei fondatori che, in questo modo, seguivano l'approccio assunto dal CSA. Pur riconoscendo il ruolo prevalente degli studi e degli studiosi di letteratura, annoverava ricercatori di diverse aree di studi. A rimarcare tale scelta, insieme al presidente Anzilotti venivano nominati due vice-presidenti: Giovanni Bognetti, Professore di diritto pubblico comparato prima a Urbino e Pavia e poi alla Statale di Milano, e Raimondo Luraghi, professore di storia americana a Genova e autore della famosa *Storia della guerra civile americana*. Con

loro erano risultati eletti: Gaetano Prampolini, nominato poi segretario generale, Vito Amoroso, Cristina Giorcelli, la più giovane componente, Agostino Lombardo, Sergio Perosa e Beniamino Placido. Le votazioni erano state gestite dagli impiegati del CSA guidati dalla segretaria esecutiva Elena Potsios (Prampolini, "Lettera a Potsios"). A testimoniare l'intenzione del direttivo dell' AISNA di posizionarsi a livello nazionale e internazionale fu anche l'immediata adesione dell'associazione alla European Association for American Studies (EAAS), fondata quasi venti anni prima, nel 1954.

Dalla Fondazione dell'associazione a oggi, si può tracciare una certa continuità nelle attività e nelle principali scelte tese allo sforzo di consolidare la propria esistenza a livello accademico e associazionistico. Tali preoccupazioni sovente spingevano i rappresentanti dell' AISNA a rivolgersi a istituzioni quali l'ambasciata degli Stati Uniti, l'USIS e ovviamente il Centro. Nei primi anni un altro utile interlocutore fu l'ACLS (American Council of Learned Societies) che assegnava fondi per borse di studio e senior fellowships. Esse consentirono a diversi studiosi di svolgere ricerche di lungo periodo nelle biblioteche e negli archivi degli Stati Uniti. La storia dell' AISNA non può essere ricostruita senza la sua costante interazione e reciproco scambio con queste istituzioni. Lombardo venne nominato rappresentante italiano nell'EAAS mentre continuava a gestire in collaborazione con Tedeschini Lalli il seminario annuale di letteratura, a fianco di quelli di storia e alternativamente di studi giuridici ed economia promossi dal CSA. Coscienti di avere un certo ritardo nella creazione dell'associazione e nel suo posizionamento accademico, i promotori decisero quasi immediatamente di organizzare un convegno di studi dedicato a "La situazione degli studi americani in Italia: metodi e prospettive". Il simposio si sarebbe tenuto presso l'università di Pisa nel maggio 1974 ("Lettera di Anzilotti ai soci").

Fin dal momento della sua fondazione l'organizzazione individuò un problema di indiscutibile rilevanza culturale e professionale: il riconoscimento dell'equivalenza tra una laurea in lingua e letteratura inglese e una in lingua e letteratura angloamericana ai fini dell'insegnamento della lingua e della letteratura inglese nelle scuole secondarie. Uno dei primi atti pubblici del presidente Anzilotti fu quello di dare attuazione a una mozione approvata dall'assemblea riunitasi a Pisa il 26 maggio 1974, con l'invio

al Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione di una richiesta di riconoscere tale equivalenza. La risposta del Ministero non si fece attendere: entro l'anno il Direttore Generale del personale e degli affari generali per le scuole assicurava che si sarebbe provveduto quanto prima a precisare la possibilità di accedere ai concorsi per l'insegnamento dell'inglese nelle scuole anche per i laureati della classe XLIII (Lingua e Cultura degli Stati Uniti) e che di questo si sarebbe data pronta segnalazione anche "alle commissioni ed ai candidati dei concorsi in atto" (AISNA Newsletter 3, Dic. 1974 8).

Come si sa tale riconoscimento è arrivato cinquant'anni più tardi. L'associazione nasceva non a caso in un frangente particolarmente delicato della storia degli Stati Uniti e delle relazioni di questi con l'Italia, partner strategico nella NATO e nel Mediterraneo con il più grande partito comunista dell'Europa occidentale. In fondo l'EAAS esisteva ormai da diversi anni e per quanto gli studi americani avessero attirato l'attenzione di diversi intellettuali italiani già nella prima metà del ventesimo secolo, si arrivava con un certo ritardo nel loro sviluppo. La conoscenza degli Stati Uniti in Italia era ancora abbastanza superficiale, nonostante la notevole attività del Centro Studi Americani di Roma, della Biblioteca di Storia americana di Firenze e l'esistenza di numerosi uffici USIS in giro per l'Italia.

Il 1973 fu l'anno del caso Watergate e del conseguente procedimento di *impeachment* nei confronti di Richard Nixon, della firma del trattato di pace tra Stati Uniti e Vietnam, che non aveva però significato ancora la cessazione delle ostilità. Due anni prima erano usciti pubblicamente i Pentagon Papers, mentre l'instabilità internazionale e il conflitto in Medio Oriente, in particolare con la Guerra del Kippur, avevano contribuito ad alzare l'attenzione di un mondo ormai globalizzato verso le fragilità degli Stati Uniti. Non erano del tutto sopite, d'altronde, le rivolte nei ghetti afroamericani e ancora fresche erano le eco delle sollevazioni studentesche con le loro tragiche conseguenze. L'AISNA nasceva, insomma, in un frangente complesso della storia degli Stati Uniti, quel 1973 che è una sorta di spartiacque tra l'illusione del secolo americano e la crisi degli anni Settanta, che secondo diversi studiosi segna l'inizio del declino della potenza americana (Ferguson, Maier, et al 17-18).

Come scrive Charles Maier nel volume *The Shock of the Global*, dedicato ai complessi anni Settanta: "The turmoil of the 1970s provoked

a fundamental rethinking of the economic and political axioms that had been taken for granted since the Second World War, it closed the 'postwar' era and its policy premises" (26). Di questo in qualche modo c'è traccia anche nelle attività dell' AISNA. A dicembre 1973, il presidente comunica ai soci il cambiamento del calendario del convegno di maggio a causa del "possibile permanere in vigore delle misure restrittive della circolazione automobilistica", la cosiddetta austerità dovuta alla crisi petrolifera conseguente al conflitto in Medio Oriente (AISNA Newsletter 1, Dic. 1973 3). L'EAAS intanto ad aprile programmava un convegno a Vienna dal titolo: "European Attitudes Towards America – a Love-Hate Relationship", tema quanto mai significativo visti i tempi. Per la prima volta, un rappresentante dell' AISNA prendeva ufficialmente parte al convegno: Agostino Lombardo.

Contestualmente, nella più ampia comunità degli studi americani, si concretizzava la collaborazione con un'altra società di studiosi avviata solo due anni prima: il Comitato Italiano per la Storia Nord Americana (CISNA) (Bonazzi 12). Nel corso di lunghe trattative, non scevre di qualche tensione, si arrivò a un accordo per riconoscere ufficialmente l' articolazione multidisciplinare dell' AISNA, che già includeva comunque specialisti di vari settori compresi gli storici. Ciò comportò anche una redistribuzione dei posti nel Consiglio Direttivo (CD) su base disciplinare al fine di evitare spaccature e ulteriori suddivisioni. L' interesse a mantenere unita un' area disciplinare articolata e complessa e in formazione spinse così il CD a decidere di raccomandare che "in seno all' associazione si riconoscano tre gruppi di discipline: a) letterature e arti; b) storia; c) scienze sociali (comprendenti: diritto, politologia, sociologia, economia, psicologia)". Nell' assemblea del 1977 a Urbino si propose di sottoporre a votazione una modifica dello statuto in tal senso con l' esplicita affermazione della necessità di assicurare a ciascuna disciplina almeno un rappresentante nel CD (AISNA Newsletter 7, Mag. 1977 6). In quell' occasione, Vito Amoroso si pronunciava fortemente "a favore dell' interdisciplinarietà e contro il pericolo della scissione in gruppi." Vista la crescente tensione tra settori scientifici, comunque, su proposta di Bognetti l' attesa votazione dell' assemblea sulle modifiche allo statuto veniva rinviata alla riunione successiva (8).

Nella seconda metà degli anni Settanta, l'associazione andò stabilizzandosi anche grazie a una più attiva collaborazione con l'Ambasciata degli Stati Uniti a Roma e al lavoro dell'USIS. Nella posizione di addetto culturale sotto l'amministrazione di Jimmy Carter si succedettero infatti Richard Arndt, abile organizzatore culturale e docente in università americane, e il politologo di Yale Joseph La Palombara, grande conoscitore dell'Italia. Intanto, "a seguito di un colloquio svoltosi a Firenze con i proff. Spini e Luraghi e in seguito ad altri contatti avuti con il Coordinamento degli Storici", si giungeva alla risoluzione di introdurre una modifica allo statuto capace di consentire l'elezione di almeno un rappresentante in CD per ognuna delle discipline indicate e riconosciute ufficialmente dall'assemblea dei soci (AISNA Newsletter 8, Giu. 1978 9). L'Associazione poteva così dedicare la propria attenzione a due questioni centrali per il consolidamento degli studi americani in Italia: la pubblicazione di una rivista della società e il riconoscimento dell'equipollenza degli esami universitari di letteratura americana con quelli di letteratura inglese per la partecipazione ai concorsi per l'insegnamento dell'inglese nelle scuole medie.

L'Italia riceveva un'attenzione particolare da parte degli organismi governativi americani intenti a condurre la "Guerra fredda culturale". Il paese rappresentava una sorta di laboratorio e ovviamente istituti come il CSA o associazioni come l'AISNA erano utili punti di riferimento nel settore degli studi americani. Essi contribuivano, e contribuiscono tuttora, a incrementare la conoscenza della cultura americana in un paese dove si parla moltissimo di Stati Uniti ma con poche conoscenze effettive (Tobia 239). Non solo. Come sottolinea ancora una volta Maier: "[a]gain, in Italy – which in fact was a bellwether for so many social trends in the West in the 1970s, whether terrorism or the defense of abortion and divorce rights – the Christian Democratic electorate was reduced, and 'lay' or Republican and Socialist Party ministers could take control of the ministries" (Ferguson, Maier et al. 37). La particolare realtà politica italiana richiedeva un impiego intensivo degli strumenti culturali come strumento di consolidamento della presenza americana nel paese.

Prima dell'AISNA, gli studi americani erano passati sostanzialmente per i canali del CSA e degli uffici USIS diffusi sul territorio italiano. Essi cominciarono progressivamente a ridursi di numero, probabilmente anche

in ragione della presa d'atto da parte della legazione diplomatica americana e dell'USIA che in Italia gli Studi Americani si stavano sviluppando grazie a organizzazioni italiane, in testa alle quali stava il CSA ora affiancato dall' AISNA. Già a partire dal 1953, il Centro di Studi Americani, ancora non completamente ricostituito, aveva cominciato a ospitare seminari di letteratura americana promossi dall'Associazione Italo-Americana (AIA) fondata, in parallelo a quello che sarebbe poi diventato il CISA, nel 1919. Le due istituzioni avevano riaperto negli anni cinquanta con un'impostazione molto diversa rispetto a quella delle organizzazioni che le avevano precedute.

Il Centro sviluppò anche programmi per seminari di storia, diritto ed economia. "I seminari annuali di letteratura duravano solitamente un mese", scrive Del Ferraro, mentre l'AIA, a volte con il sostegno di enti americani o dell'ufficio culturale dell'Ambasciata e della commissione Fulbright, metteva a disposizione borse di studio "per consentire anche a persone non residenti in Roma di partecipare" (Del Ferraro 36). I seminari di letteratura, cultura, storia, diritto ed economia americani sono rimasti un elemento caratterizzante del Centro Studi Americani fino ai nostri giorni. Oggi il seminario è unico ed è dedicato agli Studi Americani e ha durata ridotta rispetto al passato. Dal 2005 il CSA ha coinvolto l' AISNA nel coordinamento scientifico ufficializzando una partecipazione di fatto di docenti e allievi dei diversi corsi di laurea in discipline americanistiche. Le mutate esigenze degli studenti che si avvicinano alla materia e degli studiosi che la praticano richiedono oggi attività diversificate e più "specialistiche" di un tempo. A partire dalla fine degli anni Settanta i seminari sono diventati più interdisciplinari guardando, come fanno tuttora, ai rapporti tra le varie materie e in particolare a storia, letteratura, arte e cinema. A questa collaborazione contribuiva anche l'AIA, che "si impegnava a organizzare una serie di eventi collaterali – dibattiti, conferenze, ricevimenti – che andavano a integrare i lavori veri e propri" (Archivio CSA).

Sul finire del decennio i rapporti istituzionali dell' AISNA erano ormai alquanto consolidati. Nel salutare l'addetto culturale Arndt a metà del 1978, il presidente Lombardo menzionava gli ottimi rapporti con l'ufficio culturale e con l'ambasciata favoriti anche dal lavoro del consigliere italiano dell'addetto culturale, dott. Roberto Bolzoni. Lombardo e Anzilotti

avevano avuto peraltro un incontro con l'ambasciatore Richard Gardner durante il quale avevano ribadito l'importanza di un approfondimento della conoscenza delle rispettive culture e degli scambi culturali, soprattutto per quel che riguardava i giovani. Per questo lamentavano la recente diminuzione delle borse di studio per giovani italiani negli Stati Uniti (AISNA Newsletter 8, Giu. 1978 7-8).

Tra la metà degli anni Settanta e i primi Ottanta avvengono diversi cambiamenti nella struttura e nelle attività dell'associazione che testimoniano di una maggiore efficienza organizzativa e di una stabilizzazione. Innanzitutto, a partire dal 1977 si stabilisce di passare il convegno da annuale a biennale, per consentire una migliore organizzazione e una partecipazione più ampia, mentre tra il 1979 e il 1981, con l'avvicinarsi alla presidenza di Agostino Lombardo e Sergio Perosa, si comincia a parlare anche di un mandato più lungo di presidente e direttivo. Ma non solo: l'inglese diventa la lingua del Newsletter, fatto che segna una rinnovata e più sostenuta interazione con l'U.S.I.C.A. (United States International Communication Agency) come si chiamava ora l'USIA. L'attenzione per l'AISNA del nuovo addetto culturale del governo Reagan, Alan H. Dodds, consentì a partire dal 1981 anche il finanziamento di una nuova pubblicazione, la Rivista di Studi Americani (*RSA*), sull'attivazione della quale erano state spese tante energie negli anni precedenti (AISNA Newsletter 13, Feb. 1982 5).

Nel convegno dell'ottobre 1981 che si tiene a Bologna e che segna il passaggio della presidenza da Perosa ad Alfredo Rizzardi, viene affrontato un tema al centro del dibattito storiografico e critico letterario di quegli anni negli Stati Uniti: il Puritanesimo e la sua impronta nella cultura americana. Il titolo del convegno è "In the Puritan Grain", con ben tre keynote lecturers: Sacvan Bercovitch, Leslie Fiedler e Tiziano Bonazzi. Per l'occasione, la dottoressa Surdi presenta una bibliografia monografica dal titolo *I Puritani*, ribadendo la disponibilità del Centro a supportare le attività ma soprattutto la ricerca scientifica dell'associazione. Nel decennio seguente le bibliotecarie contribuiscono all'attività dei membri dell'AISNA con la preparazione di diverse bibliografie sui temi scelti per i convegni biennali. Perosa poteva così chiudere il mandato con un risultato forte e ben visibile.

A stringere rapporti più stretti con gli americanisti italiani sarebbe stato poi Robert McLaughlin, addetto culturale dell'ambasciata tra il 1985 e il 1989, l'anno della caduta del muro di Berlino. In quel frangente la struttura interna dell' AISNA viene definitivamente riorganizzata e consolidata sotto la presidenza di Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli che realizza un sondaggio sulla condizione degli studi americani, e in particolare degli insegnamenti di letteratura e storia nelle università italiane. Si propone inoltre la compilazione di una bibliografia nazionale degli studi americani in collaborazione con il CSA, mentre la durata del mandato della presidente e del Consiglio Direttivo viene portata da due a tre anni nonostante il parere avverso di alcuni soci e in particolare degli storici.

La presidente riesce poi a far incrementare il contributo dell'USICA alle attività tanto che sul finire degli anni Ottanta esso rappresenta circa un terzo del budget complessivo dell'associazione,² mentre consolida definitivamente il rapporto con il Centro Studi Americani. La sua capacità di membro del CdA del CSA favorisce naturalmente una maggiore sinergia tra le due istituzioni anche grazie all'impegno dell'allora direttore scientifico e poi presidente del Centro Guglielmo Negri. Soprattutto grazie al lavoro di Surdi che provvede anche a dare supporto pratico e logistico alla realizzazione del Newsletter dell' AISNA, il CSA diventa un interlocutore sempre più rilevante. Ciò comprende la crescente apertura ai soci AISNA in occasione dei tradizionali seminari, e in particolar modo di quelli di letteratura e storia. In alcuni casi a curare un seminario o un convegno monografico vengono chiamati studiosi che appartengono anche all' AISNA, come per il convegno, "Nazione, popolo e lavoro: Ford, Giannini, Hearst nella cultura imprenditoriale americana" dell'aprile del 1984 affidato a Piero Bairati, iscritto all'associazione, e a Peppino Ortoleva (AISNA Newsletter 17, Gen. 1984 11).

Mario Materassi guida l'associazione nel triennio successivo che si conclude sul limitare della fine della Guerra fredda. Lo studioso fiorentino incrementa ulteriormente il lavoro di riorganizzazione avviato dalla sua predecessora, e punta l'attenzione in particolare sulla rivista. Ribattezzata

² In particolare, "Verbale dell'assemblea dei soci AISNA del 17 novembre 1984". Serie AISNA Convegni. Archivio Storico CSA, Roma.

RSA Journal, la rivista, un po' come è stato per l'associazione, ha bisogno di essere ripensata e di un maggiore contributo dei membri dell'AISNA alla sua realizzazione. Si avvia così anche una raccolta di informazioni, una specie di censimento degli americanisti italiani iscritti all'associazione, circa i loro interessi di ricerca, la metodologia utilizzata nei loro studi, e una stima su modalità e tempi dei lavori che hanno in corso (AISNA Newsletter 23, Mar. 1987 6). Ma i due passaggi fondamentali di questi anni sono soprattutto istituzionali: si rende necessario riscrivere e depositare legalmente lo Statuto che sembra non fosse ancora registrato, dopo quasi vent'anni di attività, e si riscontra la crescente attenzione e maggiore collaborazione e sostegno da parte dell'USIS. Con la fine della Guerra fredda ci sarà però un'inversione di tendenza.

Tra il 9 e l'11 ottobre del 1989 si svolge il convegno presso l'università di Sassari, "The City as Text", che prevede anche l'assemblea generale che il 10 porta all'elezione di Cristina Giorcelli come nuova presidente. In quell'occasione Materassi fa un bilancio del suo mandato e mette in evidenza i risultati ottenuti, oltre la compiuta riorganizzazione delle infrastrutture dell'associazione, vi è la risistemazione in corso della rivista che, ammette, non ha avuto il riscontro che meriterebbe. In quel discorso il presidente uscente ricorda anche un significativo evento dell'anno precedente, il convegno dell'EAAS a Berlino che aveva visto un'attiva partecipazione dei membri italiani, molti dei quali supportati da un buon finanziamento dell'USIS. Ringraziando l'addetto culturale Gilbert Callaway e il suo aiuto Bolzoni, sempre molto attenti al lavoro svolto dagli americanisti italiani, Materassi suonava tuttavia un campanello d'allarme: nonostante l'impegno dei funzionari in Italia e i patrocini concessi, il contributo economico dell'USIS era diminuito sensibilmente nel recente passato. A tale proposito concludeva: "L'A.I.S.N.A. io credo, deve poter trovare fonti alternative di finanziamento che la sgancino almeno in una misura superiore all'attuale, dal fluttuare della politica di Washington" (AISNA Newsletter 26, Feb. 1990 4). Cominciava l'epoca della cosiddetta "illusione unipolare" e Washington abbandonava progressivamente alcuni dei suoi progetti di soft power culturale (Brands 363-64).

Un mese più tardi una affrettata e inesatta risposta di un portavoce della Repubblica Democratica Tedesca avviava l'apertura del confine lungo

il muro di Berlino. La portata degli eventi internazionali e la progressiva uscita dei paesi del Patto di Varsavia da quell'alleanza, con il successivo crollo dell'Unione Sovietica, avevano ripercussioni anche nel microcosmo dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Nord Americani. I rapporti dell' AISNA con l'ambasciata degli Stati Uniti continuavano sotto altra forma e ovviamente con un impegno economico meno significativo di quello nel pieno della Guerra fredda, ma d'altronde come si è visto quel rapporto stava già cambiando. Nel giro di dieci anni venne smantellata l'USIA e l'associazione dovette rivedere i propri rapporti con il governo americano. Le iniziative culturali ricadevano infatti sul Public Affairs Office dell'ambasciata nel quale è compreso anche l'ufficio di addetto culturale. Così come si dovette riformulare il rapporto privilegiato con il Centro di Studi Americani che a sua volta, e per le stesse ragioni, fu costretto a procedere a una profonda ristrutturazione della propria governance, riformando radicalmente i suoi programmi e i suoi obiettivi.

Questo riposizionamento storico dell' AISNA e delle istituzioni con le quali collabora stabilmente ha consentito però, a partire dall'inizio del nuovo secolo di rafforzare l'associazione con l'aggiunta di iniziative rivolte soprattutto alle/ai giovani studiosi/e/i: l' AISNA Graduate Forum e la rivista *JAm It!* (*Journal of American Studies in Italy*), di cui si parla dettagliatamente in un altro articolo di questo Forum.

NOTA BIOGRAFICA

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Il suo volume più recente è *Il pluralismo culturale. Un dibattito americano (1915-1916)* (2021). Si specializza in relazioni tra Stati Uniti e Italia nel diciannovesimo e l'inizio del ventesimo secolo; ha anche scritto ampiamente sulla storia e la cultura dei nativi americani.

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L' AISNA e l' internazionalizzazione degli Studi americani

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holly the fifth International

(Allen Ginsberg, “Footnote to *Howl*”)

Nell'ottobre del 2005, l'assemblea dei soci tenutasi in occasione del convegno biennale dell' AISNA presso l'Università di Bari, con voto quasi unanime, approvava la proposta di adesione alla International American Studies Association (IASA), una scelta in linea non solo con la pluriennale affiliazione dell' AISNA alla European Association of American Studies (EAAS) ma, più in generale, con la storia e la tradizione dell'americanistica italiana. Nel momento in cui questa decisione veniva presa, la cosiddetta “svolta” transnazionale (che alcuni preferivano, e forse ancora oggi preferiscono, definire “internazionale” oppure “globale”) era in pieno svolgimento. Non solo alcuni convegni biennali dell' AISNA l'avevano posta al centro dei propri lavori (come lo stesso convegno di Bari su “American Solitudes: Individual, National, Transnational”, e quello del 2003, “Ambassadors. American Studies in a Changing World”), ma nell'ultimo capitolo del suo *Effetti teorici. Critica culturale e nuova storiografia letteraria americana* (2002), Maria Cristina Iuli aveva offerto una preziosa ricognizione critica del rapporto tra storiografia letteraria e le idee di

nazione e di sovra- o post-nazionalità. L'anno successivo, presso il Centro Studi Americani di Roma, s'era poi tenuto un seminario su "The State of the Art in American Studies", organizzato da Daniele Fiorentino, Matteo Sanfilippo, e da chi scrive, che aveva visto la partecipazione, tra gli altri, di Djelal Kadir, fondatore ed allora presidente della IASA. In quella circostanza, l'attenzione s'era appuntata in modo preponderante proprio sulla "transnational/international/global turn in American Studies", al fine d'indagare non solo quale tra queste prospettive sembrava promettere un più marcato *decentering* degli Studi americani come progetto culturale di ascendenza nazionalista, ma anche quali potessero essere i confini di una nuova, assai più ampia disciplina, incline a sconfinare in direzione degli studi comparatistici.

È però opportuno sottolineare che gli studiosi italiani non si sono limitati ad abbracciare (con entusiasmo ma anche con alcune riserve) le proposte metodologiche ed epistemologiche che in buona misura – paradossalmente – andavano prendendo forma proprio nel paese la cui storia politica, culturale e letteraria si voleva "provincializzare" al fine d'inserirla in un contesto più ampio di quello dello stato-nazione. Al contrario, credo sia evidente che l'americanistica italiana la "svolta" internazionale ha contribuito a promuoverla, consolidarla e praticarla ben prima che diventasse un fenomeno accademico di respiro globale. Inizierei col ricordare che tra gli estensori della "founding declaration" della IASA (Bellagio, 1 giugno 2000) figurava Cristina Giorcelli, un dato che non può sorprendere considerato il lungo impegno di Cristina nella direzione della sezione angloamericana di *Letterature d'America*, una rivista che sin dalla sua nascita si è caratterizzata per uno sguardo "continentale" su *tutte* le Americhe, e sull'insieme delle loro differenti tradizioni storico-culturali e linguistiche. Analogamente, pur eleggendo a suo principale campo d'indagine il solo continente nord-americano, anche *Ácoma*, rivista nata nel 1994, ambiva (come il nome stesso della pubblicazione suggerisce) a ridisegnare in senso transnazionale e transculturale il campo degli Studi americani, ponendo un'enfasi particolare sulla dimensione irriducibilmente ibrida e composita degli oggetti di studio di questo campo disciplinare.

Sbaglieremmo però nel considerare questo respiro internazionale dell'americanistica italiana come un dato tutto sommato recente, conseguente a trasformazioni socioculturali di natura epocale (la

globalizzazione, la fine della Guerra Fredda, l'esplosione di nuovi e allarmanti conflitti). Come scriveva una decina di anni fa John Carlos Rowe, in un articolo per la *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, se da un lato “The ‘transnational turn’ in American studies refers generally to scholarship in the past twenty years that has stressed the comparative study of the different ‘Americas’— Latin America, the Caribbean, the United States – and Canada as the appropriate objects of study for the discipline”, dall’altro “Transnationalism also refers to American studies done by international scholars outside the United States, especially scholarship that emphasizes the influence of the United States abroad” (n. pag.). Se il “transnazionalismo” è concepito in quest’ultima accezione, è evidente che non solo l’americanistica italiana, ma quella di qualsivoglia paese che non siano gli Stati Uniti d’America, è “transnazionale” per definizione, ed è una realtà non recente, ma vecchia di decenni o magari di secoli, perché ha a che fare con i processi di traduzione linguistica e culturale attraverso cui ogni nazione importa, filtra e fa circolare “testi” (nel senso più ampio del termine) creati originariamente oltreoceano. Si sarebbe tentati di dire che non c’è americanistica “straniera” che non sia, almeno in questo senso, necessariamente transnazionale.

Per quel che concerne l’americanistica italiana, la più accurata e acuta interrogazione della sua storia e della sua *in-betweenness* è stata offerta da Donatella Izzo, nel saggio “Outside Where? Comparing Notes on Comparative American Studies and American Comparative Studies”. Ritrovando l’esteriorità degli Studi americani italiani nel loro essere una formazione disciplinare “eterotopica” rispetto agli American Studies statunitensi, Izzo propone di considerare l’americanistica italiana “as a localized, highly specific, but also in many ways representative instance of the international grafting of a national discipline. It takes place ‘inside’ American Studies in as much as it is American Studies, but simultaneously ‘outside’ it in as much as it goes on from outside the national culture it refers to” (589). Nel ripercorrere una storia certamente familiare ai lettori di *RSA*, Izzo da un lato rivendica il valore storico di uno sguardo critico indipendente, che ritrova in Pavese e Vittorini i fondatori ideali di un’americanistica italiana democratica, antifascista, culturalmente e politicamente impegnata, senza però nascondere come quest’ultima, pur sfuggendo da un lato alla vulgata “eccezionalista” degli Studi americani

statunitensi, dall'altro "it has created an exceptionalism of its own, tuned to the ideological demands of each successive generation".

Nell'immediato dopoguerra, ad esempio, con la storica rivista *Studi Americani*, Agostino Lombardo, grazie al fondamentale contributo di studiosi come Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli, Guido Fink, Claudio Gorlier, Beniamino Placido, Elémire Zolla, Marisa Bulgheroni, Sergio Perosa, e molti altri, non solo fa dell'americanistica una disciplina accademica a pieno titolo, ma insiste sul carattere peculiarmente italiano della disciplina, limitando a casi rarissimi la pubblicazione di saggi in lingua inglese o a firma di studiosi non italiani. Si tratta di una scelta che non ha nulla di provinciale, ma è frutto di un contesto particolare in cui la disciplina, per consolidarsi, ha bisogno di dialogare con quelle che oggi chiameremmo le "condizioni locali", dimostrando la propria solidità in un confronto serrato con i fermenti e le correnti critico-culturali italiane del periodo che va dai primi anni Cinquanta alla fine degli anni Settanta, quando, anche a seguito di un lungo ciclo di lotte politiche e sociali, prendono forma nuove prospettive critiche, e nascono nuove riviste (come le summenzionate *Letterature d'America* e *Ácoma*, e più recentemente *Iperstoria* e *Jam It!*) in cui il numero dei contributi di studiosi non italiani sale vertiginosamente (così come il numero dei saggi pubblicati in inglese) perché il confronto si fa sempre più globale, e la distinzione tra il "dentro" e il "fuori" dell'America, e degli stessi Studi americani, diviene labile e sfuggente.

Alla "svolta" transnazionale, com'è noto, hanno fatto seguito altre "svolte", il cui moltiplicarsi e rapido succedersi ingenera inevitabilmente la sensazione che la disciplina non risponda solo alle comprensibili e giuste esigenze di restare al passo con i rivolgimenti epistemologici che fanno parte della storia di ogni branca del sapere, ma anche al bisogno di essere "vendibile" su un mercato accademico in cui le scienze umane faticano a mantenere quelle posizioni di prestigio un tempo occupate. Mi sentirei però di dire che in buona parte queste ulteriori "svolte" sono intimamente legate al riassetto dell'americanistica come disciplina globale, cui ovviamente le studiose e gli studiosi italiani hanno dato e continuano a dare contributi significativi. Non mi pare il caso di fornire qui un elenco di tali contributi, che non potrebbe comunque che essere parziale e soggettivo. Basterà ricordare che le americaniste e gli americanisti italiani oggi pubblicano spesso non solo su riviste nazionali, ma su riviste internazionali, ivi incluse

importanti riviste statunitensi, e spesso scelgono di pubblicare le proprie monografie in inglese, per il semplice motivo che in tal modo i risultati delle loro ricerche raggiungono un pubblico assai più ampio di quello di lingua italiana. Questa scelta è naturalmente anche legata alle politiche di governo delle università italiane, dove tutto ciò che è percepito come contributo alla “internazionalizzazione” è generalmente accolto con favore.

A costo di essere tacciato di passatismo, però, vorrei qui ribadire che l'americanistica italiana non dovrebbe esitare, da un lato, a rivendicare percorsi di ricerca propri, anche se distanti da quelli più in voga in una data fase storica e, dall'altro, non dovrebbe dimenticare – se posso usare questo termine – la sua funzione *pedagogica* nei confronti della società di cui è in buona parte espressione. Da quando è tramontato l'ideale dell'intellettuale “organico” o comunque “impegnato”, mi pare si sia ampliato a dismisura lo iato tra l'accademia e un mondo della comunicazione dove la ricezione critica dell'informazione (o di ciò che passa per informazione) latita, o fa comunque fatica a trovare un suo spazio. Ecco, per restare fedeli a una vocazione “internazionale” che li ha accompagnati sin dalla nascita, e poi nei momenti chiave di sviluppo della disciplina, credo che gli Studi americani italiani debbano sforzarsi di esercitare con maggiore convinzione il proprio ruolo di traduttori culturali nella società civile: nelle scuole come nelle università, nei luoghi di aggregazione di base come nei centri di ricerca. E naturalmente, anche sul World Wide Web, senza però credere che il mondo sia tutto contenuto nel cyberspazio. Magari sarò un inguaribile utopista (altrimenti perché avrei scelto un'epigrafe dall'opera di Allen Ginsberg?), ma credo che solo tornando a respirare con più convinzione l'aria del mondo grande e terribile che palpita, coi suoi orrori e le sue infinite possibilità oltre le mura dell'accademia, l' AISNA, e più in generale gli Studi americani italiani, possano avere un futuro che sia all'altezza delle numerosissime sfide che ci attendono.

NOTA BIOGRAFICA

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Uno sguardo indietro

La vita e i tempi di *RSAJournal* – *Rivista di Studi Americani*

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Quando, nel 1990, l'Associazione Italiana di Studi Nord-Americani decideva di riproporre un suo organo ufficiale che potesse rappresentare le molte e varie prospettive di ricerca dei membri dell'Associazione, il panorama degli Studi americani in Italia era molto diverso da quello che aveva accolto, nel 1955, la nascita della prima rivista dell' AISNA, la gloriosa *Studi americani* di cui Mario Materassi, nell'introduzione al numero d'esordio di *RSA Journal* (con le due parole separate da uno spazio – spiegherò poi perché ora non è più così), compiangeva “la triste, silenziosa uscita di scena” avvenuta ormai nel 1980. Se negli anni Cinquanta in Italia la concezione del “campo” degli Studi americani era ancora, del resto coerentemente con l'assetto che essi avevano assunto negli Stati Uniti, contraddistinta da una prevalenza della critica letteraria, per quanto fin dal principio innervata da fertili contaminazioni interdisciplinari soprattutto con l'area degli studi storici, tra la fine degli anni Ottanta e i primi anni Novanta era ormai in corso una sua sempre più accentuata estensione – di nuovo, parallelamente a quanto accadeva dall'altra parte dell'Atlantico, seppure con un qualche ritardo e con un'iniziale timidezza in termini teorici e metodologici. Questa cautela nella “partenza” della nuova rivista, che evidentemente intendeva

ricollegarsi ai fasti dell'antenata, si riflette nei primi numeri di *RSA Journal*, in cui la letteratura mantiene un predominio pressoché assoluto: il numero 1 è esclusivamente letterario, nel secondo appare un solo articolo di carattere storico (quello di Valeria Gennaro Lerda sullo stato dell'arte della storiografia statunitense sullo schiavismo – ma già questa prima scelta tematica lascia trapelare un impulso revisionista che si manifesterà di lì a poco in tutti i campi disciplinari dell'americanistica italiana e nella loro intersezione), il quarto contiene un contributo dell'attuale Direttore sulla filosofia pragmatista (ma gli altri articoli sono letterari), e solo con il decimo (del 1999), sotto la direzione di Rosella Mamoli Zorzi (subentrata nel 1995), abbiamo un'impostazione decisamente multi-, inter- e addirittura transdisciplinare, con interventi che spaziano dalla traduttologia (l'articolo di Iain Halliday sulle traduzioni di *Gatsby*) all'intersezione degli studi sul sistema educativo, sulle arti figurative e sulla condizione femminile negli Stati Uniti dell'Ottocento (il contributo di Cristina Ossato).

Dopo due numeri di nuovo “tradizionalmente” letterari, con il 13 si inaugura un assetto che diverrà una costante, e che garantirà la definitiva conversione della rivista verso una dimensione plurima e aperta: la suddivisione dei contributi in tre sezioni (se ne aggiungerà a partire dal numero doppio del 2007 una quarta, quella del Forum, dedicata a interventi di dimensioni ridotte che ruotano attorno a un tema comune di discussione, come in una tavola rotonda), ovvero la *Special Section* (su un argomento spesso di carattere interdisciplinare – per il 13, “The Theme of Destruction in American Culture”, a cura della Direttrice), gli *Articles* (a scelta libera) e le *First Editions* (poi *Inediti*, peraltro già presenti fin dal primo numero). Il numero 15 (con un numero doppio, 15-16) segna un altro tipo di apertura – quello verso l'internazionalizzazione di autori o autrici, fino ad allora quasi esclusivamente italiani/e o comunque residenti in Italia: ben quattro contributi sono infatti di *scholars* che lavorano all'estero (in Francia, Germania, Gran Bretagna e Stati Uniti). Il 2005 è quindi l'anno in cui la rivista si trasforma da “vetrina” della ricerca condotta in Italia nel campo degli Studi americani a luogo di scambio e interazione tra prospettive critiche la cui varia dislocazione (soprattutto europea) arricchisce il dibattito in modi che nemmeno le riviste statunitensi, spesso propense a privilegiare il mondo anglo-americano e a ignorare visioni “eccentriche”, sanno adottare.

Difficoltà di carattere organizzativo costringono però la redazione della rivista, che non ha più un/a *general editor* ufficiale (anche se per dieci anni sarà in realtà Giuseppe Nori a coordinarne il *board* con impegno e dedizione), a saltare un anno e a proporre un altro numero doppio nel 2007, che per la prima volta nella *Special Section* non ha alcun contributo di carattere letterario. Tuttavia, forse è proprio la gestione “collettiva” di *RSA Journal* che consente negli anni successivi di selezionare i temi della *Special Section* con un’attenzione rivolta alle frontiere più avanzate della ricerca interdisciplinare e ai dibattiti più attuali: è un *turn* epistemologico (e anche politico) che si manifesta già nel numero 19 del 2008, curato da Donatella Izzo e dedicato a quelle *Pursuits of Happiness*, che – nonostante la storia più che bicentenaria dell’espressione (al singolare, ovviamente) e il suo ruolo fondativo per la nazione americana e le sue mitologie identitarie – acquisiscono un senso nuovo e dirompente nella contemporaneità, anche grazie alle prospettive teoriche e critiche allora più recenti (e non solo statunitensi: si pensi a Žižek o ad Agamben). Con questo numero inoltre la veste grafica della rivista si stabilizza nell’aspetto che ha ancora oggi.

Nel numero 20 (2009) la nuova tendenza a porre l’attenzione su questioni attuali e inerentemente plurime, che richiedono una molteplicità di approcci diversi e interconnessi, si manifesta nella sezione monografica *American Patchwork: Multi-Ethnicity in the United States Today*, coordinata da Marina Camboni, che trascende anche i confini della separazione tra le varie parti della rivista e “invade” gli *Articles* con i contributi di Daniele Fiorentino e di Stefano Rosso, in cui si traccia la traiettoria che dalle prime teorie del multiculturalismo da Horace Kallen porta alle odierne configurazioni del pluralismo culturale. Per certi versi, oltre ad ampliare il campo degli Studi americani in tutte le direzioni disciplinari con tutte le loro interconnessioni, queste linee di ricerca, che spesso si palesano in titoli in cui termini come “American” o “US” non appaiono più necessari, testimoniano di una rinnovata consapevolezza della vastissima e altrettanto profonda rete di collegamenti che esondano oltre i confini statunitensi e si disseminano in tutto il globo, al punto che gli stessi oggetti di studio, per quanto del tutto “americani”, si qualificano nel contempo come ineludibilmente significativi (e non sempre in modo positivo) anche per le altre culture.

Con il numero successivo, l’ultimo di dimensioni doppie per coprire un biennio (a partire dal 2012 la rivista rispetterà fedelmente la cadenza

annuale), questo orizzonte ormai pienamente globale degli Studi americani porta alla necessità di ridefinire il posto stesso degli Stati Uniti nel mondo e rispetto ad esso (e di converso del mondo “non-americano” in relazione a una superpotenza che sta perdendo il predominio assoluto illusoriamente conquistato con la caduta del Muro di Berlino e ormai posto radicalmente in discussione della proliferazione di conflitti e tensioni di ogni genere e dall’ascesa di nuovi protagonisti sulla scena internazionale): ne consegue la ugualmente obbligatoria revisione della versione idiosincraticamente americana di un concetto universale come quello di “frontiera”, che in “The World and the New Frontiers of the US”, l’articolo del curatore Daniele Fiorentino in apertura della sezione speciale *The United States: A World Within, the World Without*, si intreccia con analoghe operazioni di ricontestualizzazione e declinazione di altri cardini della mitografia angloamericana passata e presente (e forse inesorabilmente futura) come l’“American Dream” o l’“American Promise” o ancora l’“American Way of Life”. Sempre in questo numero, e significativamente, prende l’avvio una linea di ricerca distintamente “italiana”, anche se con numerosi contributi stranieri, che da un lato va a indagare l’“Italia dentro l’America” – ovvero la storia, la cultura e la letteratura degli italoamericani e delle italoamericane (con il Forum “The Emerging Canon of Italian-American Literature”, a cura di Leonardo Buonomo e John Paul Russo) – e dall’altro osserva l’America dall’esterno, grazie alla teoria e alla critica prodotte in Italia, e soprattutto studia i risultati di questa osservazione, evidenziandone un’originalità che permette di “defamiliarizzare” e quindi riarticolare in modo più consapevolmente autonomo tutta una serie di assunti che forse si tendeva a dare per scontati: valga per tutte proprio la questione del “canone” della letteratura italoamericana, che assume valenze senz’altro diverse se affrontata “dall’altro lato”, ovvero da quello di chi ne mette in risalto la rilevanza e la rappresentatività non solo in relazione al più ampio canone della letteratura “americana”, ma anche per contestare la sostanziale sottovalutazione – fino a tempi abbastanza recenti e con significative eccezioni come quella di Martino Marazzi – del contributo della cultura della diaspora italiana in Nord America alla cultura italiana *tout court*. Qualche anno più tardi, con il numero 26 del 2015, il Forum, curato da Mena Mitrano, sarà dedicato ad “American Studies and Italian Theory”.

Un ulteriore “scarto” rispetto alla concezione tradizionale degli Studi americani si verifica nel numero 24 del 2013, con la sezione monografica *Mapping American Popular Culture* coordinata da Leonardo Buonomo: il campo degli Studi culturali, per quando ufficialmente nato in Gran Bretagna grazie a precursori come Raymond Williams e poi istituzionalizzato con la costituzione del Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies di Birmingham soprattutto sotto la direzione di Stuart Hall, ben presto si è imposto, come altrimenti non poteva essere, quale area di ricerca di primaria importanza nel paese che più di ogni altro ha prodotto e produce testi culturali di vastissima diffusione, ma in Italia è stato necessario attendere la fine del secondo millennio per assistere al riconoscimento della necessità di un approccio più globale e inclusivo a tutte le forme e tutti gli aspetti della “costruzione della cultura”, anche grazie all’operato di chi lavorava nell’allora Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli – non a caso, uno dei centri di eccellenza dell’americanistica italiana. La *Special Section* sulla cultura popolare sancisce l’allineamento dell’americanistica italiana negli orizzonti di ricerca meno convenzionali degli *American Studies*.

Con il numero 26 riappare la figura ufficiale del/la *general editor*, nella persona di Gianfranca Balestra, che avvia la complessa procedura di adeguamento di *RSA Journal* ai criteri richiesti dall’Agenzia Nazionale per la Valutazione del sistema Universitario e della Ricerca per l’ottenimento della tanto agognata classe A. La *Special Section* sul cinema statunitense, a cura della nuova Direttrice, conferma la centralità assunta da tematiche e approcci (inter- e trans-) disciplinari non convenzionali sia per la rivista sia per l’americanistica italiana nel suo complesso. Nel numero successivo, la cui *Special Section* è dedicata a *The United States Between Transnationalism and Interculturality*, la presenza di contributi di autori e autrici provenienti dall’estero diventa persino dominante, come a ribadire il ruolo che la rivista è andata assumendo come luogo di dibattito internazionale, e che già il titolo della sezione in qualche modo suggerisce. L’ultimo numero sotto la gestione di Gianfranca Balestra prosegue l’opera di riorientamento degli interessi di ricerca verso percorsi raramente attraversati dall’americanistica, e non solo in Italia: la sezione monografica, a cura di Simone Francescato e Carlo Martinez, su turismo e letteratura negli Stati Uniti, ma più in generale sul viaggio come tema fondamentale di tante opere non solo

odeporiche, affronta un nodo peraltro cruciale della storia nordamericana, ovvero la funzione fondativa che il viaggio in essa ha avuto e il ruolo che continua ad avere per una società che insiste ad autorappresentarsi come una nazione “in movimento”.

La preoccupazione per questioni di vasta portata che interessano il mondo intero ma trovano la loro origine e/o la loro più estrema manifestazione negli Stati Uniti di ieri e di oggi diviene il motore della progettazione della rivista nei sei anni in cui, modestamente, ho svolto la mansione di suo *general editor*. Il peccato originale (assieme al genocidio delle popolazioni native) della storia americana e le sue attualissime conseguenze nel presente divengono il tema della prima *Special Section* della nuova gestione, che peraltro si pone in piena continuità con la precedente: *Post-racial America Exploded: #BlackLivesMatter Between Social Activism, Academic Discourse, and Cultural Representation*, curato da Anna Scacchi e Gianna Fusco (che assieme a Marco Mariano faceva parte della redazione uscente), era infatti stato progettato l'anno prima, ed è quasi un manifesto “politico” (nel senso più ampio del termine), perché non si limita ad analizzare le più recenti evoluzioni e configurazioni del movimento antirazzista, ma si interroga su come l'attivismo sociale possa trovare un riscontro e una dimensione teorico-critica in un mondo comunque mai davvero asetticamente distante dai tumulti delle strade e delle piazze, almeno a partire dal secondo dopoguerra – quello dell'accademia, che proprio in questi ultimi mesi ha riaffermato, secondo modalità che possono essere considerate controverse ma che proprio per questo rendono giustizia alla complessità delle scelte etiche richieste da determinate situazioni, la sua posizione di luogo in cui il dibattito pubblico sui temi più brutali dell'attualità raggiunge il punto più alto e più aspro di elaborazione, interagisce direttamente con le pratiche della protesta di massa, e innesca risposte repressive di cui si fatica a trovare esempi analoghi nel passato recente e che vanno a colpire i massimi livelli dell'*establishment* universitario. Con il numero 29 si verifica anche il subentro, come Direttrice responsabile, di Gigliola Nocera, al posto di Sergio Perosa, che aveva ricoperto questa carica fin dal numero d'esordio. In questa occasione viene rinnovata l'iscrizione della rivista nel registro della stampa, ma per un errore di trascrizione nel titolo lo spazio tra *RSA* e *Journal* scompare, e per evitare ulteriori e complicati passaggi

burocratici il titolo viene lasciato così com'era stato registrato, e come continua ad apparire.

Nel numero 30 del 2019, la *Special Section* curata dal sottoscritto e da Maddalena Tirabassi (*Mobilities and Citizenship: Rethinking Migrations, Individual and Collective Civil Rights, and Their Representations*) affronta un altro tema che è situato nella sua primissima configurazione all'origine stessa della civiltà angloamericana, e al contempo si riafferma in misura quantomeno drammatica nella società attuale, come a ribadire che la sua storia appare per certi versi una sorta di ripetuto ritorno dell'uguale – una riproposizione di eterni problemi affrontati negli stessi modi e sempre senza trovare una qualche soluzione. Alla sezione monografica si affianca il forum curato da Matteo Pretelli, che focalizza l'attenzione sulle specificità della diaspora italoamericana – ma l'argomento delle migrazioni tornerà per tre numeri, a partire dal 32 (2021), nel Forum “a puntate” “Frontiera/Frontiere: Conversazioni su confini e migrazioni tra il Mediterraneo e l'Atlantico”, che estende il perimetro dell'indagine e mostra le interrelazioni spesso invisibili tra le due aree geopolitiche che costituiscono assieme lo spazio di riferimento (come oggetto di arrivo, come luogo di partenza) della nostra ricerca di americanisti e americaniste. La dimensione “globale” dei temi al centro di questo numero si riflette nella molteplicità dei luoghi di provenienza di autori e autrici, che comprende un continente finora assente nella geografia della rivista come l'Asia.

Evidentemente prevedendo l'atmosfera pre-apocalittica che si è imposta prima con la pandemia di COVID-19 e poi con guerre che potrebbero preludere alla guerra che porrà fine a tutte le guerre (e all'umanità), il numero 31 (del 2020, ma progettato nell'autunno del 2019, quando ancora si vedevano mascherine solo sul volto di qualche turista in visita dall'Asia) presenta una sezione speciale sulle *American Apocalypse(s): Nuclear Imaginaries and the Reinvention of Modern America*, a cura di Elisabetta Bini, Thomas Bishop e Dario Fazzi, che fornisce una cornice interpretativa sia per la realtà storica della proliferazione nucleare sia per le varie forme d'espressione che ne hanno offerto raffigurazioni la cui portata ci appare oggi ancor più significativa.

Con il numero 32 si torna a una *Special Section* esclusivamente letteraria, a cura di Pia Masiero e Virginia Pignagnoli, dedicata alle ultime tendenze

del romanzo statunitense – ma solo a leggere i titoli di alcuni contributi, sull'*autofiction* storiografica o sulle *queer realities*, si comprende come, ancora una volta, la letteratura sia affrontata, se non nei termini shakespeariani (o marxiani) di un rispecchiamento della vita, in quelli di un territorio in cui ciò che è all'esterno – il “contesto” – non è semplicemente l'oggetto pre-discorsivo sottoposto a rappresentazione, ma un sistema di segni che almeno in parte ne determinano anche l'articolazione formale. Il 2021 è anche l'anno in cui finalmente *RSA Journal* riesce a fare il suo ingresso nell'empireo delle riviste di classe A – ed è un ingresso quasi trionfale, perché conseguito per tutta una serie di settori concorsuali, da Lingue, letterature e culture inglese e anglo-americana (ovviamente) a Critica letteraria e letterature comparate, Storia contemporanea, Geografia, fino ai Diritti costituzionale, internazionale e dell'Unione Europea e comparato (per qualche oscura ragione, inizialmente il settore concorsuale di Storia delle relazioni internazionali, delle società e delle istituzioni extraeuropee, che comprende Storia e istituzioni delle Americhe, resta escluso, ma grazie a una collettiva opera di negoziazione che ha coinvolto alcune figure di riferimento della disciplina la Classe A viene infine concessa).

Con il numero 33 si torna ad affrontare questioni globali che trovano una manifestazione angosciosamente spettacolare nella cultura americana, ovvero i *Sites of Emergency e gli States of Exception* della *Special Section* curata dal Direttore e da Giorgio Mariani, che si focalizza sulla concettualizzazione e destrutturazione di questi principi quasi basilari della storia degli USA, in fondo nati proprio come uno “stato di eccezione”, ovvero, per dirla con Benjamin Franklin, al fine di rispondere a un'emergenza con un atto che doveva accadere una volta e una volta soltanto, e poi consolidati proprio come nazione la cui “eccezionalità” non può che emergere indiscussa.

L'ultimo numero prima di quello che state leggendo è letteralmente un numero di congedo, della redazione uscente ma purtroppo anche di due figure assolutamente centrali nella storia dell'americanistica italiana e dell'AISNA, Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli e Maurizio Vaudagna, ricordate da chi le ha conosciute da vicino. La sezione speciale, curata da Cristina Iuli e Pilar Martinez Benedí, apre ancora una volta una nuova e avanzatissima traiettoria di ricerca, che indaga l'intersezione tra “Posthumanism and Environmental Poetics in American Literature”.

Il testimone passa adesso al nuovo Direttore e alla Redazione entrante, cui spetta l'onere e l'onore di continuare, magari non *le combat*, ma sicuramente un percorso ricco e complesso (e talvolta accidentato), con la consapevolezza dei risultati e delle conquiste che la rivista, se ci si volge indietro e se ne osserva la storia, ha saputo ottenere nel corso di quasi un quarto di secolo.

NOTA BIOGRAFICA

Valerio Massimo De Angelis insegna Letteratura e Cultura Americana presso l'Università di Macerata. È autore di due libri (*La prima lettera: Miti dell'origine in The Scarlet Letter di Nathaniel Hawthorne*, 2001; e *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Il romanzo e la storia*, 2004), co-curatore di due raccolte di saggi bio-critici su autori americani contemporanei, degli atti di una conferenza internazionale su Philip K. Dick, e degli atti del XIX Convegno Internazionale dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Nord-Americani (AISNA). Ha pubblicato numerosi articoli e saggi sulla narrativa storica, il romanzo, l'abolizionismo, il femminismo, il modernismo, il postmodernismo, i fumetti, il cinema di fantascienza, le relazioni transatlantiche italo-americane e su autori come Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Ambrose Bierce, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Henry James, Langston Hughes, Thomas Wolfe, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Henry Roth, Pietro di Donato, Mario Puzo, Leslie Fiedler, E.L. Doctorow, Stephen King, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gloria Anzaldúa, Margaret Atwood e Rudy Wiebe. È coordinatore del Centro Studi Italo-Americani presso l'Università di Macerata e membro dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Nord-Americani (AISNA), della European Association of American Studies (EAAS), della International Association of American Studies (IASA), della Italian American Studies Association (IASA) e del Centro di Studi Americani di Roma. È stato Direttore Generale di *RSAJournal*, la rivista ufficiale dell'AISNA, dal 2017 al 2023.

L'istituzionalizzazione dell'AISNA Graduate Forum e le sue pratiche prefigurative

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Il Graduate Forum dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Nord-Americani (AISNA) nacque nel 2009 quando, sotto la presidenza di Marina Camboni (2007-2010), Daniele Fiorentino propose di portare anche in Italia l'esperienza di varie associazioni europee di studi americani, e della stessa *European Association for American Studies*, creando una rete di giovani studiosi

¹ Lorenzo Costaguta e Virginia Pignagnoli sono stati coordinatori del Graduate Forum dal 2017 al 2019. Stefano Morello è stato coordinatore dal 2017 al 2021. Costaguta è attualmente membro del Direttivo AISNA per i rapporti con il Forum. Le informazioni contenute nell'articolo sono state reperite tramite conversazioni con gli interessati, la mail istituzionale del gruppo (aisnagraduates@gmail.com), registrata nel 2009, e i documenti ufficiali dell'Associazione a disposizione degli autori.

e studiose.² Oggi, a quindici anni dalla sua fondazione, il Graduate Forum ha raggiunto una stabilità e autonomia di funzionamento tale da permettere di identificarlo come una delle componenti cardine dell'Associazione. Le attività svolte nel corso degli anni sono state fondamentali per permettere al Forum di diventare un punto di riferimento per gli studi nord-americani in Italia: le politiche “prefigurative” di cui ci si è fatti promotori infatti hanno dato luogo ad uno spazio in cui la nostra area di ricerca è potuta crescere in uno spirito di apertura e sperimentazione, malgrado il contesto di precarietà in cui molti giovani ricercatori e ricercatrici si ritrovano.³ Nel tempo, il Graduate Forum ha portato idee e proposte che hanno saputo soddisfare il bisogno di comunità e sinergia tra giovani studiosi e studiose di master, dottorato, e post-dottorato e trasformarlo in attività altamente formative, collaborative e di valore scientifico. Chi scrive è stato protagonista della fase di “istituzionalizzazione” del Forum dal 2015 in avanti e offrirà quindi una prospettiva focalizzata principalmente sulla storia recente dell'Associazione. Nel proporre questo contributo, il nostro obiettivo è riflettere in maniera critica su che cosa ha funzionato, che cosa non ha funzionato e quali sono gli elementi fondamentali per assicurarsi che il Forum continui ad avere una presenza centrale nell'Associazione.

² Le persone registratesi all'incontro di fondazione del forum, tenutosi il 14 dicembre 2009 al Centro Studi Americani, furono: Noemi Abe, Stefano Asperti, Elena Baldassarri, Francesco Barbieri, Matteo Battistini, Alberto Benvenuti, Laura Blandino, Enrico Botta, Annalisa Brugnoli, Francesca Cadeddu, Lorena Carbonara, Elisabetta Careri, Barbara Carcone, Alice Casarini, Michele Cento, Lorenzo Costaguta, Manlio Della Marca, Sergio Di Giacomo, Michele Di Gregorio, Mariadele Di Blasio, Fabiana Errico, Anna Faggian, Paola Ferrero, Claudia Fimiani, Alessandra Fiorini, Simone Francescato, Fulvio Lorefice, Roberta Luongo, Arianna Mancini, Marina Marchetti, Barbara Miceli, Renata Morresi, Mariangela Orabona, Ugo Panzani, Floriana Puglisi, Vincenzo Romania, Mara Salvucci, Andrea Scionti, Luca Secondo, Simone Selva, Paolo Simonetti, Cristina Tinelli, Umberto Tulli.

³ Il termine “prefigurativo” si riferisce a pratiche o azioni che anticipano e incarnano i valori e le strutture di una società futura desiderata. In particolare, nelle scienze sociali, politiche e umanistiche si usa per descrivere movimenti o gruppi che cercano di vivere secondo i principi del cambiamento che vogliono vedere nel mondo, creando microcosmi del futuro all'interno del presente. Si veda Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left: 1962-1968: The Great Refusal*. New York: Praeger, 1982.

Al momento dell'istituzione del Forum, nel 2009, l'obiettivo era quello di creare uno spazio di aggregazione e rete per coloro che ancora non erano parte del corpo docente strutturato, all'interno di un'Associazione il cui controllo era ancora totalmente appannaggio di docenti strutturati, nonostante il crescente numero di non strutturati e non strutturate, e in un contesto accademico in cui le interazioni tra dottorandi, dottorande e post-doc in vari atenei era ancora minima. Nel corso del primo incontro tenutosi al Centro Studi Americani (CSA) nel dicembre del 2009, infatti, una delle principali proposte emerse fu quella di creare un sito internet, da popolare con profili biografici e rispettivi interessi di ricerca. Uno spazio di condivisione "privato", se vogliamo, utile a conoscersi e farsi conoscere e all'interno del quale scambiarsi informazioni su eventi e opportunità rilevanti per studenti e studentesse di dottorato (bandi, borse, pubblicazioni). In questo incontro vennero anche previsti incontri a cadenza regolare a Roma, l'instaurazione di relazioni con organizzazioni *graduate* europee e americane e, in prospettiva, la creazione di *American Studios*, una rivista gestita dal Forum e dedicata alle pubblicazioni di dottorandi e dottorande, post-doc e studiosi e studiose *early career*. La realizzazione del sito web, lanciato poi solo nell'aprile del 2012, fu il principale obiettivo raggiunto in questo periodo. L'Associazione, inoltre, favorì la visibilità dei Graduates affidando loro l'organizzazione di tavole rotonde durante le assemblee annuali AISNA e promuovendo il regolare svolgimento, presso il CSA, di incontri di presentazione di ricerche, commentate da componenti *senior* dell'Associazione. Venivano infine incentivate occasioni di confronto tra *early career* nel corso delle conferenze biennali. Tra queste va ricordata in particolare la *plenary* che si tenne nel 2015 durante il convegno biennale AISNA presso L'Orientale di Napoli, a cui furono invitati i e le *chair* delle associazioni di studi americani *graduate* tedesca e di quella britannica. Tuttavia, nonostante la varietà e la ricchezza delle proposte, nei primi anni il Forum faticò ad imporsi come una presenza regolare all'interno dell'Associazione. Tra i vari problemi incontrati, vi furono la mancanza di fondi (necessari, ad esempio, per finanziare la rivista), lo scollamento tra la leadership del gruppo e il Direttivo dell'Associazione e, infine, forse l'elemento più importante, il rapido alternarsi delle persone alla guida del

gruppo, fisiologico e inevitabile data la breve durata dei cicli dottorali italiani.

Alcuni elementi contribuirono a segnare un cambio di passo decisivo nelle attività del gruppo a partire dal 2015. Tra questi vi fu l'importazione in Italia di pratiche dall'estero volte a creare una leadership più strutturata del gruppo. Fu a seguito della *roundtable* di Napoli, occasione che permise di conoscere più nel dettaglio il funzionamento dei gruppi *graduate* tedesco e britannico, che venne organizzata una *call for applications* che portò alla creazione di gruppi di lavoro più ampi e consolidati sotto l'ombrello del Forum. Nuove forze e una nuova struttura generarono immediatamente risultati tangibili, come ad esempio la prima giornata AISNA Graduates (tenutasi a Perugia nel settembre 2016) sul cui modello fu realizzato, due anni dopo, il primo convegno dell'AISNA Graduate Forum, *Rethinking 1968 and the Global Sixties* (Roma, Centro Studi Americani). Divisa in due momenti, la giornata di Perugia vide la realizzazione di un *workshop* con sessioni parallele e divise per area (sul modello di alcune scuole dottorali internazionali) in cui le ricerche dei giovani studiosi e studiose di studi nord-americani ricevettero pareri e commenti da parte di ricercatori e ricercatrici *senior*. Nella seconda parte della giornata, fu organizzata una tavola rotonda in cui varie voci intervennero sul tema delle opportunità post-dottorali in Italia e all'estero – un evento non scientifico ma senz'altro rappresentativo dei bisogni delle ricercatrici e dei ricercatori nei complicati anni che seguono il conseguimento del titolo di dottorato. La natura di questo primo evento evidenziò il carattere accessibile e non gerarchico delle iniziative del Forum e il desiderio da parte di giovani studiosi e studiose di trovare momenti e spazi comunitari. Un secondo risultato ottenuto in questi anni fu il nuovo sito web (<http://aisna-graduates.online>), aperto nell'aprile del 2017, che ben presto diventò (e rimane tutt'ora, anche attraverso la gestione dei social media ad esso collegati) un punto di riferimento per l'individuazione di risorse ed opportunità professionali, nonché un ulteriore spazio di condivisione e coesione.⁴

⁴ Il gruppo di lavoro, come riportato nella versione di Ottobre 2017 della pagina "About" del sito, accessibile tramite la Wayback Machine di Archive.org (<<https://web.archive.org/web/20171002021639/http://aisna-graduates.online/about-us/>>), includeva,

L'istituzionalizzazione del Forum, sostenuta dal Direttivo presieduto da Elisabetta Vezzosi (2016-2019), culminò nella presentazione del documento programmatico discusso ed approvato al convegno biennale di Milano nel settembre 2017, attraverso cui il gruppo di lavoro stabilì una sua *governance* (tre coordinatori eletti ogni due anni)⁵ e la struttura con un comitato per ciascuna delle quattro aree chiave del Forum: eventi, social network e sito web, rivista, *recruiting* e *membership*. Ciò implicò il suo riconoscimento formale come organo dell'Associazione, garantendo la continuità di finanziamento da parte della US Mission to Italy, la cui insistenza nell'indirizzare parte dei fondi destinati ad AISNA esclusivamente ad attività organizzate da e per il Forum non va dimenticata. Il riconoscimento formale del Graduate Forum come organo dell'Associazione incentivò anche il consolidamento del gruppo di lavoro, nonché un coordinamento più efficiente tra Direttivo e leadership del Forum. Questi fattori crearono le condizioni per la fondazione di *JAm It! Journal of American Studies in Italy!*, rivista scientifica in open-access e in lingua in inglese. Costituita nel 2019, *JAm It!* (<https://ojs.unito.it/index.php/jamit/index>) è tutt'oggi una manifestazione tangibile degli scambi intellettuali all'interno del Forum e dei suoi eventi, oltre che "palestra" per giovani americanisti e americaniste che possono acquisire esperienza editoriale come *guest editor* o membri della redazione.⁶

Oggi il gruppo coinvolge con le proprie attività circa ottanta persone all'interno dell'Associazione, oltre a giovani studiosi e studiose internazionali che partecipano agli eventi e contribuiscono alla rivista. Le persone coinvolte attivamente sono più di venti, divise nei quattro

oltre agli autori, anche Marta Gara, Marco Antonio Loi, Rosita D'Elia, Alice Balestrino, Alice Casarini, Claudia Fimiani, Matteo Muzio, Leonardo Nolè, Irene Polimante, Edoardo Frezet e Giulia Affede.

⁵ Ai primi tre coordinatori, Costaguta, Morello e Pignagnoli (2017-2019), hanno fatto seguito Marta Gara, Morello, e Marco Petrelli (2019-2021), Serena Mocci, Chiara Patrizi e Valentina Romanzi (2021-2023) e Mattia Arioli, Emanuele Monaco e Rachele Puddu (2023-2025).

⁶ Sulla nascita e *mission* della rivista: Stefano Morello, "On Jamming: 'Study' and the Unstudied." *JAm It! (Journal of American Studies in Italy)* 1 (2019): 4-9. <<https://doi.org/10.13135/2612-5641/3328>>.

sottogruppi di lavoro istituiti nel 2017, che si riuniscono trimestralmente per aggiornamenti sulle rispettive iniziative. A conferma del buon funzionamento della struttura di leadership impostata nel 2017, alla conferenza di Narni del 2023 è stato eletto il quarto comitato direttivo del gruppo. Seguendo una cadenza temporale biennale che ormai è diventata consuetudine, nel settembre del 2024 si svolgerà la quarta conferenza graduate organizzata dal Forum (“‘What is an American?’ Narratives and Counternarratives of an Imagined Nation (1782-2024)”), in concomitanza con l’assemblea annuale AISNA, che fa seguito alle conferenze del 2020 (“Voting Divide: The Changing Boundaries of Citizenship in the United States”) e del 2022 (“Queering America: Gender, Sex, and Recognition in US History, Culture, and Literature”). Giunta al suo decimo numero, *JAm It!* ha dato un contributo decisivo a sviluppare il carattere paritario ed inclusivo del Forum, dedicando fascicoli monografici a temi che spaziano dall’iper-nazionalismo (n. 1) all’ecocritica (n. 3), dai Surveillance studies (n. 5) ai Queer studies (n. 9) e ospitando interventi tanto di giovani studiosi quanto di ricercatori di chiara fama nel campo degli American Studies come Jeffrey C. Stewart, Tom Ferraro, Fred Gardaphé, Ashley Dawson, Peder Anker, Ralph Savarese, Meili Steele e Colin Fisher. Inoltre, le *call for papers*, gli eventi e i bandi pubblicati dal gruppo social AISNA Graduate vengono oggi sistematicamente diffusi anche attraverso un’apposita sezione del sito principale dell’Associazione, circostanza che crea un ulteriore legame di continuità tra le attività dei Graduates e dell’AISNA, e tra il Forum come originariamente concepito e il Forum odierno. Infine, sulla scia di quanto fatto con la *plenary* di Napoli nel 2015 e con un panel di scambio organizzato con i graduate forum polacco, greco e tedesco alla EBAAS Conference a Londra nel 2018, gli attuali coordinatori stanno lavorando per rafforzare il legame del Forum con organizzazioni paritarie europee. Un primo passo in questa direzione è il dialogo con il graduate forum della British Association for American Studies, della Deutsche Gesellschaft für Amerikastudien e dell’Hellenic Association for American Studies circa la possibilità di creare sessioni congiunte a convegni e opportunità di scambio. Un secondo passo, ancora in fase di sviluppo, è la creazione di un EAAS post-graduate network, iniziativa portata avanti dal Forum in collaborazione con altri gruppi europei.

Ragionando a posteriori, è possibile identificare diversi fattori che hanno portato all'attuale consolidamento. L'ingrediente principale alla base del successo del Forum è stato senza dubbio la creazione di una struttura formale – basata tanto su incarichi chiari quanto su una cultura istituzionale improntata allo spirito di collaborazione condiviso – con mandati elettivi. Ciò ha permesso di risolvere il principale problema delle esperienze iniziali relative ai vuoti di leadership causati dal ricambio generazionale e di dare stabilità e prospettive al gruppo. Fondamentale è stato il costante sostegno da parte dei Direttivi AISNA dal 2015 in avanti a incoraggiare le attività del gruppo e altrettanto decisiva è stata la presenza di un rappresentante dei Graduates all'interno del Direttivo per favorire il dialogo tra il Forum e l'Associazione. Questa presenza non solo ha consentito di avere un punto di riferimento stabile all'interno dell' AISNA, ma ha anche portato in primo piano nell'Associazione le sfide e difficoltà incontrate dai giovani nel mondo accademico. In secondo luogo, il sostegno da parte della US Mission to Italy ha dato il via a iniziative a lungo termine ambiziose, altrimenti insostenibili attraverso i soli fondi dell'Associazione.

In conclusione, l'istituzionalizzazione del Forum è stato un tentativo riuscito di formalizzare ed estendere i rapporti costituitisi (e costituenti) all'interno di reti di supporto nazionali e transnazionali venutesi a formare a livello informale nell'ambito dell'americanistica italiana negli anni precedenti. L'internazionalizzazione della disciplina, invocata da Giorgio Mariani nel suo intervento su questo numero, è stata cruciale per dare forma al Forum e alle idee nate al suo interno e non è certo un caso che numerose delle buone pratiche che hanno contribuito al successo del Forum siano state frutto dell'esperienza maturata all'estero dei loro promotori.⁷ In un mercato accademico globale segnato da una retorica di crisi perpetua e dalla normalizzazione del precariato, questi network hanno giocato un ruolo fondamentale nel mantenere una percezione di possibilità tra i giovani americanisti e le giovani americaniste italiane, nonostante le

⁷ Va però ammesso che, per la nostra generazione, tale spinta verso l'esterno è stata inizialmente più una necessità – un modo per ovviare alla carenza di opportunità in Italia – che una vera scelta.

scarse prospettive di lavoro che caratterizzano il percorso di molti studiosi e molte studiose.

È precisamente in questo spazio, che è allo stesso tempo nazionale e internazionale, dentro e fuori all'accademia, professionalizzante e non, che risiede la sfida del futuro del Forum. In questi anni, il gruppo ha tratto la sua linfa vitale dal fatto di essere percepito come una "palestra" dove imparare il mestiere dell'accademico. E questo in effetti è stato: chi ha preso parte al gruppo ha imparato a stare dentro alla redazione di una rivista, seguendo tutte le fasi di pubblicazione di un numero, dalla scrittura della *call* alla sua uscita; a organizzare un evento scientifico, sia esso una conferenza internazionale o una serie di seminari; a gestire un gruppo di lavoro, sviluppare un sito internet e creare contenuti per esso. Parliamo in molti casi di competenze la cui utilità è sancita dalla procedura stessa prevista per ottenere posizioni accademiche in Italia, ovvero l'Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale. Il modo migliore per far sì che il lavoro del Forum continui ad essere valorizzato, allora, è assicurarsi che il valore di queste competenze maturate dalle generazioni che si affacciano sul mercato universitario venga adeguatamente riconosciuto nel momento in cui questa generazione dovrà entrare in accademia. La sconfitta della precarietà, l'abbandono della consorceria, la trasparenza delle pratiche di reclutamento, l'orizzontalità dello sviluppo della produzione scientifica sono le migliori ricette per fare in modo che le pratiche prefigurative e di sperimentazione attuate dal Forum in questi anni possano continuare ad avere lunga vita ed essere il motore di sviluppo dell'americanistica del futuro.

NOTE BIOGRAFICHE

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American Studies in Italy

Historical Legacies, Public Contexts and Scholarly Trends

MAURIZIO VAUDAGNA

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Maurizio Vaudagna, insigne storico degli Stati Uniti scomparso nell'aprile del 2023, ha dedicato un numero significativo di articoli e riflessioni all'emergere e alle vicende della disciplina degli American Studies in Italia e in Europa. Ringraziamo la Fabrizio Serra Editore per l'autorizzazione a riprodurre questa porzione di un suo lungo saggio uscito per Storia della Storiografia 51 (2007, 17-63), che si distingue come lucido contributo alla storiografia americanista in Italia. La sezione riportata di seguito è la 3, alle pagine 36-41. {NdR}

III. The Second Generation: The Critical Eye on the United States

When the student protests of 1968-1969 broke out in Italy in all their intensity, the second generation of Italian Americanists had already reached junior positions in academia and had already been significantly shaped in its scholarly and public profile by the earlier part of the decade. Many of them had followed in the footsteps of prominent members of the earlier generation. Anna Maria Martellone, who became a professor of American

history at the University of Florence, had been influenced by Giorgio Spini. Tiziano Bonazzi, later a professor of American history at the University of Bologna, had been a student of Nicola Matteucci. Valeria Gennaro Lerda's cooperation with Raimondo Luraghi is yet another example of the many cultural associations between established and younger Americanists.

The second generation can be examined from both a public and a scholarly point of view. As far as the former is concerned, in contrast with the earlier generation where a group of centrist public intellectuals had held center stage, these younger Americanists were mainly oriented toward the Left. As with the former generation, Marxist (especially Communist) and Catholic fellow-travelers were few in number and the majority were pluralist radicals or socialists. They shared with the former generation the traditional Italian notion that history writing was an educational and civic duty more than an exercise in an 'objective' experimental method, as preached by the positivistic tradition so prevalent in the United States. However, the way in which the American experience and its relationship with Europe and Italy came to be framed by these scholars was quite different from that of their liberal predecessors. Whereas the latter had looked at American history and culture as a model and an ideal with which to try and mend the historical and contemporary ills of Italy and Europe, the critical eye of new scholars moved the other way around, and the shortcomings of American society, history, and foreign policy came to the fore as much as those of Europe.

It was the public climate in both the United States and Europe/Italy that contributed to the change. The United States that surfaced from the Eisenhower years was no longer the triumphant country of the New Deal and the victorious war for democracy; it showed instead a domestic and foreign image of conformity and stagnation, which the new, young President Kennedy tried to remedy, raising new hopes for the young, critical Italian Americanists. The beginning of *détente* had attenuated the image of Communism as the archenemy that had been so central to the previous generation. The Khrushchev years saw the golden age of the 'convergence thesis', expounded for example by the distinguished Soviet dissident Andrej Sacharov, and this was echoed positively by the European Left. The hope was that the Soviet system would become more liberal and the West more social minded. The Italian communist milieu had

translated this longing into the popular slogan of the 'three men of peace', in reference to Kennedy, Kruscev, and Pope John XXIII. With the onset of the 1960s, the Cold War theatre had moved to the developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America and an increasing awareness of the tragedy of underdevelopment had penetrated the European Left.

In the meantime, Europe had been successfully reconstructed; it also seemed on the verge of being restored as an actor of the first magnitude in the international arena. This was thanks to, among other things, a successful process of European unification, which was primarily economic but was aiming to become political in the near future. Charles De Gaulle's challenge to the bipolar alignment also elicited sympathies in political quarters very distant from his French nationalism and his conservative outlook. Italy was at the peak of its 'economic miracle' with rates of economic growth at more than 5% a year, the fastest in Europe alongside Germany, and lifestyles and mentalities were changing quickly. The onset of the new centre-left governments, based on a new alliance between the predominant Christian Democrats and the progressive, working-class-based Socialist Party, bore the promise of enlarging the popular foundations of government. It also promised to clear up the major ambiguity of a new, triumphant urban-industrial society that was politically led by the doctrine of social Catholicism, which had deep reservations about modernizing lifestyles and mental landscapes and spoke of slowing down the social consequences of economic growth, putting the 'Christian reconquest of society' up against the immorality of modern life, and matching a modern economy with traditional rural values.

American cultural messages were also fundamental in shaping the second generation's frame of mind. In contrast with the 'tranquillized fifties', Michael Harrington had published his denunciation of poverty in America, Betty Friedan had exposed the traps of American femininity, and the civil rights movement in particular had cancelled the image of a cohesive America with liberty and abundance for all, revealing American marginalization and discrimination instead (see Harrington; Friedan).

In American history writing, while the great revolution of the new, radical social history that would change the method and narrative of the American experience was still to come, critical voices had nonetheless come to the fore: William Appleman Williams had redesigned the premises of

American expansionism; Eugene Genovese had reinterpreted slavery; David Montgomery had rediscovered American working-class militancy on the shop floor; and Herbert Gutman had narrated the independent cultural ways of the lower classes. In turn, Barton J. Bernstein and the review *Studies on the Left* were denouncing the fact that American liberalism, which the former generation had considered the central, modernizing ideology of American public life, had really only shown a limited commitment to change and democracy. While it was not yet the paradigm shift of the following decade, the American-history-writing scene had become pluralistic, diverse, and controversial (see Zinn; Williams; Kolko; Weinstein; Gardner; Bernstein).

The second generation of Italian historians of the United States merged a sense of public commitment with new themes of scholarly research. Their progressive frame of mind was no less critical of Europe than it was of the United States, for they basically saw the West in general as being afflicted by a lack of individual liberty, socio-economic democracy, and an equitable foreign policy due to the overwhelming weight of concentrated power. Furthermore, the focus on constitutional and intellectual history, and the history of political thought, that had characterized the core of the former generation lost its preeminence, and the landscape of Italian American-history-writing became more pluralistic. The history-of-political-thought approach was, however, far from disappearing. As a branch of historical studies that is much stronger in Italy than in the United States, and one that is deeply rooted in Italian departments of politics, it has continued unabated to the present day. It responded to conditions that were specific to life in Italy, long a highly politicized and polarized country where scholars have been requested, and have felt the need, to feed arguments for or against contrasting ideas in the public arena. Not only have they been persistently concerned about the stability and solidity of liberal institutions in a country that has long experimented with dictatorship and authoritarianism, but theirs has also been primarily a shared, non-positivistic, non-experimental notion of the historian as civic educator and public mentor. To this day, Tiziano Bonazzi is the Americanist who has best represented the continuity of this approach and has gained a prominent standing with his contemporaries as well as later generations of Americanists. His early focus on issues of church-and-state relations in colonial America soon developed into an all-encompassing approach that

moved freely through time and dealt with such issues as American public values, national identity, and state development, all of which, in time, have shown an increasingly comparative approach.

On the whole, however, works on the history of emigration, foreign policy, and political and comparative history became more frequent. In publications extending from the late sixties to the mid-seventies, the historical focus moved forward in time and the attention formerly given to the colonial and revolutionary periods was now often directed to the twentieth century. Gian Giacomo Migone, professor of American history at the University of Turin, for example, studied Italian-American foreign relations in the interwar years and showed that, in contrast with the established opinion of an early opposition between Fascism and American democracy, the two countries had maintained friendly relations until late into the thirties, and the Roosevelt government had long subscribed to the idea of Mussolini as the 'good fascist' in opposition to Hitler. In the meantime, Migone was elected to the Italian Parliament with the post-communist party; he also worked with unions, wrote for leading newspapers, and was the chair of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Italian Senate for a legislature. Massimo Teodori at the University of Perugia published extensively on the origins and the intellectual foundations of the American New Left, was also elected to Parliament with the Radical Party (a small political formation that focused on issues of civil rights and political liberties), wrote in national newspapers, and, some fifteen years ago, experienced a political conversion and is now a noted columnist for one of Italy's leading neoconservative dailies (see Migone, *Le origini dell'egemonia americana*; Migone, *Gli Stati Uniti e il fascismo*; Migone, "Stati Uniti, Fiat e repressione"; Teodori, *America radicale*; Teodori, *The New Left*; Teodori, *Note*; Teodori, *La fine del mito americano*).

As with the first generation, the second too obeyed the unwritten rule that, considering the small number of its practitioners, American Studies was the cradle for a surprising percentage of public figures. But even those Americanists who were not directly involved in public life had a political frame of mind that led them to embrace new subjects: at the University of Genoa Valeria Gennaro Lerda studied American agrarian populism; in Florence Anna Maria Martellone worked on emigration history (Italian emigration to the United States in particular), a subject

which, in the 1960s and 1970s, still sounded rather populist vis-à-vis the elitist traditions of Italian historiography; and Loretta Valtz Mannucci, an American-born Italian who taught at the University of Milan, studied American radicalism, the New Left, and African-Americans (see Lerda, *Il populismo americano*; Lerda, *Città e campagna*; Martellone, *Una Little Italy*; Martellone, *La questione*; Valtz Mannucci, *I nuovi americani*; Valtz Mannucci, *I negri americani*).

What appeared in the research subjects of the second generation of Italian Americanists was a feature that has persisted to this day, one they also share with most of their European colleagues: the preference for relational issues, connecting the United States and Europe, which has come to be considered a field of history writing that elicits more scholarly interest than others. This is mainly because it makes sources easier to find in Europe and it allows European scholars to feel that they can make original contributions to the larger community of Americanists. In 1976, on the occasion of the bicentennial of the American revolution, a two volume collection of essays on American-Italian relations from the eighteenth century to the present, under the joint editorship of Giorgio Spini and two leading Americanists of the second generation, Gian Giacomo Migone and Massimo Teodori, amounted to a sort of shop display window filled with the subjects and approaches of the second generation, together with a significant selection from the third wave of historical Americanists in the making (see Spini, Migone and Teodori, *Italia e America dal Settecento*; Spini, Migone and Teodori, *Italia e America dalla grande Guerra*).

The second generation also developed in a changing institutional setting: they were the first generation of Italian scholars that were full-time Americanists. Their chairs were no longer in modern history or history of political thought, but in the history of Northern America or the United States. The newer subjects required more of an experimental approach based on notions of evidence and archival research. The founding of AISNA and CISNA represented steps toward the professionalization of historical work, even if primarily directed toward the domestic academic market.

To summarize, the second generation of Italian historians of the United States was now made up of full-time Americanists who shared a public-oriented definition of historical work with their predecessors, even if the

history of foreign policy, emigration, and radicalism caused the use of the experimental method of history writing to be on the rise. Even those who were not personally involved in public life thought it as their primary duty as intellectuals and scholars to contribute ideas and information about the United States, to make the public conversation of the country more mature, as Tiziano Bonazzi has stressed. As a consequence, like the former generation, they continued to think of themselves as Italian scholars, despite having spent significant amounts of time in leading American universities at the time of their Americanist education, and the fact that they maintained personal contacts with American colleagues and visited American campuses fairly often. Still, there was basically no effort to systematize scholarly relations with the United States and make them more comprehensive, because Americans were not the public they were addressing. Even if they probably spoke English better than the former generation and lived in a cultural climate where the importance of English as a *lingua franca* was rapidly growing, they still wrote in Italian and their books and articles were rarely translated into English because, among other reasons, they made little or no effort to that effect. They were Italian experts on the United States speaking to a variety of Italian publics.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

Maurizio Vaudagna (1945-2023) was professor of Contemporary History at the University of East Piedmont, as well as founder and director of the Piero Bairati Center for Transatlantic American Studies. His many publications include *The New Deal and the American Welfare State: Essays from a Transatlantic Perspective (1933-1935)* (Otto 2014); *Shifting Notions of Social Citizenship: The Two Wests* (Columbia UP 2017, with Alice Kessler-Harris); *The American Century in Europe* (Cornell UP 2003, with R. Laurence Moore); *Corporativismo e New Deal* (Rosenberg & Sellier 1981).

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First Editions

Resettling China Policy Game Rules

A Confidential Memorandum from Brent Scowcroft to President Bush Sr.

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ABSTRACT

The document under examination is a confidential memorandum addressed to President George H. W. Bush by his National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, in early April 1990. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square crackdown in June 1989, and the intense emotional response it provoked within the United States, the memorandum sought to alert President Bush to the growing domestic dissatisfaction with what was perceived as the Administration's overly cautious stance toward the Chinese leadership. The memorandum foresaw a range of dynamics and critical challenges that would subsequently unfold in Washington over the course of President Bush's presidency.

KEYWORDS

Sino-American Relations, Most Favorite Nation Status, Human Rights Imperatives, Post-Cold War

The document presented hereafter is a confidential memorandum issued to President George H. W. Bush by his National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, in early April 1990. It is housed within the National Security Council Files at the Bush Presidential Library in College Station, Texas (“Memorandum” n. pag.). Titled “China — Game Plan for MFN,” the memorandum aimed to caution President Bush about the growing Congressional discontent regarding what was perceived as the Administration’s overly restrained approach toward the Chinese leadership following the Tiananmen crackdown in June 1989. Additionally, it sought to advise the President on the most effective strategy to adopt vis-à-vis an increasingly confrontational Congress on various China-related issues. The memorandum anticipated numerous dynamics and critical challenges that would eventually arise in Washington over the course of President Bush’s tenure.¹

Ten months had passed since the massacre of peaceful pro-democracy demonstrators in Beijing’s central square.² Yet the Democrat-led Congress persisted in criticizing the Administration for not providing any compelling means to express its outrage over the events in Beijing. The crackdown had significantly undermined the widespread belief in the United States that China was on an inexorable path toward “Western-style modernization” and that the market-oriented reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s would eventually lead to political and social liberalization.³ Following a six-month debate on the visa extension for Chinese students and scholars in the United States – during which a bipartisan coalition of members in both the House and Senate questioned President Bush’s methods of managing relations with Beijing – the annual renewal of trade privileges under the Most Favored Nation (MFN) status emerged

¹ For a personal account of his presidency, see Bush and Scowcroft.

² For a comprehensive account of the events leading to the crackdown and the nature of the protests in China, refer to Brown. Additionally, see Calhoun. For an overview of Sino-American relations see Dong.

³ On US-China special relations see Wang.

as the most effective domestic platform to challenge the Administration's approach to China.⁴

The memorandum exemplifies the multifaceted challenges faced by the Bush Administration in its effort to safeguard relations with the PRC despite the June 1989 crackdown. To integrate Beijing into the upcoming post-Cold War global order led by Washington, President Bush was tasked with balancing a foreign policy driven by human rights imperatives on one side and economic interests and growing interdependencies on the other.⁵ The document conveys the many difficulties and anxieties encountered by the Administration in retaining full control of Washington's China policy. It also underscores the realization that a new paradigm of conducting foreign policy was emerging. At least three dimensions are worthy of closer examination.

Firstly, the foreign policy making involving relations with Beijing appeared to have ultimately lost its insulation from domestic policy-related issues. For nearly two decades following the diplomatic opening initiated under the Nixon Administration, the executive branch had wielded significant influence in shaping China policy, favoring personal diplomacy and secrecy.⁶ However, the crackdown in Beijing, prominently broadcasted live on television, disrupted Washington's foreign policy-making dynamics. This event, along with the emotional wave it generated in the United States, fueled a triangular policymaking dynamic where Congress and an increasing number of third-party stakeholders no longer accepted being marginalized. Although Capitol Hill had reasserted its

⁴ By granting Most Favored Nation (MFN) status to China, Washington had significantly lowered trade tariffs and barriers on a broad array of strategic products, including grain, textiles, and various manufactured goods. This status ensured that China received non-discriminatory trade privileges like those extended to the majority of US trading partners, thereby promoting increased bilateral trade and economic cooperation. See Mann, "Bush Rejects."

⁵ For an insightful examination of how the Bush Sr. Administration navigated one of the most transformative periods in contemporary history, refer to Engel.

⁶ For an in-depth analysis of the rapprochement with China, see MacMillan.

prerogatives on foreign policy since the mid-1970s, issues related to China had largely remained absent from the congressional agenda.⁷

Since 1980, when Beijing was first granted MFN trade status, the annual renewal had not been a prominent issue in Washington. The establishment of trade relations between the two countries was formalized under the provisions of the 1974 Trade Act.⁸ This legislation required the President to make an annual determination by early June regarding the extension of MFN status to China, significantly reducing trade tariffs and barriers between the two nations. This decision was then subject to confirmation, or rejection, by Congress, which had a sixty-day window to vote. Specifically, both the White House and Capitol Hill were called upon to decide whether to waive the amendment named after Senator Henry Jackson (D-WA) and Representative Charles Vanik (D-OH). This provision pertained to non-market states and aimed to safeguard freedom of emigration. It stipulated that MFN status could be granted to a Communist country only if certain conditions were met, including a valid bilateral trade agreement negotiated with the United States and the assurance of freedom of emigration to its citizens. Initially conceived as a legislative tool to promote human rights within an anti-Soviet framework as well as to support the Jewish community in the USSR and to attack Kissinger's *détente*, the Jackson-Vanik amendment gradually evolved into a defining aspect of the late Cold War.⁹

A couple of months before the final deliberation, the confidential memorandum anticipated that a large number of Congress members would eventually oppose a straightforward renewal of trade privileges and underscored the ongoing struggle with Congress. It foresaw that

⁷ For insights into the role of Congress in foreign policy-related issues, see Johnson. Regarding China, Congressional involvement in foreign policy-making has been limited with some notable exceptions. For a detailed analysis, refer to Sutter.

⁸ For a contemporary history of US-China trade relations see Allen. For an analysis of the origins of US-China trade relations in the 1970s, detailing the involvement of US entrepreneurs and corporations in accessing China's market and labor resources, and its intersection with China's economic restructuring, consult Ingleson.

⁹ For a study on the influence of domestic dynamics in US foreign policy in the specific case of the Jackson-Vanik amendment passage see Stern.

the upcoming months would be exceptionally challenging. “An ugly confrontation with Congress and Beijing awaits us over waiver of Jackson-Vanik for China,” warned the National Security Advisor (“Memorandum” 1). Brent Scowcroft advised that the Administration should promptly assert control over an increasingly combative Congress and adopt a strategic approach “to move from defense to offense domestically on China issues while maximizing incentives for China to take steps in the right direction” (1). Reports from Capitol Hill staffers suggested that Congress members were “eager to humiliate our China policy,” indicating a formidable challenge on the horizon.

These rumors were confirmed in a private letter addressed to the President by Senator Bob Dole (R-KS), a figure historically opposed to close ties with Beijing and one of Capitol Hill’s staunchest supporters of relations with Taiwan since the 1970s.¹⁰ “On the MFN issue, they smell blood [and] frankly, as things now stand, their sense of smell is probably pretty good,” cautioned Dole (“Letter to George Bush” 1). According to the Senator from Kansas, the Democrats were willing to exploit the MFN renewal debate to denounce the inconsistency and amorality of the China policy put forth by the Administration since June 1989. In his correspondence, Senator Dole signaled the bipartisan nature of the contention as he cautioned that even among Republicans supporting the Administration’s China policy, there was concern that the President’s position might not sufficiently align with the values and ideals upheld by Washington. According to Dole, Bush should “somehow eliminate the impression that does exist in some circles that the Administration cares more about China’s strategic importance than its treatment of its own citizens.” He urged the President to issue a statement affirming “in a convincing way” Washington’s opposition to the ongoing violation of human rights in China. Additionally, Dole called for a “full court” lobbying effort, involving the business community, to garner support from Republican senators and reinforce party loyalty (1).

Secondly, due to its anti-Soviet counterbalance strategic relevance in Asia, the PRC had not been a focal point of the US-led human rights

¹⁰ For a comprehensive history of US-Taiwan relations and the role of the “Taiwan Lobby” in Congress see Bernkopf Tucker.

campaign that had targeted Communist countries in the late Cold War.¹¹ With very few exceptions, Beijing had avoided direct admonition for its failure to adhere to internationally recognized human rights standards. However, in the wake of the crackdown, human rights quickly turned into the main pillar of the American domestic debate on China and, according to the NSC, the President should not be left behind on this issue, at least in its rhetorical facets. “We need to move early to signal to China and to the American public your strong commitment to human rights in China before human rights activists and political opponents seize the lead,” suggested Scowcroft in his confidential memorandum, signaling the multiplication of actors engaged in the American public debate on China and the inescapable moral dimension surrounding the policy-making process. “We will want to be seen as actively interested in the human rights of the Chinese people and working against irresponsible Chinese behavior abroad,” urged the National Security Advisor (“Memorandum” 2). Following the crackdown, what Scowcroft labeled the “China-watching community in the U.S.” had grown exponentially, becoming increasingly vocal on the precarious human rights situation in the country. This community, along with members of Congress displeased with Bush’s arguments on China, included former US officials, NGOs, labor unions, consumers organizations, Chinese students and dissidents, and American scholars, among others. Their sentiment resonated deeply within the American public, garnering widespread attention and concern. The events of June 1989 had compacted a multifaceted group that was now “hurt, angry, and vengeful” (3). Dissatisfied with the President’s willingness to maintain the status quo with China, this community would play a significant role in combing any attempt to safeguarding open dialogue with the Chinese leadership.

Polls confirmed the prevailing negative perception of China among Americans. According to Gallup polling data, the percentage of individuals expressing positive views of Beijing experienced a notable decline from 72 percent in February/March 1989 to 31 percent by August of the

¹¹ On the late Cold War US-led human rights crusade see, among others, Keys. For a study on how US foreign policy became intertwined with human rights imperatives see Snyder.

same year (n. pag.). This trend, characterized by a marginal deviation in favorability, persisted throughout the tenure of George H. W. Bush in the White House. These figures were particularly telling when juxtaposed with Americans' perceptions of the Soviet Union. In 1990, 64 percent expressed a favorable opinion of Moscow, whereas only 39 percent viewed Beijing positively (see Taifa). Concurrently, other polls also indicated a similar negative trajectory. According to ABC/Washington Post surveys, Americans' favorability toward China decreased from 80 percent in the spring of 1989 to 39 percent one year later.¹²

The Cold War had not officially ended, but developments in Eastern Europe, where countries were increasingly embarking on a political transition, had redirected attention towards China's future. Members of Congress and the public questioned why the same Administration, which had endorsed the democratic movements sweeping through the soon-to-be former Soviet Union, appeared hesitant to apply similar principles to China. Mass demonstrations from Poland to Hungary, from East Germany to Czechoslovakia, and culminating in the violent overthrow of Romania's dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, had effectively dismantled Soviet-aligned regimes in Eastern Europe. These events eventually resulted in the establishment of democratically elected governments to replace former socialist regimes, demonstrating that assertive US policies had yielded positive outcomes. This sharply contrasted with the Administration's cautious approach to China.¹³

The crackdown in Beijing not only disrupted the legislative inertia of Congress but also prompted a renewed emphasis on China's adherence to human rights practices. By the spring of 1990, the Administration acknowledged that the renewal China's MFN commercial status would face more challenges if compared to the same legislative process in the previous decade. The President was scheduled to submit his recommendation on the extension of trade benefits to Congress by the beginning of June,

¹² The ABC/Washington Post polls, as well as those conducted by CBS/New York Times are cited in Pomoroy Waller and Ide.

¹³ On the democratization wave sweeping across Eastern Europe see Csaplár-Degovics et al.

coincidentally overlapping with the anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre. Scowcroft warned that:

Human rights activists have energy to spare following the developments in the Soviet Union and East Europe. China has rapidly become the test case for many as to how this Administration stands on human rights. They particularly like China because it is easy to make the Administration look bad. Naturally, adversaries on the Hill will exploit this to the extent their constituents permit. (“Memorandum” 4)

With the progressive disappearance of Washington’s Cold War existential threat, China’s geopolitical strategical relevance had been downsized and human rights double standards would no longer be accepted, as Congress members and lobby groups had switched their focus from Moscow to Beijing.¹⁴

Thirdly, the memorandum confirmed that the end of the Cold War had ushered in a reduced tolerance for diplomatic secrecy, a style of conducting foreign policy that the American public had been accustomed to and had generally accepted. After all, the rapprochement with China in the early 1970s, initially embraced with enthusiasm in the United States, had been the outcome of secret diplomacy and interpersonal maneuvering conducted away from public scrutiny. However, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown, this lenience gradually eroded.

The Administration was highly criticized for the dispatch of secret emissaries to China one month after the massacre, a move perceived as contradictory to the formal suspension of high-level contacts between American and Chinese officials, enacted in response to the crackdown. The news had been leaked by CNN in December 1989, prompting Capitol Hill to challenge President Bush’s prerogative in handling relations with China (see Mann, *About Face*). Therefore, the delegitimization of traditional diplomatic channels coupled with contestation of seniority mechanisms

¹⁴ See the hyper critical op-ed authored by the former US Ambassador to the People’s Republic of China, Winston Lord, “Misguided Mission.”

subjected foreign policy decisions to an unprecedented bargain among a plurality of stakeholders. In the words of historian and presidential biographer Herbert Parmet, Bush “aimed toward the White House, only to find, by the time he arrived at this goal, that presidential power was not what it had once been” (9).

In light of these evolving dynamics in Washington, Brent Scowcroft, in his memorandum, proposed that President Bush adopt a nuanced approach, employing a dual rhetorical strategy. “As outrage occur during the spring anniversary season in China, we should modestly escalate our rhetoric of condemnation. This will run against instinct, but even the Chinese will understand (though not agree) if they see the rhetoric protecting the policy,” suggested the National Security Advisor (“Memorandum” 4). The American public should be assured that human rights concerns were central to the Administration’s China policy. Simultaneously, the Chinese leadership should be reassured that, to prevent Congress from excessively interfering in Beijing’s internal affairs, President Bush needed to rhetorically express dissatisfaction with the CCP leadership’s actions while threatening the MFN revocation. “The Chinese will need to be told quietly that under present circumstances, you cannot recommend that MFN be retained” (4). After all, Scowcroft lamented that the Chinese had offered very little sign of redemption that the White House could use to justify its wait-and-see approach on the MFN deliberation. “Chinese steps so far have been small and politically useless. Beijing may be willing to do more; we need to encourage much more,” wrote the National Security Advisor in the memorandum.

Faced with an unprecedented domestic challenging environment, by the beginning of 1990, President Bush had three possible paths ahead of him. First, he could work towards the suspension of MFN status for China – or at least threaten such a move – to gain more credibility on the human rights front and restore moral authority in his dealings with China before the American people. Second, set up a more conciliatory approach with Congress and let the Hill decide whether to sustain the MFN renewal, without opposing the eventuality of negative feedback. Third, as his National Security Advisor warned, “prepare for another fight over [his] right to conduct foreign policy by signaling an intention to veto.” By opting

for this third approach, the President should aim to secure the support of the American business sector, which had a growing stake in China's markets, factories, and workforce. Simultaneously, he should also seek to align a significant segment of the Chinese American community, which had commercial interests with the PRC, with his administration's policies. The President's decision to pursue the third path initiated a prolonged, convoluted, and problematic dialogue with Capitol Hill and third-party groups regarding Washington's approach to Beijing, a negotiation that continues to persist to the present day.¹⁵

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

Stefano Chessa Altieri is a PhD candidate in Global History at the Scuola Superiore Meridionale (Italy) and Sciences Po (France). His doctoral research investigates the complexities of post-Cold War US foreign policy towards China in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square crackdown in June 1989, focusing on the challenging dilemma faced by policymakers as they sought to balance economic integration with the promotion of human rights. His work builds on his MSc thesis, which critically reassessed the historiographical debate surrounding the perceived inconsistency between Jimmy Carter's human rights rhetoric and the formal establishment of diplomatic relations with China in 1979. Stefano graduated with distinction from LSE. At Sciences Po, Stefano has served as a teaching assistant for courses on global history and transatlantic relations and has co-convened the annual LSE-Sciences Po Seminar in International History. He has also been awarded the Columbia University Alliance Visiting Program and the Yale Fox Fellowship.

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Memorandum to George Bush, April 2, 1990

China – Game Plan for MFN

BRENT SCOWCROFT

Transcript of “Memorandum, Brent Scowcroft to George Bush.”

April 2, 1990, OA/ID CF00312-005, National Security Council: Karl Jackson Files, China – General 1990, Bush Presidential Records, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, College Station, Texas.

INFORMATION

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: BRENT SCOWCROFT

SUBJECT: China – Game Plan for MFN

An ugly confrontation with Congress and Beijing awaits us over waiver of Jackson-Vanik for China. We need to move early to signal to China and to the American public your strong commitment to human rights in China before human rights activists and political opponents seize the lead. This

is an opportunity for us to move from defense to offense domestically on China issues, while maximizing incentives for China to take steps in the right direction.

The predicament. Draft legislation in both houses – now stalled – may give the Congress the means for a fast-track joint resolution of disapproval by the time the China waiver goes forward. To continue MFN, the waiver must be sent to the Hill by June 3, the anniversary of Tiananmen.

Good estimates of how the Congress will vote are not yet available; it is too early for them to focus on it. Most staffers say a majority in both houses will be eager to humiliate our China policy, but they probably lack the two-thirds necessary to override a veto of a joint resolution of disapproval. They hope to have it both ways: humiliation of the policy and the trade benefits of MFN with China.

The best way to proceed is to take the offensive vs. both the Chinese and Congress, by taking a position that, under present circumstances, you cannot recommend extending MFN for China. This will anger the Chinese, but force them to face the issue of better relations squarely. It will leave defense of MFN to Congress and the business community.

The Chinese. There are early signs that the Chinese want to help prevent loss of MFN. Chinese steps so far have been small (Peace Corps and Fulbright implementation) and politically useless. Beijing may be willing to do more; we need to encourage *much* more.

Internal leadership tensions and common fear of the masses will lead to compromise efforts to placate you. Beijing will undoubtedly try to delay any actions they may “promise” to take. For example, one PRC Embassy official has suggested that you recommend continuing MFN just before the due date of June 3. The argument goes that China will carry out what we ask for after the June 3-4 Tiananmen anniversary, and before Congress votes. This may be Beijing’s intention, and it may also be a trick. The risk of another battle royal with Congress is too great to follow this approach.

China must face the choice at some point. Either accommodate the people and world opinion and risk downfall, or retreat into greater isolation. The latter tendency is already strong, and doctrinaire leaders will welcome a rupture with the U.S., perhaps believing they can get what little they think they need from the rest of the world.

A key point on which public debate here over MFN will turn is whether to retaliate and squeeze China for its human rights offenses and bad international behavior or work to strengthen the forces of economic growth and reform. Over the next two months, anniversaries and dissident tactics will continue to have the regime seized with fright and ruthlessly determined to crush dissent. Therefore, it will be important not to get ourselves into defending China's record or otherwise get put on the defensive over what happens in China. In fact, we will want to be seen as actively interested in the human rights of the Chinese people and working against irresponsible Chinese behavior abroad.

Why MFN for China? The primary case to make for MFN for China is *economic*. Two-way trade last year was \$17.8 billion, of which U.S. exports were \$5.8 billion. If MFN is lost, China will retaliate against every American exporter who has competition on the world market. (The U.S. is the only country with MFN legislation like Jackson-Vanik.) Foreign Minister Qian has also threatened major "retrogression," probably meaning at least downgrading relations to the charge level. (Of course, the flip side of the trade figures is that loss of MFN should remove the \$7-8 billion trade deficit from the U.S. account.)

CIA calculates that loss of MFN would cost China significantly more than \$2.5 billion in export earnings immediately, and the Chinese would seek to impose a similar cost on U.S. exporters. Beijing has increasingly centralized trade authority since Tiananmen, so it has the tools. Loss of MFN would probably strengthen the voice of hardliners who seek further recentralization. This could make eventual restoration of reforms and opening to the outside world all the more difficult.

Joint ventures in China, such as Beijing Jeep, will have exorbitant duties imposed on equipment needed to operate the ventures; they will fail. Our competitors in trade and investment will be the immediate beneficiaries.

Moreover, the extremity of the consequences of withdrawal of MFN will tempt the G-7 to break ranks on other issues such as the current limits on World Bank lending to China. Our human rights legislation will not permit us to vote for the loans, but with any G-7 country voting for World Bank lending, the loans may go through. If they do, Congressman Obey has threatened to withhold IDA replenishment, which in turn will lower the U.S. voting share below the current 15.5% and lead to loss of a U.S. veto on certain matters concerning the Bank.

A second reason for MFN is *Hong Kong*. Loss of MFN would threaten to rupture many of the economic links through the colony. Unemployment will climb dangerously in South China, and substantially in Hong Kong, where \$5.5 billion of Chinese goods are reexported. U.S. investors in Hong Kong are already seeking legislative help to restore confidence among their Hong Kong white-collar employees; loss of MFN will wipe out any such effort.

Concerns about the future of Hong Kong should help to sustain China's MFN. Congressmen Solarz and Porter, for example, take a strong interest in both human rights in China and Hong Kong's future. Importers in Solarz's district have complained when he has threatened MFN.

The third argument is *human rights and the well-being of the people of China*. Since you first articulated your sanctions against China, you have insisted on trying not to hurt ordinary Chinese people, on keeping a line out to those with an interest in opening and reform. You will be questioned on how to reconcile your desire to avoiding hurting the Chinese people with not supporting MFN. One answer is to throw back the question by asking how can you help the people of China when your efforts on behalf of the relationship are taken by Beijing as endorsement of its current behavior.

The opponents of MFN. The China-watching community in the U.S. has been traumatized by the repression since Tiananmen. They are hurt, angry and vengeful as a group. Like many ordinary Americans and Chinese students here, they believe the collapse of the Chinese regime is just a shove away, a la East Europe. Frankly, many are also outraged by their perception of the two trips to China last year and the Pelosi veto. They believe, paradoxically, that the Administration should be made to squirm over MFN, yet you should not be so “irresponsible” as to let a resolution of disapproval stand. There are a few exceptions, especially in Washington and among those with policy experience. (The Chinese-American community is also traumatized, but not for the first time, and so is much more inclined to favor continued MFN. Many Chinese-Americans, of course, also have business interests in China, but their human rights interests are no less genuine.)

Human rights activists have energy to spare following the developments in the Soviet Union and East Europe. China has rapidly become the test case for many as to how this Administration stands on human rights. They particularly like China because it is easy to make the Administration look bad. Naturally, adversaries on the Hill will exploit this to the extent their constituents permit.

What to do? First, the Chinese will need to be told quietly that under present circumstances, you cannot recommend that MFN be retained. We should not go public with this for a week, as Beijing will be somewhat more responsive if it is not publicly backed into a corner at the outset.

We also need to get you on record as much as possible favoring advancement of the human rights of the Chinese people. A speech on Asia which touches on the subject would help. China also needs to hear you speak firmly on proliferation of missiles.

As outrages occur during the spring anniversary season in China, we should modestly escalate our rhetoric of condemnation. This will run against instinct, but even the Chinese will understand (though not agree) if they see the rhetoric protecting the policy.

If Congressional support for MFN manifests itself, when the waiver is sent to the Hill, its text will require close attention to the human rights potential of continued MFN and the costs of its loss. Critics will point to new restrictions on study abroad imposed since the Pelosi veto to embarrass you and to block MFN, on the narrow Jackson-Vanik grounds of restrictions on emigration. There is potentially some flexibility on this point – based on compulsory national service precedents – but not much, and the Chinese should be pressed to change the regulations.

More importantly, we need to jolt allies of the MFN in the business community to carry on a campaign in the Congress. So far, business people appear reluctant to take up China with their senior management, let alone with Congress, but for some companies the numbers in the China trade are very large.

Options. In the end, your options boil down to the following:

- Threaten to let MFN lapse. You could blame China for the chill in relations. China will be reluctant to respond as fully as is necessary, but pressure will build for China to recognize the realities of the situation. You will be criticized for “irresponsibility” by the business community and some foreign policy observers and modestly praised for yielding to the human rights activists, but you have a chance at generating support for your management of China policy.
- Send the MFN waiver, but not fight for it. Say it is up to Congress to decide. This may amount to turning China policy over to the legislative branch, if we are not successful beforehand in getting the Hill to decide to support MFN.
- Prepare for another fight over your right to conduct foreign policy by signaling an intention to veto. Given the way China has reneged on the scorecard of positive steps since the Pelosi veto fight, we will need maximum help from the business community, which of course will be reluctant to be seen publicly trying to stay in China.

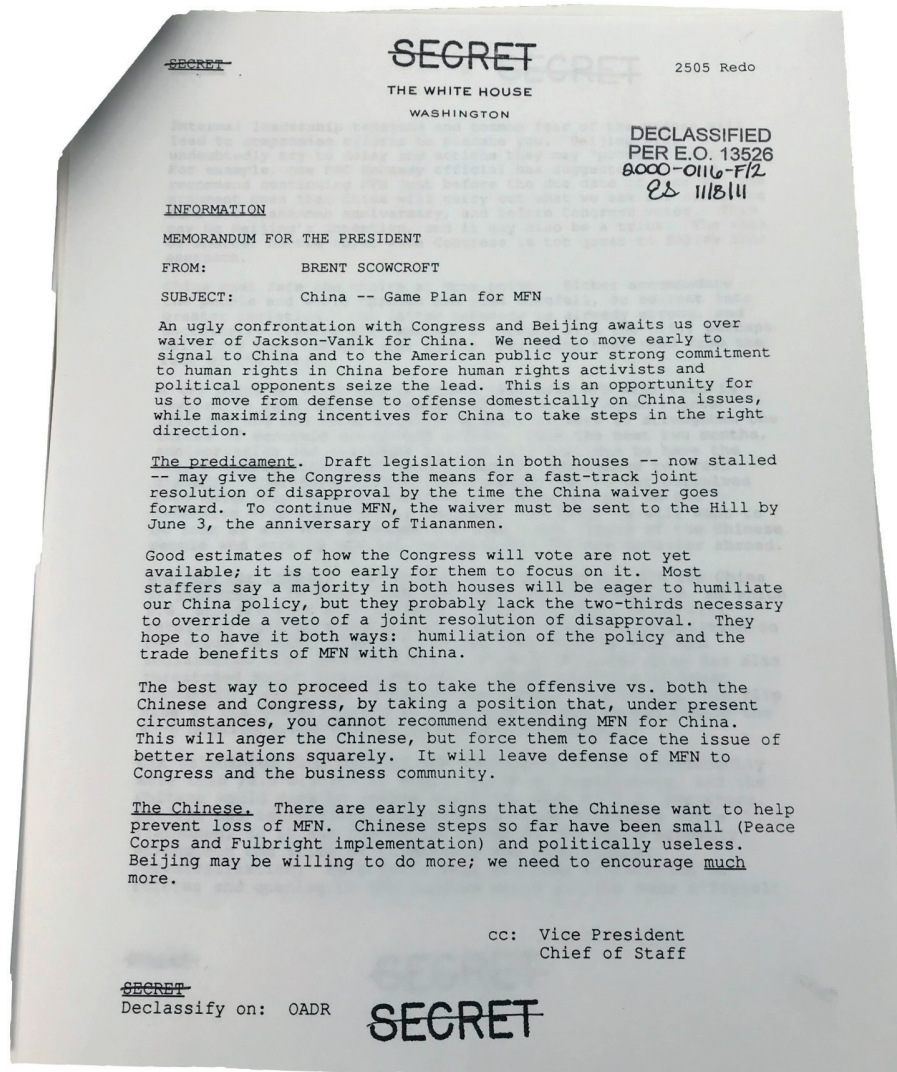
For the time being, we are publicly characterizing you as not having addressed the issue yet. In talks with trade groups, my staff has found

that business people become energized when they hear that your veto of a resolution of disapproval is not guaranteed.

CC. Vice President
Chief of Staff

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Transcript and Photograph courtesy of the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library & Museum.



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