



The Fractured

States of America

**Guest Editors:
Valentina Romanzi and
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NO. 6 May 2022
THE FRACTURED STATES OF AMERICA

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PUBLISHED BY

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO | *Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature
Straniere e Culture Moderne*
Via Verdi, 8 – 10124 Torino

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THE FRACTURED STATES OF AMERICA

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“ One of America’s two major political parties is, at its core, not just corrupt, not just racist, not just misogynist, not just opposed to truth or science or history. They are, their leaders are, actively enemies of the U.S., our system and what we stand for,” wrote David Rothkopf on Twitter on February 23, 2022, the first day Russia invaded Ukraine. A renowned political scientist who held several positions under the Clinton administration, Rothkopf has published extensively on the internal divisions of the US. For instance, in his 2012 essay “The Enemy Within” he purported that America was on the permanent lookout for an enemy. Historically, he claimed, US identity had been (and keeps being) defined and redefined by its interaction with its ‘villainous’ enemies: “America seems to have a visceral need for them.” From this perspective, the ‘Indians’ that lurked at the Frontier in the 18th and 19th centuries morphed into the Japanese and the Nazis during World War II, retrieving the animosity against the Germans that had typified the first global conflict. These were later replaced by the ‘Commies’ during the Cold War and, most recently, by the trope of the ‘Arab terrorist.’ Yet, despite its readiness to intervene on the international military stage and to single out an (alleged) external enemy that could function as its archetypal rival, the US have long been fractured by visceral internal fights often overshadowed by outer antagonists. Indeed, as Rothkopf belligerently writes, “By far, the greatest threats to the United States right now are internal ones [...]. They don’t come from terrorists. They come from political obstructionists and know-nothings who are blocking needed economic and political reforms” (2012).

Over the past decade, as the debate moved from the academic to the public sphere, Rothkopf's attention to "the enemy within" has sharpened. The comment opening our introduction, shared by Rothkopf in the form of a tweet that received more than 20,000 likes, signals the pervasiveness of a rhetoric of fragmentation and division in public discourse. It is part of a longer thread that publicly condemned the pro-Putin tirades by some GOP members and supporters (Tucker Carlson's infamous defence of Vladimir Putin by Fox News anchor-man comes to mind [Bella 2022]).¹ However, the debate on the "fractured States of America" long predates the current conversation on the American position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since the early days of the nation, the portrayal of the country as divided—along racial, political, or class lines, among others—has been one of the fixtures of a public discourse that focused on the complexity and heterogeneity of the American identity. Indeed, the quest to delimit and describe its true essence predates the founding of the nation, as the British colonies progressively cut ties with their motherland. Yet, scholars traditionally situate the first explicit investigation into what constitutes an American citizen in J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). The third of the titular letters, aptly named "What is an American," offers a list of features that de Crèvecoeur considered quintessential to Americanness: industry, freedom, individualism, equality, assimilation. All these elements converged in what later became known as American exceptionalism, a doctrine that undergirded (and, to an extent, still undergirds) most, if not all, of US foreign policy.

De Crevecoeur's essay also introduced the concept of the 'melting pot' to describe the yearned-for homogeneity of a nation aspiring to *merge* the different cultures informing it, rather than to *preserve* their differences. The United States has long strived to present a solid front against the rest of the world, returning time and

¹ In the last few weeks, their support for the Russian president has at last in part abated (Rove 2022; Marcotte 2022) but the clash between those in the GOP who believe the Russian aggression must be condemned—now the majority—and those who purport it needs to be justified continues. As of April 7, 2022, *The New York Times* reports that there is "still a meaningful faction of Republican elites who feel an affinity for the Russian president" (Leonhardt 2022).

time again to the defining features of its citizens, and to what sets them apart from their European counterparts. Yet, over the past few decades, it has become evident that internal divisions and differences are increasing rather than decreasing. While the national narrative of the United States insists on advocating the exceptionality of its people, it is also continuously confronted by the hard truth of their lived experiences (Sieber 2005; Hodgson 2009; Grandin 2019; Spragg 2019).

Far from being a side note on the history of the United States, strong internal fractures have typified most of its existence. The nation developed and expanded through the gradual elimination of Native American communities from the continent, inspiring countless western narratives (think, for instance, of *The Leatherstocking Tales* by James Fenimore Cooper [1823-1841], or the “spaghetti westerns” of the 60s). Simultaneously, it framed the white conquerors as civilized men graced with a divine right to cleanse the land (Carter 2014; Pearce 1988), causing a visceral fracture between Native Americans and white Americans that has not yet healed. In the 19th century, the Civil War between Confederates and Unionists represented the most evident domestic conflict, highlighting the peril of an enemy within national borders (Levine 2013). Such divisions sprang from diverging opinions on the legitimacy of preserving the institution of slavery, which featured several dimensions—economic, social, racial. These disagreements continued long past the official end of the conflict. At the end of Reconstruction, as the Unionist army left the southern territories it had occupied to ensure the abolishment of slavery, former Confederate states—first of all Mississippi—started promulgating Jim Crow laws, highlighting the racial element of the conflict (Wells 2011; Levine 2013). As W. E. B. Du Bois famously noted, in the aftermath of the Civil War, “The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery” (Du Bois 1964, 30).

Throughout the 19th and 21st centuries, the danger and perception of an internal enemy spread not only along racial lines but also along lines of class, gender, religion, politics, and more. All these strands of different internal enemies shared a common bottom line: these domestic Others disrupting the US on its own soil had to be evened out for the sake of a uniform—rather than united—nation.

In terms of racial fractures, one of the most notable examples remains the conflict between the African American community and the government security agencies, especially the FBI, which, throughout the 20th century, tried to dismantle those radical associations promoting Black rights, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), but also Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association in the 1930s, or the Black Panther Party in the 1970s (Maxwell 2016). Recently, these dynamics have surfaced again, targeting Black Lives Matter activists, who are viewed as potential national security threats (Farmer 2017).

Federal policing had more than one target throughout the 20th century. In the 1950s, fear of the expansion of communism gave rise to the repressive practice known as McCarthyism, which aimed at uncovering the 'red plot' within the nation. This led to the spread—in politics and public opinion—of the fear of an 'outside' infiltration from the Soviet Union that would lead to the collapse of American values and freedom from within. The witch hunt perpetrated by the federal administration—and by zealous citizens keen on denouncing each other—caused the dismantling of several leftist political organizations and harsh personal and professional consequences for those believed to be communists (Doherty 2005; Morgan 2020). Similarly, groups working for women's rights in the 1970s were infiltrated by the federal authorities to disrupt their operations and cause their implosion (Enke 2003).

As of today, tears in the social fabric of the United States remain visible, if not more exacerbated than in the past. Especially after 9/11, Muslim Americans—identified as a racial minority even though no one racial group constitutes more than 30% of the Muslim population (Ramadan 2021)—have suffered increasing discrimination, with repercussions to their personal and professional lives (Carosso 2021). First- and second-generation immigrants are similarly ostracized. Women's rights, the achievements of decades of protests, are on the line as several states pass legislation that limits access to abortion (Kitchener, Schaul, Santamarina 2022), and the class divide is increasingly sharper, as richness is accumulated by the so-called 1% (Schaeffer 2020) referenced by the "we are the 99%" slogan of the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement.

A kind of internal splintering is especially noticeable in the polarization of contemporary political and public discourse, namely in the way it has fractured the country into factions, causing bitter divisions across identity lines. Long overdue civil, political, and social rights battles have radicalized most public debates, from racial issues connected to voting rights and disenfranchisement (e.g., the long fight to ensure voting rights for African Americans, from the birth of the NAACP at the beginning of the twentieth century to the recent Fair Fight Action movement), to questions of representation and cultural appropriation (e.g., the debate surrounding Jeanine Cummins's 2018 novel *American Dirt*, Scarlett Johansson's casting as a Japanese character in the 2017 movie *Ghost in the Shell*, or the controversial use of fashion and hairstyles belonging to different cultures, as in the case of Katy Perry's 2013 American Music Awards performance or Justin Bieber's latest hairdo).

After the January 6, 2021 attacks on the Capitol prompted by a toxic combination of conspiracy theories and political fanaticism, an especially American tradition of internal violence has taken center stage. The exposure of its undeniable pervasiveness has led to a reckoning that the enemy oftentimes lies within the nation itself, as President Biden himself remarked in his Inaugural Address: "We must end this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural versus urban, conservative versus liberal" (Biden 2021). This issue of *JAm It!* features contributions that address how different iterations of real and/or symbolic internal enemies have been generated and represented, covering issues of race, gender and class. The authors, with their contributions, highlight social divides across time and space, from the 18th to the 21st century. Their specific case studies exemplify the fractures that have permeated American society from its inception.

Anna Ferrari opens this issue with an essay that tracks the use of Fifties and Eighties imagery in popular culture and their role in shaping the definition of Americanness, highlighting the contrast between the idealized portrait of US society and its underlying tensions. Using Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future* (1985), Rob Reiner's *Stand by Me* (1986) and David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) as examples of nostalgic representations of the Fifties, the author underlines how these directors

offered an either polished or haunted version of an idealized Fifties suburban area that has, in turn, been retrieved in more recent productions. According to Ferrari, works like *Stranger Things* (2016–) offer an equally dream-like portrait of 1980s America and, simultaneously, introduce a second revival of the Fifties imagery. In doing so, they sketch both an idealised depiction of and a critical take on these two decades.

Liliana Santos also takes into consideration contemporary works of fiction, but she compares several stories of Latinx (im)migration to the United States: Yuyi Morales's picture book *Dreamers*, Elisa Amado's graphic novel *Manuelito*, Margarita Engle's poetry memoir *Enchanted Air*, and Jacqueline Woodson's young adult novel *Harbor Me* lie at the core of her discussion. In analyzing the notable impact of racial discrimination on immigrant children and families, Santos uses Critical Race Theory, Latino-critical and Critical Multicultural Analysis as a theoretical framework in order to juxtapose the expectations of Latinx (im)migrant characters and the reality they encounter in the US as depicted in children and young/adult literature.

Matthew Harrington takes us back to the 19th century to explore racial and social fractures, spotlighting the concept of masculine degeneration in the 'Indian Hater' character so typical of frontier fiction. In his critical reading of James Hall's *The Pioneer* and Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods*, Harrington shows how the authors expose a tension between negative individualism and lack or distortion of civic duty. The Indian Hater narratives of Hall and Bird express anxiety about men turned into the very 'savage' they are hunting because of their desire for vengeance and violence, a "degeneration" that will bar them from returning to civil society. Hall and Bird seem to detect the irony of such degeneration and confront readers with the self-destructive nature of uncontained Indian Hating. In doing so, Harrington claims, these narratives do more than present the Indian Hater as a self-sacrificial hero. Rather, they closely diagnose how a man lost in his passions can become an Other within his very society when lacking civic constraints.

Christina Cavener describes the historical contribution of women to the definition of an exclusively white American citizenship in the 18th and 19th centuries. Contributing to slavery institutions, at times even as slaveholders, white women

reinforced white supremacy by distancing themselves from Black women, whom they considered wild, masculine and promiscuous. Even after the abolition of slavery, white women participated in southern segregation and used their whiteness and femininity to insist on a 'Whites Only' citizenship during their struggle for suffrage. Cavener remarks how even Italian and Irish migrant women adopted nationalism and anti-Black sentiments to be assimilated into the American conception of white citizenship. Her article, spanning across the whole history of the nation, contributes to the necessary historical reconsideration of white women's role in the racial definition of American citizenship.

Amílcar A. Barreto and Edward F. Kammerer also explore the notion of whiteness, focusing on its relationship with sexual orientation. While investigating how mainstream media has been redefining non-heterosexual people as partial insiders of American civil society, they highlight that this process is not neutral: since most mass media target a specific American audience—often white and heterosexual—the representation of the LGBT community has to be shaped to meet the expectations of said public. In order to merge the LGBT community into the idealized American national identity, mass media have structured sexual minorities into a hierarchy based on class and race. This has led to the current whitewashing of the LGBT community in media representation, where it is depicted as white, middle-class, and heterosexual-looking, leaving out all other instances of class and race.

Niklas Thomas and Till Neuhaus close the issue with an essay on the history of the National Basketball Association (NBA) and its management of the racial tensions that permeated it, tracing how it chased a coherent racial image aligned to the audience's expectations and desires. According to the authors, in the last fifteen years the NBA has changed its position on Blackness, shifting from infantilizing Black players to strongly advocating for social justice. Such a shift was caused primarily by the social unrest following the murders of several Black unarmed men at the hands of police forces between 2014 and 2020, which led to the widespread and enhanced interest of American society in Black Lives Matter's activism. Thomas and Neuhaus show how American corporations' actions and choices have aligned with, and impacted on, several internal

fractures in the US context. Nevertheless, they remark that this corporate interest in social causes is strictly tied to the need for businesses to assuage customers and remain profitable, regardless of the significant causes of a given set of social frictions.

In their uniqueness and individual import, these essays depict the ‘particular’—that is, the very specific instances of internal tears in the fabric of American society concentrated in time and space, and tied to a specific (and at times limited) context. Taken together, they make a macroscopic trend emerge, highlighting its pervasiveness and endemicity: the unity the name of the nation recalls has never been a given. Rather, it resists *despite* the US’s many internal fractures, representing, perhaps, more a hope than a reality, a beacon not to the world, but to American citizens themselves.

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THE GREAT REVIVAL: THE IDEALIZED AMERICAN PORTRAIT FROM THE FIFTIES THROUGH THE EIGHTIES TO THE TRUMP ERA

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ABSTRACT

The Fifties have been consolidated in the American ethos as one of the best times in its history. The decade's iconography was vigorously evoked during Reagan's presidency in an attempt to erase the civil rights victories of the Sixties. This paper focuses on the different interpretations of Fifties and Eighties imagery in popular culture, and on their role in shaping the definition of Americanness, highlighting the contrast between the idealized portrait of American society and its underlying tensions. Taking the Eighties as the focal point of the argument, the analysis goes from the 1950s to modern days to deal with the influence the Fifties myth has had on the new 'revival' of the Trump years.

Keywords: Fifties; Eighties; American exceptionalism; Myth; Reaganism.

INTRODUCTION

Among the myths shaped around American exceptionalism, one of the most persistent and pervasive ones has its origins in an idealized image of the Fifties. Still today, this image feeds on and into the very concept of American exceptionalism. After World War II, the United States experienced a time of economic prosperity which set the standard in American imagery for decades to follow, thus transforming into an ideal more than a historical reality. These years forged America's identity for the second half of the 20th century and beyond, shaping the American ethos—the accepted general narrative about the nation's identity and therefore its core values, sentiments, and philosophy—in a way that remains heavily influential to this day. Godfrey Hodgson recognizes this time as the origin of a specific new form of exceptionalism:

A new ideology of exceptionalism was becoming widespread in the 1950s. It defined American exceptionalism, partly in terms of material prosperity and military power, and partly in the name of a contrast between democracy, often assumed to be essentially American, with dictatorship and totalitarian societies, especially, of course, in contrast with the Soviet Union and communism. This

was the new and specialized meaning of freedom, a value that had been cherished by Americans since the Revolution, but whose precise meaning had changed. (Hodgson 2009, 92)

Clearly, the 1950s were not as perfect a decade as its portrait conveyed through popular culture and political discourse suggests—not even close. First of all, economic affluence hardly included those who were not white, and social freedoms and civil rights hardly applied to anyone other than white, straight, cisgender men. This fantasy of prosperity, then, only included a specific segment of the population—however, since it was the dominant segment, the fantasy got consolidated in the American cultural mainstream, permeating public discourse, political rhetoric, and popular culture alike as the decade’s master narrative. Greil Marcus argues that the Fifties represented “an exchange of real life for an idea of normal life” in the American consciousness (Marcus 2000, III, 9). This prevalence of myth over history has made Fifties imagery particularly troublesome in the decades that followed: generally regarded as an innocuous throwback to a positive time, the cultural implications this imagery carries can easily transform it into a dog whistle for the oppression towards women and minorities—up to its most explicit incarnation in 2016, when Donald Trump won the presidency by issuing a call to “Make America Great Again.” In his book *Happy Days and Wonder Years*, Daniel Marcus has argued that this remove from reality is what makes the Fifties such an insidious subject, especially from a political point of view: “because the Fifties always operated at an imaginary level, their norms have been able to maintain a hold on America’s fantasy life, to be resuscitated in conservative discourse and popular culture” (Marcus 2004, 2). Without even needing Trump to pronounce the words out loud, when he launched his presidential campaign his message was clear. Despite the fact that—at least in some instances, particularly on LGBTQ rights—his rhetoric on social issues was not as explicit as it was, for example, on race, the overall message of Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign unequivocally expressed a longing for a time that among its most significant traits had racial segregation, invisibility of gay people and the triumph of the “traditional family” (i.e., the man providing and the woman at home). Therefore, Trump’s campaign rhetoric (sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly) had the same effect as if he was constantly saying, in substance, if not literally, “if you vote for me you will not have

black and brown people in your neighborhoods, no one will attempt to convert you or your children to homosexuality, and this woman [Hillary Rodham Clinton] who is speaking across the stage from me will go back to the kitchen, with all the others, where they belong.¹ You will also have more money”—but the economic argument is, in my view, secondary to the social one. When evoking the Fifties, social anxieties come first, partly because the goal of this political rhetoric is to point to the social gains of minorities to explain away the problems of everyone else: as during the 1960s and 1970s women, African Americans, and LGBTQ people had made steps forward politically,

¹ Trump notoriously launched his campaign by comparing Mexican immigrants to rapists (Jake Miller, “Donald Trump Defends Calling Mexican Immigrants ‘Rapists,’” CBS News, July 2, 2015, accessed May 11, 2022 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/election-2016-donald-trump-defends-calling-mexican-immigrants-rapists/>), and repeatedly perpetuated racist tropes about the African American community, describing black neighborhoods as “ghettos” and “war zones” (Jeremy Diamond, “Trump Refers to ‘Ghettos’ in Discussing African-American Issues,” CNN, October 27, 2016, accessed May 11, 2022 <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/27/politics/donald-trump-ghettos-african-americans/index.html>). While positioning himself against marriage equality (“Donald Trump: Opposes Nationwide Marriage Equality,” Human Rights Campaign, accessed May 11, 2022 <https://www.hrc.org/resources/2016republicanfacts-donald-trump>), Trump’s rhetoric on LGBTQ rights was less explicit during the campaign than after he became president (Dan Diamond, “Trump Administration Dismantles LGBT-friendly Policies,” Politico, February 19, 2018, accessed May 11, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/02/19/trump-lgbt-rights-discrimination-353774>; Meghan Keneally, “Donald Trump’s Past Statements about LGBT Rights,” ABC News, July 26, 2017, accessed May 11, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/donald-trumps-past-statements-lgbt-rights/story?id=48858527>). However, the clearest campaign message on what was to come for the gay community was delivered when Mike Pence, a politician with one of the strongest records of oppression of gay rights, was selected as vice-president (Liam Stack, “Mike Pence and ‘Conversion Therapy’: A History,” *The New York Times*, November 30, 2016, accessed May 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/us/politics/mike-pence-and-conversion-therapy-a-history.html>; Amanda Holpuch, “Before He Was Trump’s Running Mate, Mike Pence Led the Anti-LGBT Backlash,” *The Guardian*, October 4, 2016, Accessed May 11, 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/04/mike-pence-led-anti-lgbt-backlash-trump>).

When it comes to women, Trump has a long history of chauvinism and misogynistic comments. In the Republican primary, Trump stirred controversy by insulting fellow candidate Carly Fiorina and journalist Megyn Kelly. This record was obviously boosted by the fact that he was running against a woman (Tamara Keith, “Sexism Is Out In The Open In The 2016 Campaign. That May Have Been Inevitable,” October 23, 2016, accessed May 11, 2022 <https://www.npr.org/2016/10/23/498878356/sexism-is-out-in-the-open-in-the-2016-campaign-that-may-have-been-inevitable>). After winning the nomination he made several remarks about Clinton, saying (among other things) that “she screams, it drives me crazy” and that despite all her professional accomplishments, “the only card she has is the woman’s card” (Stephen Collinson, “Donald Trump Has a Woman Problem—3 of Them,” CNN, May 26, 2016, accessed May 11, 2022 <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/05/13/politics/trump-women-2016-campaign/index.html>). He notoriously referred to her as a “nasty woman” during the October 19, 2016 debate and encouraged his supporters’ “Lock Her Up” chant at his rallies (Jeremy Diamond, “Trump on ‘Lock Her Up’ Chant: ‘I’m Starting to Agree,’” CNN, July 30, 2016, accessed May 11, 2022 <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/29/politics/donald-trump-lock-her-up/index.html>) even after winning the presidency. Yet, apart from personal attacks made during the campaign, Trump also made other derogatory statements many women across the country considered threats: in particular, his stance on women deserving to be punished for having an abortion (MSNBC Town Hall, March 30, 2016) and, in the last month of the campaign, his characterization of sexual assault as “locker-room talk” (NBC Presidential Debate, October 9, 2016). Despite his scornful rhetoric, some of the people in these groups (particularly white women) still supported him. This, however, does not alter the nostalgic implications his campaign message conveyed, nor does it lessen its oppressive connotations.

socially, and economically, these victories became an easy scapegoat for any struggle experienced by the only group that had until then held power—straight, white, cisgender men. However, using the Fifties as a dog whistle for inequality was not invented by Donald Trump. Because of its powerful place in the American ethos as an ideal time, not only do the Fifties play a steady role in US rhetoric, but they have also preponderantly occupied the political discourse in at least two occasions in the last few decades: during the 1980s, when a revival of the Fifties became a central theme in Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaign, and in a less explicit, but equally effective form in the past decade. Both times, the Fifties myth permeated political discourse as well as pop culture by shaping a dominant narrative around nostalgia, a generic nostalgia for an idealized past that does not have to explicitly clarify what we should be feeling nostalgic about or why—a “group memory,” to borrow the term used by Daniel Marcus to define the sense of a collective “shared experience and identity” (Marcus 2004, 4). This idealized and reassuring portrait of the decade consolidated a vision of American identity that in a way became for many US citizens more real than historical reality.

Referring to the way public narratives and images shape both personal and collective consciousness, Lauren Berlant argued that “nations provoke fantasy” (Berlant 1991, 1). Berlant defines the cluster resulting from the intersection of the nation’s different identities (political, linguistic, genetic, etc.) as the “National Symbolic” (5), meaning the force that shapes this fantasy. In the case of the US, particularly 1950s America, this fantasy has been appropriated by Reagan and shaped into a form we could call mythical: “the middle-class suburban lifestyle, heterosexual nuclear family, and technocratic-corporate culture” (Marcus 2004, 68), are values that were often promoted through popular culture, especially on screen. John Archer has formulated a definition of myth that is useful here:

Myth establishes a framework and sets the terms by which people encounter, comprehend and shape social relations and the space around them. By their very nature, myths are frequently, and in large measure, political [...]. In this sense, the crucial role of myth is often to sustain the relationship between the citizen, the broader culture, and social and political institutions. (Archer 2014, 7-8)

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By carrying out an analysis of the dynamics through which Fifties imagery is employed in the 1980s, my argument revolves around the impact of the Fifties myth on political discourse as well as popular culture (which, we will see, often overlap during this time), to reflect on the significance of this myth reaffirming its political nature in different decades. Considering the Eighties as the focal point of the argument, I will focus on a few visual texts, mainly movies, observing how the cultural production evoking the Fifties ethos powerfully shapes public discourse. We will see how the evolution of that ethos presents itself in a renewed form during the 2010s in popular culture, and what implications the stark contrast between the idealized portrait of American society and the tension beneath the surface has for the hegemonic, mainstream idea of Americanness.

FROM THE FIFTIES TO RONALD REAGAN

The historical events of the decade should make it more difficult not to consider it a controversial time, from the Red Scare to racial segregation, from gender discrimination to homophobia. Despite this, as we have seen, the Fifties are generally remembered as an idealized time, “a prosperous, peaceful, and optimistic period in American history after World War II but before the Kennedy assassination” (Dwyer 2015, 3). The cultural, political, and social dynamics at play in this decade, however, are decidedly more complex. During the Fifties the United States consolidated their position as the greatest superpower in the world, and as the indispensable nation, opposed to the Soviet Union. The Fifties also represent a time when this comforting, idealized narrative only applied to a specific segment of the population. If you were a woman or belonged to any kind of minority, chances were that you would not benefit from as many opportunities as white men would, or from any opportunity at all, for that matter. Nevertheless, the Fifties “turned out to be prototypes for what would become mainstream American life” (Andersen 2017, Chap. 21), thus shaping a myth that, at least on paper, was carved out

of a universal narrative. Following Jameson's distinction² between the historical period and the cultural myth (Jameson 1991, Chap. 9), I will henceforth refer to the decade as 'the 1950s', and to the myth as 'the Fifties'.

In *Postmodernism*, Jameson devotes several pages to the phenomenon of the canonization of the Fifties. The central dynamic of this process, he argues, lies in how pop culture representation has shaped the role of the Fifties in American imagery through "a list of stereotypes, of ideas of facts and historical realities" (Jameson 1991, chap. 9). From cinema to television, an idealized portrait of this decade took hold of American imagination. The Fifties were characterized as an exceptional decade, an ideal time in American history. Thus, the prototype was not shaped by reality, but rather through imagery the media made available:

Peyton Place, bestsellers, and TV series. And it is indeed just those series—living-room comedies, single-family homes menaced by *Twilight Zone* ...—that give us the content of our positive image of the fifties in the first place. If there is "realism" in the 1950s, in other words, it is presumably to be found there, in mass cultural representation, the only kind of art willing (and able) to deal with the stifling Eisenhower realities of the happy family in the small town, of normalcy and nondeviant everyday life. (Jameson 1991, Chap. 9)

From its very inception, the Fifties did not have much to do with reality: the portrait that this myth created had an aura of innocence and undeterred happiness that was difficult to couple with darker, and more problematic, historical facts. Analyzing the origin of myth and fantasy in American imagery, Kurt Andersen reflects on how "a new form of nostalgia emerged as an important tic in Americans' psychology, an imaginary homesickness for places and times the nostalgists had never experienced and that had in some cases never existed" (Andersen 2017, chap. 16). His description perfectly frames how the Fifties were created and employed to shape the National Symbolic.

² In *Postmodernism*, Jameson highlights the "shift from the realities of the 1950s to the representation of that rather different thing, the 'fifties,' a shift which obligates us in addition to underscore the cultural sources of all the attributes with which we have endowed the period, many of which seem very precisely to derive from its own television programs; in other words, its own representation of itself" (Jameson 1991, chap. 9).

Because language has always played a central role in myth-making, it became crucial to analyzing how the Fifties theme has been used in different eras: Jameson argues that “the fifties is a thing, but a thing that we can build, just as the science fiction writer builds his own small-scale model” (Jameson 1991, chap. 9). Jameson thus hints to an *intentional* creation of this narrative which, in the following decades, would become a part of mainstream American collective consciousness, as a “feeble and sentimental nostalgia for the fifties and the Eisenhower era” (Jameson 1991, Chap. 2). The significance of the Fifties, though, assumed much more serious implications when it took a drastic turn in the 1980s. When it comes to the role of the Fifties in American culture, the positive gaze that nostalgia casts upon a certain object transformed the myth into an established historical reality. Hodgson notes how “American history has been encrusted with accretions of self-congratulatory myth” (Hodgson 2009, 14). However, the level reached by American exceptionalism in the Eighties is remarkably and insidiously pervasive. From a political as well as cultural standpoint, particularly in reference to the conservative narrative, “when it came to the Cold War, the 1980s were like the 1950s redux” (Belletto 2018, 310). In this sense, the ethos of the Fifties was weaponized by the political discourse of the Eighties. This political strategy aimed at the erasure of the civil rights victories of the 1960s and 1970s, conveniently forgetting the steps forward made by women, people of color, and the LGBTQ community, in order to promote an unreal portrait of Americanness which did not include minorities. This cultural shift was mainly caused by the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan.

Reagan shaped first his 1980 campaign, and then his presidency, around a revival of traditional values: Barbara Ehrenreich writes that “sometime in the Eighties, Americans had a new set of ‘traditional values’ installed. It was part of what may someday be known as the ‘Reagan renovation’” (Ehrenreich 1990, 3). Ehrenreich contrasts Reagan’s philosophy, arguing that “from the vantage point of the continent’s original residents, or [...] the captive African laborers who made America a great agricultural power, our ‘traditional values’ have always been bigotry, greed, and belligerence, buttressed by wanton appeals to a God of love” (Ehrenreich 1990, 4). The act of evoking traditional values represents a very direct call on Reagan’s part for the

ethos of the Fifties. After two decades of social advancements fostered by women's and minorities' activism, and after the political impasse encountered by the Carter administration, Reagan employed an idealized version of the Fifties in order to offer a reassuring narrative to mainstream America, a strategy that made his political fortune. This approach, as we have said, was largely built upon the employment of dog whistles: Daniel Marcus notes how "conservatives of the Reagan era rarely criticized the civil rights movement directly" (Marcus 2004, 43), although the rhetoric certainly pointed in that direction. Ehrenreich particularly attacks the rhetoric concerning 'family values':

the kindest—though from some angles most perverse—of the era's new values was 'family.' [...] Throughout the eighties, the winning political faction has been aggressively 'profamily.' They have invoked 'the family' when they trample on the rights of those who hold actual families together, that is, women. They have used it to justify racial segregation and the formation of white-only, 'Christian' schools. And they have brought it out, along with flag and faith, to silence any voices they found obscene, offensive, disturbing, or merely different. (Ehrenreich 1990, 4-5)

This rhetorical style had complex consequences: Reagan clearly had a political agenda that he was looking to advance. However, the core feature of his message was not the substance, but rather the vibe—an abstract, yet powerful, shared perception. This entails that the imagery he evoked was central to his rhetoric and therefore to his political message. The narrative Reagan promoted a narrative evocative of a specific era by echoing "the mythic Fifties small-town America depicted in film, television, and other forms of popular media—an America that featured a booming consumer economy, military strength, domestic stability, dominant 'family values,' and national optimism and belief in 'the American Way'" (Dwyer 2015, 1). Marcus goes as far as arguing that, particularly in the 1984 campaign, because Reagan had become the physical embodiment of America, political attacks made at him were perceived by the general public as attacks directed at America itself (Marcus 2004, 86).

The dynamic of myth-shaping is what made the Eighties the era that birthed the concept of politics as spectacle, a time when popular culture represented a significant contribution to socio-political discourse. Ehrenreich highlights the hypocrisy displayed

by the dominant class while preaching ‘traditional values,’ perfectly exemplified, she argues, by the fact that “the ‘phonies’ came to power on the strength, aptly enough, of a professional actor’s performance” (Ehrenreich 1990, 9). In fairness, Reagan’s past career as an actor played an important role in the socio-political landscape of the Eighties:

after a so-so career playing fictional characters in movies, he became a superstar playing a politician in real life and on the TV news, first as governor of California. His winning presidential campaign in 1980 had policy specifics that jibed with his misty vision of a simpler, happier, more patriotic old-fashioned America [...] As a vacationing president, he wore a cowboy hat and rode a horse at his ranch in southern California. He and his team concocted a brilliant fantasy narrative in which he was the convincing leading character. More than any previous presidential handlers, they staged and crafted his presidential performances specifically to make for entertaining television. (Andersen 2017, Chap. 29)

The close relationship between the Reagan administration and show business is clear when we analyze Reagan’s rhetorical style. Pop culture references were a constant part of his rhetoric. These include *Back to the Future* (a movie where he is referenced, both as actor and as president, and which he would subsequently mention in the 1986 State of the Union Address), and the decision to simplify communication on the Cold War by evoking doom, thus describing the USSR as the ‘evil empire’ and naming his Strategic Defense Initiative the ‘Star Wars Program.’ The strategy, therefore, was not a mere glorification of a return to the Fifties, but rather the employment of the Fifties myth to shape the present. Since “the problem with glorifying the 1950s is that it belies the truth about the era in favor of the Hollywood version of it” (Sparling 2018, 247), the values fostered by that Hollywood version are employed to build today’s world. Reagan’s rhetoric worked: not only did he go down in history as the ‘great communicator,’ he also made conservatism cool, its impact visibly shaping pop culture—from *Risky Business* to the TV show *Family Ties*, where Michael J. Fox plays a conservative teenager raised by two liberal parents—which, in turn, shaped American culture (Ehrenreich 1990, 27). The character of Doc perhaps summarized it best in what could be considered the only explicitly political line of *Back to the Future*: after the famous joke he makes upon discovering who is president in 1985 (“Ronald Reagan? The actor? Then who’s vice

president, Jerry Lewis?”), when 1950s Doc finds out about modern video cameras, he says, “No wonder your president has to be an actor, he has to look good on television.” And wasn’t that the truth.

THE MYTH ON THE SCREEN

Although the impact of Reagan’s figure was visible in many areas of popular culture, cinema is where we can recognize the return to the Fifties he himself theorized. In the 1980s, several movies started to reintroduce Fifties imagery, *i.e.*, the portrayal of small-town America—in some cases merely offering an airbrushed image of an idealized past; in others showing its contrasts and contradictions, the darker and more controversial aspects, with works that went from *Back to the Future* to David Lynch’s productions. This double portrayal is particularly recognizable in the mid-1980s, when the political rhetoric was at its height because of the 1984 presidential campaign. We can observe these works through a lens that Michael Dwyer calls ‘pop nostalgia,’ a specific phenomenon he outlines with three key features: circulation and reception for mass audiences, the ability of being prompted by tropes or symbols without claims for historical accuracy, and the affective relationship between audience and text. This last aspect, in particular, is crucial to Dwyer because “it broadens our focus from the texts themselves, or the biographies of audiences, and toward the historical, cultural, and political conditions that structure the way we collectively ‘feel’ the past” (Dwyer 2015, 4). The idealized portrait of the Fifties is effectively conveyed through cinema thanks to the visual power of the medium. Movies like Robert Zemeckis’s *Back to the Future* (1985) and Rob Reiner’s *Stand by Me* (1986) are two good examples of movies that communicate this nostalgic look cast upon the Fifties. Both films include the idea of returning to the past: *Back to the Future* features Marty, a teenager who travels back in time to the Fifties where he finds himself fixing up his own parents, while *Stand by Me* is structured around the narrator’s long flashback to his last childhood summer, when he and his friends go out on an adventure in search for a corpse they hear has been found outside their town. It is important to notice how none of these films carry an explicit political message: it is the atmosphere, the gaze that counts. Dwyer notes that

“as he ‘fixes’ his own family’s shortcomings in 1955, Marty simultaneously cleanses the Fifties of social agitation, racial oppression, and the other cultural anxieties that actually gripped the decade” (Dwyer 2015, 42). Without mentioning any controversial topic (and, we may even argue, without *meaning* to openly mention anything controversial), Zemeckis manages to whitewash history, with effects that can be paired with Reagan’s rhetoric. In fact, to portray the Fifties in such an unchallenging manner five years after Reagan took office means to embrace the feelings of nostalgia summoned by the president’s dominant narrative. As critic J. Hoberman notes, the film is “conveniently set in 1955, rather than the following year of cultural revolution when Elvis Presley enjoyed his television apotheosis and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King became a national figure” (Hoberman 2019, Chap. 5). Moreover, the Eighties are portrayed as an improved, still idealized version of the Fifties: there is an African American mayor as the lone symbol of social progress, the music is more interesting, the girls are less sexually repressed, and everyone owns at least one TV. The American innocence which, Hoberman notices, may be a direct consequence of Steven Spielberg producing Zemeckis’ film, is preserved at all costs. The suburban or small-town setting, another powerful element of Fifties iconography, is heavily present in both *Back to the Future* and *Stand by Me*, not just as a backdrop, but as an integral element conveying a specific set of values—*traditional* values, as well as nostalgia for a time when those values shaped a simpler and more reassuring world.

Stand by Me manages to nostalgically convey another aspect that was revived in the Reagan years by recounting the last adventurous summer of a group of young boys: American masculinity. The 1980s were a time when a certain type of machismo, heir to the ethos of another Fifties icon, John Wayne, also underwent a revival: this is, for example, the decade of *Rambo* (another movie publicly referenced by Reagan³). In *Stand by Me*, Reiner portrays the trip as a rite of passage for these four boys through the nostalgic lens of the Fifties. This lens is highlighted in the last scenes of the movie as we

³ Cf. Andersen 2017, chap. 29.

find out what happened as the boys grew up: apart from the narrator, none of them had a happy ending. In his book *Back to the Fifties*, though, Dwyer seems to suggest that the revival of Fifties imagery in the Eighties sparked the production of different texts, only some idealizing the decade. Although he is correct about this point, Dwyer fails to note that most of the texts that offer a different narrative on the ethos of the Fifties seem to represent a reaction against (sometimes a parody of) the texts that celebrate their idealized version, or at the very least they are texts that focus on the cracks of this polished portrayal of America that dominated in the Eighties. The best example is probably represented by Lynch's works.

Shortly after *Back to the Future* and *Stand by Me* came out, Lynch premiered *Blue Velvet* (1986). The movie's release caused much controversy, including an accusation of pornography.⁴ Unlike *Back to the Future* and *Stand by Me*, *Blue Velvet* does not explicitly mention the year in which the movie is set—the atmosphere, though, is unmistakably that of the Fifties. Lynch also portrays a suburb during the investigation of a mystery carried out by two teenagers, Jeffrey and Sandy, after finding a severed human ear in a field near Jeffrey's house. As the landscape portrayed by Lynch is highly suggestive of the Fifties' ethos, the definition of a specific time and place becomes unnecessary. This fact makes Fifties imagery much more powerful and much more insidious than in Zemeckis' film. Lynch also displays images of nostalgia for the America suburb, as the opening sequence of *Blue Velvet* attests—with the difference that, in the world he conjures, the landscape is haunted. The opening frame of Lynch's movie is a close up of a flowerbed of red roses placed in front of a white picket fence, against a clear blue sky. Not only is this a typical suburban image, but the colors and shapes also evoke the American flag. After giving us an idyllic tracking shot of this postcard neighborhood, Lynch's camera shifts to the ground to show an eerie colony of bugs squirming just under the surface: "are there maggots in the apple pie?" (Hoberman 2019, Chap. 5). While in Lynch's work nostalgic iconography is always portrayed with an affectionate

⁴ Cf. Simon 1986, 54-56.

gaze, the imagery of deconstruction of the American Dream is still pervasive—also in *Blue Velvet*. During his investigation, Jeffrey discovers an underworld of crime, sex, and violence just a few blocks from his home, prompting him, halfway through the movie, to admit to Sandy: “I’m seeing something that was always hidden.” Therefore, Lynch’s portrayal of the Fifties ethos and of the American suburb carries gothic traits a subversion of traditional leitmotifs connected to this imagery: “Blue Velvet subverts, satirizes, and parodies the representations that it targets. Lynch’s film recalls general moods, aesthetic renderings, and indistinct portraits of past representations” (Coughlin 2003, 304). In *Blue Velvet* we can see how Lynch’s interest does not merely lie in a nostalgic portrayal of 1950s America, but rather in a simultaneous celebration and subversion of a *topos*. Quoting Linda Hutcheon, Coughlin argues that

postmodernism ‘is always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic ‘return’ [...] Postmodernist theory allows an analysis of *Blue Velvet* that is expansive and calls into question the ideologies of past representations that are too often recalled as nostalgic ideals despite their inherent limitations. Lynch is parodying and criticizing these representations by reassembling them and then infiltrating them with elements that expose their frameworks as ultimately inadequate. (Coughlin 2003, 305)

While commenting the movie, Coughlin rightfully recognizes that “Lynch, with *Blue Velvet*, seems to be stating a position of anarchy rather than conservatism. His objective is to find fault with the structures and paradigms that are used so often to support the political ideals he is accused of valorizing. [...] with *Blue Velvet* Lynch is not pleading for a ‘return to the fifties’ or deferring to a ‘nostalgia’ of the past” (Coughlin 2003, 310). In his analysis, though, Coughlin argues that Lynch “is actively criticizing the past to facilitate a greater understanding of the limitations of many of its representations. He is opening up possibilities by displaying how some frameworks seek to close down ideas” (310). I would argue that, more than criticizing the past, Lynch criticized an ideal: much of his production beyond *Blue Velvet* revolves around the deconstruction of Fifties imagery, around depicting also the darkness, the cracks in the idyllic portrayal, and most of all around the ambiguity that shapes the American Dream as much as the American Nightmare. In a way, though, despite *and* alongside all the darkness, the

dream (a word that is dear to Lynch) is still very present: Hoberman notices how the film is “a unique blend of raw pathology and icky sweetness, in which innocence is no less perverse than experience” (Hoberman 2019, Chap. 5), a blend that has become a trademark of Lynch’s style.

As he analyzes *Blue Velvet* in *Postmodernism*, Jameson underlines how, just like *Back to the Future* and *Stand by Me*, Lynch’s film also lends itself to an interpretation of American masculinity:

history therefore enters *Blue Velvet* in the form of ideology, if not of myth: the Garden and the Fall, American exceptionalism, a small town [...] lovingly preserved in its details like a simulacrum or Disneyland under glass somewhere [...]. Even a fifties style pop psychoanalysis can be invoked around this fairy tale, since besides a mythic and sociobiological perspective of the violence of nature, the film’s events are also framed by the crisis in the paternal function—the stroke that suspends paternal power and authority in the opening sequence, the recovery of the father and his return from the hospital in the idyllic final scene. That the other father is a police detective lends a certain plausibility to this kind of interpretation, which is also strengthened by the abduction and torture of the third, absent, father, of whom we only see the ear. Nonetheless the message is not particularly patriarchal-authoritarian, particularly since the young hero manages to assume the paternal function very handily [...]. Now the boy without fear of the fairy tale can set out to undo this world of baleful enchantment, free its princess (while marrying another), and kill the magician. (Jameson 1991, Chap. 9)

Lynch’s portrayal of the hero does not reflect traditional depictions of masculinity as one would encounter them in the Eighties: Jeffrey manages to get both women during the movie, but his sex scenes with the *femme fatale* Dorothy Vallens are more awkward than anything else. The antagonist, Frank, on the other hand, is at the same time terrifying and grotesque. Thus, instead of portraying masculinity as the pillar of the American family, Lynch reveals its ambiguities.

In certain cases, however, the presence of traditional Fifties imagery in American cinema can even affect the subversive narratives of the time. In an article published in *The New York Times* in 1984, critic Michiko Kakutani notes how many 1980s teenage movies “use conventions borrowed from pictures made in an earlier era,” as the rebel

iconography of James Dean and Marlon Brando, only to turn them into innocuous and entertaining narratives. Kakutani argues how

frequently, they are models employed in ways that purvey attitudes more conservative than those in the original films. In the process, our sense of the past—and in this case, of teenagers in earlier eras - also undergoes a revision. [...] The car culture of the day, with its drive-in theaters and fast-food joints; class tensions between greasers and their social betters; and romances between ‘nice’ girls and more disreputable boys have become insistently regular features on the screen. [...] today's youth films imply that the 80's, rather than resembling that earlier era, may well turn out to be far more conformity-conscious and success-oriented than the Eisenhower era ever was (Kakutani 1984).

Therefore, the effects of the Fifties ethos are even more pervasive than expected, sometimes even making Fifties themes tamer than they were in portrayals of the time such as *Rebel Without a Cause* or *On the Waterfront*. This diluting dynamic returned in more recent times, with the Eighties—another era marked by stark contrasts—definitely seeing a polished revival in 2010s cultural productions.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER 2015

Dwyer argues that “the Fifties [were] not only important in American popular culture but central to American self-understanding in the Reagan era” (Dwyer 2015, 6). If Dwyer’s argument is true, then the Fifties are also crucial to understanding the Eighties’ influence on different texts from 2015 and following years—a time when the Eighties revival (and its spectacle) made also a return in American politics, as the intersection between politics and entertainment reached unprecedented levels with Donald Trump’s candidacy.⁵ Although we can recognize several points of contact between the Trump era and the Eighties, particularly in their way of evoking the Fifties ethos and in the way Trump appropriated Reagan’s 1980 slogan ‘Make America Great Again’, J. Hoberman’s observations are punctual in noticing significant differences between the two figures:

⁵ Cf. Andersen 2017, chap. 46.

“Reagan was Hollywood incarnate, a true believer in movie magic, the embodiment of happy endings and uncomplicated emotions, amusing anecdotes and conspicuous consumption, cornball patriotism and bombastic anti-Communism, cheerful bromides and a built-in production code designed to suppress any uncomfortable truth. Trump is something else” (Hoberman 2019, epil.). Although Hoberman engages in a rather generous description of Reagan’s figure, suppressing uncomfortable truths can have, and has had, very real consequences on people’s lives, as it happened with his silence on the AIDS epidemic and its deadly consequences for thousands of Americans. It is still true, however, that Reagan embodied these traditional values by portraying a classic, reassuring Fifties man. Trump never carried himself in an old-fashioned or comforting way (his reference to “American carnage” in his inaugural speech would be an example), but nevertheless served as “a beneficiary of Reagan-nostalgia, which is to say, a nostalgia that is nostalgic for nostalgia itself” (Hoberman 2019, epil.). In recent years, the iconography and ethos of Eighties America has also returned in various movies, series, and books. Not only does this new production offer a specific, polished portrait of America in the Eighties, but it also enacts a second revival of Fifties imagery pervasively present in Eighties movies, and therefore associated with that decade as well. Here, nostalgic gazes are cast upon two different eras at the same time. As I have mentioned above, apart from the hopeful atmosphere surrounding the decade, the Eighties were also a time of tensions and contrasts. However, these have not remained in the collective memory as vividly as the idealized image has. The Reagan era is generally regarded as one of expansion, wealth, and a peak moment for American exceptionalism, although reality was more complicated: from Cold War tensions, to the AIDS epidemic, to the discrimination against minorities, this is also a time of heavy ambiguities that are often swept under the proverbial rug in pursuit of a perfect image of Americanness. Jeremy Sierra and Shaun McQuitty argue that “nostalgia contributes to individual identity based on shared heritage and memories with group members” (Sierra-McQuitty 2007, 99): in this case, the shared memories of the Eighties are to be considered as distorted as the nostalgic memory of the Fifties was. Yet, this idealized version survives, once again, in pop culture. In today’s case, though, the nostalgia

toward the American suburb is also affected by the influence of figures like Lynch, whose idealization of small-town America is juxtaposed with a haunted environment. A similar dynamic is at play in *Stranger Things* (2016). The Netflix series created by the Duffer Brothers has the declared intention of functioning as a vault of nostalgic references. Accordingly, we can recognize images and situations that are intended to explicitly quote Eighties classics such as *Stand by Me* (most obviously, but not exclusively, with the walk on the train tracks), as well as works by Lynch: the woods surrounding Hawkins, for example, remind us of *Twin Peaks*. Set in 1984 in small-town Indiana, the story features a group of boys looking for their friend Will, who has disappeared at the beginning of the first episode. The presence of a supernatural element in Will's disappearance is felt early on, and the boys' investigation generates another mystery: while searching for Will in the woods, the group finds Eleven, a strange girl with a shaved head, who helps them look for Will through her telepathic powers. In an interview to *Wired*, the Duffer Brothers described the series as a "tale of two Stevens"⁶—meaning Steven Spielberg and Stephen King, perhaps the two most influential voices in American pop culture in the Eighties. *Stranger Things* also presents another feature of the Eighties narrative: even though the dark element is present, in this case in the form of a monster, the sociopolitical frame of the era is missing once again.

This recurrence of the small-town America trope through the decades tends to follow a constant pattern. The main example among the consequences of the use of the myth of the Fifties, shared by Eighties narratives as well as by *Stranger Things*, is the creation of an ethos developed in opposition to the concept of the 'Other': the Fifties rhetoric was shaped, at least in part, around the idea of conformism and against the backdrop of the polarized reality of the Cold War. Being president in a time of renewed Cold War tensions, much of Reagan's rhetoric revolved around the dichotomy 'us' vs. 'them'. The heightened Cold War rhetoric was something that evoked the Red Scare of

⁶ Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGGc1wGmgbM>.

the Fifties, when, for example, Eastern European Jewish people were often looked at with mistrust, and suspected to have ties with the other side of the Iron Curtain, thus creating an atmosphere of paranoia and “hysterical searches for scapegoats and enemies within” (Foertsch 2001, 4). The enemy, of course, is always identified with the Other—and in this time, an ‘other’ that could infiltrate America’s everyday life sounds particularly dangerous: Jacqueline Foertsch makes a comparison between communists in the 1950s and gay people in the 1980s to formulate her argument on the widespread paranoia on the invisibility of the enemy.⁷ Wendy Brown makes a similar argument comparing the dissenter and the enemy, writing that “both threaten the group with disintegration, both reveal the thinness of the membrane binding the nation” (Brown 2005, 32). The Other and the enemy overlapped in the Fifties with the tensions brought by the Cold War, but the perceived threat posed by the Other continued to represent a challenge to mainstream America’s way of life in Fifties narratives throughout the following decades. Brown links the theme of the Other with the image of the American middle class, the category that

signifies the natural and the good between the decadent or the corrupt, on the one side, and the aberrant of the decaying, on the other. Middle class identity is a conservative identity in the sense that it semiotically recurs to a phantasmatic past, an idyllic and uncorrupted historical moment (implicitly located around 1955) when life was good—[...] it embodies the ideal to which nonclass identities refer for proof of their exclusion (Brown 1993, 395).

The opposition to the Other is central to the era’s cultural and political dynamics⁸ with regards to race relations, homophobia, or anti-communism: in a speech in front of the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1947, J. Edgar Hoover had described communism as “a condition akin to disease that spreads like an epidemic; and like an epidemic, a quarantine is necessary to keep it from infecting the nation.”⁹ Such tensions

⁷ Cf. Foertsch 2001, 17.

⁸ Cf. Hodgson 2009, 92.

⁹ Cf. J. Edgar Hoover, “Speech Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities” (26 March 1947). <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/hoover-speech-before-the-house-committee-speech-text/>, accessed on September 7, 2019.

were not necessarily made explicit by the Fifties myth, which tended to convey a more positive imagery (a time of innocence, good values, and simplicity¹⁰), but were nevertheless implied in its use, as a dog whistle. As a result, the theme of the Other is often present in Eighties narratives, but not necessarily in black and white: in *Blue Velvet*, for example, the Other may be embodied by Dorothy Vallens as well as by Frank and his world. Similarly, in *Stranger Things* the Other is simultaneously represented by Eleven and by the monster. This ambiguous presence of the Other allows for the depiction in the narrative of both a world that is scary and dangerous and a world that, to use another word dear to David Lynch, is just strange. If we examine *Stranger Things*'s portrayal of the Eighties through the lens of today's culture, we may notice a few steps forward: a girl is part of the group of the main acting characters, and rather than being a damsel in distress (and despite suffering extreme distress) she is the one who often saves them. Moreover, instead of being an all-white group (another classic feature of American pop culture, particularly until the Eighties) one of the boys is African American. Apart from these two not wildly revolutionary elements of diversity, the gaze of nostalgia is, as it happens with the Fifties, more romanticized than anything else. The world evoked by the Duffer Brothers resembles more a fond childhood memory than a critical portrait.

Therefore, a narrative such as *Stranger Things* does not exactly offer a revised interpretation of the decade even today, past Trump's presidency. The fact that these plots revolve around young characters—almost exclusively teenagers—is integral to the narrative of historical innocence: childhood certainly makes it easier to produce a nostalgic, idealized portrayal of an era. It is interesting, though, how the Eighties ethos (and, by association, the Fifties ethos) returned at the same time on the two sides of the political spectrum in Trump's right-wing rhetoric, and in Hollywood's more liberal-leaning narratives, without developing the complexities of that myth, which include darkness and contradictions. On the other hand, what happened post-2015 is that a few

¹⁰ Cf. D'angelo 2010, 35.

representations on screen started to offer a more nuanced portrayal of the 1950s, with works such as George Clooney's 2017 film *Suburbicon*, and Amazon's 2017 series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. *Suburbicon*, written by the Coen brothers offers a ruthless deconstruction of the middle-class American family, while adding a background of racial tension as the first black family moves into a suburban neighborhood. The family at the center of the plot, though, is a white family destroyed by greed dynamics external to race, which are evocative of Hollywood classics such as *Double Indemnity*, or more recent works such as the Coen's own *Fargo*. The film offers a portrayal of the American suburb which echoes post-Eighties works such as Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* or Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* and *Revolutionary Road*, particularly as it pertains to the demolition of the American family from within. Conversely, *Mrs. Maisel* is more focused on social themes, particularly women's rights, although the comedy format does not allow for the portrayal of some of the darkest aspects of the era, such as the discrimination suffered by American Jews, particularly during the McCarthy years. Moreover, being set in New York, the series offers a different family portrayal, outside the classic landscape of the American suburb. On the other hand, the background of *Mrs. Maisel* also offers a different incarnation of the Other through the portrayal of the Village counterculture scene, where a figure like Lenny Bruce is a prominent character. The counterculture scene of the 1950s also represents the origin of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s that the Fifties narrative would then try to erase in the Eighties. Similarly, the 1980s also had a vibrant underground cultural scene, an avant-garde composed of diverse, multicultural voices, now often forgotten in favor of more idealized and conformist portrayals, with rare exceptions, such as FX's *Pose*. Perhaps the answer to this lack of nuance in representation lies not in pop culture, but in different kinds of text, maybe not as popular—for example, documentaries or plays which may shape a counterpublic discourse¹¹ in opposition to the mainstream, idealized collective memory.

¹¹ Cf. Warner 2002, 56.

When discussing conservative rhetoric and the connections between the Fifties, the Eighties, and the Trump era, it is hard not to point to the historical figure that has a bond with all three: Republican lawyer Roy Cohn. A perfect embodiment of the ‘greed is good’ motto of the 1980s, Cohn gained his notoriety through his role during the Rosenberg trial in the 1950s, working as Joe McCarthy’s right hand. Afterwards, he became a prominent, albeit not exactly law-following, New York lawyer, who in the 1980s had the ear of President Reagan. During that time, he also became Donald Trump’s mentor. A closeted gay man, he died of AIDS in 1986. His figure has been immortalized in playwright Tony Kushner’s Pulitzer-winning play *Angels in America* (1991-1993), another text which recurs to the supernatural to portray the Eighties—although in a quite different way. Through Roy’s character celebration, Kushner criticizes the culture of the Reagan era as a time of ruthless individualism and greed:

It's a revolution in Washington, Joe. We have a new agenda and finally a real leader. They got back the Senate but we have the courts. By the nineties the Supreme Court will be block-solid Republican appointees, and the Federal bench—Republican judges like land mines, everywhere, everywhere they turn. Affirmative action? Take it to court. Boom! Land mine. And we'll get our way on just about everything: abortion, defense, Central America, family values, a live investment climate. [...] It's really the end of Liberalism. The end of New Deal Socialism. The end of ipso facto secular humanism. The dawning of a genuinely American political personality. Modeled on Ronald Wilson Reagan. (Kushner 1995, 69)

In *Angels in America*, Roy represents “the embodiment of [...] the corrupted power structure of America” and, by extension, of “Cold War America’s interpretation and reliance on a certain creed of straight masculinity. He is an illustration of the Reagan era’s fascination with the strong, individual, loner” (Nielsen 2008, 44-45). In the play, Kushner deconstructs the myth of American exceptionalism, so celebrated in the Fifties, by putting the ultimate takedown of America in the mouth of Roy’s nemesis, gay black nurse Belize:

I hate America [...]. I hate this country. It's just big ideas, and stories, and people dying, and people like you. The white cracker who wrote the national anthem knew what he was doing. He set the word ‘free’ to a note so high nobody can

reach it. That was deliberate. Nothing on earth sounds less like freedom to me. You come with me to room 1013 over at the hospital, I'll show you America. Terminal, crazy and mean. (Kushner 1995, 228)

Through Belize's monologue, which gains deeper significance as it is pronounced by a black, queer character, Kushner looks behind the curtain of the American fantasy portrayal that had been consolidated by the myth of the Fifties, and finds an unreachable landscape populated by stories (the mainstream American narrative) and dying people (the Others who were not included in Reagan's vision for America). This play has recently been itself the subject of a revival: in the midst of the Trump years, a new production of *Angels in America* was staged on Broadway. Much of the attention the revival got in the press was directed at Cohn's relationship with Trump. Accordingly, the production decided to directly challenge Trump's rhetoric by advertising the play on *The New York Times* with the line "Where's My Roy Cohn? Here."¹² and a picture of Nathan Lane, who interpreted Cohn's character in the revival. The revival of the play is not an isolated case: in the Trump years, Cohn was the subject of countless articles and two documentaries. The renewed attention to figures such as Roy Cohn, as well as more nuanced portrayals of the 1950s, speak to the need of employing non-idyllic imagery to depict American life: the portrayal of the Other has now been extended to the dark side of those decades, which often is admittedly more interesting.

CONCLUSION

Ronald Brunner has argued that "the sustainability of any political system is ultimately a matter of renewing faith in the underlying myth through progress consistent with basic aims and expectations" (Brunner 1994, 3). In this perspective, the myth of the Fifties has been central in American culture and in American politics. In *Fantasyland*, Andersen talks about the fact that from the beginning of the 20th century "nostalgia had been turned back into a pathology" (Andersen 2017, chap. 17). This pathological

¹² A reference to a quote attributed to Donald Trump, crying for a ruthless fixer while in the midst of the Mueller investigation.

tendency has entailed that the myth of American exceptionalism is often not questioned, both left unexplored and reiterated in all its idealized forms, from the Fifties to the Eighties. Reagan's position in American culture is a prime example: while today we may have started to look at the Fifties as a problematic era, at least because of segregation, the Reagan years—and Reagan himself—are still often idealized without question. The lack of a critical gaze toward his legacy and his subsequent idealization (on both sides of the political aisle, interestingly enough) has reached such a point that comedian Bill Maher observed that in 2012 Republicans “tried to elect his haircut”¹³ as the peak of this irrational faith in the rhetoric of the American myth.

Especially in light of the Trump years, a widespread understanding of the dynamics around the myth of American exceptionalism is necessary in order to avoid being dazzled by the American portrait itself during crucial moments where a clarity of vision is required, such as those in the voting booth. It would be necessary, in particular, to *rethink how we think* about the Eighties. In his farewell address in January 1989, Reagan noted how what was known as the ‘Reagan Revolution’ really was, to him, a ‘Great Rediscovery’.¹⁴ He, of course, intended it in the idealized sense, a rediscovery of the traditional values of the Fifties that we had forgotten. Another possibility for a ‘great rediscovery’ of the decade may actually entail new discoveries, as well as the recognition of the cracks in the portrait: the controversies, the dark aspects, the incongruencies, but also the dynamic, diverse, and complex influences that did not have space in the mainstream narrative the first time around.

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¹³ Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imjL8dfJVkA>.

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DREAMERS VS. REALITY: LATINX (IM)MIGRATION IN BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

Given how important it is to expose young readers to several representations of identity and life experiences, and following Rudine Sims Bishop's concept of "Mirrors and Windows" (1990), this paper compares several stories of Latinx (im)migration to the United States, such as Yuyi Morales's picture book *Dreamers*, Elisa Amado's graphic novel *Manuelito*, Margarita Engle's poetry memoir *Enchanted Air*, and Jacqueline Woodson's young adult novel *Harbor Me*. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT), Latino-critical (LatCrit), and Critical Multicultural Analysis as the theoretical framework, the aim of this paper is to analyze the Latinx (im)migration experience portrayed in children's and YA books of different genres, in which the expectations of Latinx (im)migrant characters are contrasted with the reality they encounter in the US.

Keywords: Children's Literature; Young Adult Literature; Latinx; Immigration; Critical Race Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Since its very own formation, the United States has been a country marked by the history of its immigrants. As such, immigration has not only profoundly shaped American culture and its politics, but also migration influxes themselves have been shaped by US policy. Consequently, controversy regarding immigration is also as old as the American migratory background. From the Naturalization Act of 1790 (which would grant naturalization to free white people of good character) to the Immigration Act of 1924 (which set quotas of immigrants from the Eastern Hemisphere and banned all immigration from Asia) to the recent polemics regarding the Trump administration family separation policy (which detained illegal parents/guardians at the US-Mexican border to prosecute and deport them, whereas their children were placed under the supervision of the US Department of Health and Human Services)—immigrants in the US have struggled not only for citizenship, but also for human rights.

The late 20th and early 21st century have highlighted several issues regarding immigration to the US, particularly Latinx undocumented immigration. Attempting to protect children of undocumented immigrants, in 2001 the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act was proposed but failed to pass the Senate. The DREAM Act introduced a conditional pathway to citizenship to undocumented youths who had completed high school in the United States and wished to attend a US post-secondary institution. After further several unfruitful attempts to pass it, in 2011 President Barack Obama issued the DACA memorandum (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals)—which protected undocumented youths who had entered the US as minors from deportation. By 2017, under the Trump administration, DACA was rescinded, only to be reinstated by decision of the Supreme Court in 2020. Eight months after President Joseph Biden’s inauguration, US special envoy to Haiti Daniel Foote resigned in protest over the deportation of thousands of Haitian migrants. About thirteen thousand Haitians who had fled from devastation caused by an earthquake, as well as from political instability, had camped under a bridge in Del Rio, Texas. Footage of horse-mounted US officers corralling the migrants shocked many, and the incident led even some of those affiliated with the Democratic party to question President Biden on his migrant policies.

What are the effects of these laws on (im)migrant families, and particularly on (im)migrant children? In this new Latinx diaspora, “many people have come to hear the urgent cries of children and families in immigrant communities who have been villainized by politicians, media, and the public” (Rodríguez and Braden 2018, 47). These cries have been reflected and discussed by children’s and young adult (YA) books. Although it has conquered a place in critical literary studies, children’s and YA literature remain neglected (Wolf, Coats, Enciso, and Jenkins 2011), just as multicultural education (Botelho and Rudman 2009) and inclusive books for children and young adults do (Rogers and Soters 1997). Yet, according to Mickenberg and Nel (2011), children’s literature (and I add YA literature as well) can act as an “important vehicle for ideas that challenge the status quo and promote social justice, environmental stewardship, and greater acceptance of differences” (445).

Minority groups, such as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), are still underrepresented in US children's and YA books (Nel 2017), as shown also by research by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC, University Wisconsin Madison), which, since 1994, has released yearly statistics on the diversity of children's books published in the previous year in the US.

Even though the American educational system has historically not been prepared to deal with concepts of 'otherness,' teaching multicultural literature at school can be a powerful practice, since "[p]edagogy can either reinforce the status quo or challenge existing social structures" (Baxley and Boston 2014, 3). In order to challenge power structures, there is a need to have different models in literature (particularly in texts taught in school), in terms of characters and/or stories young people can relate to, since texts are fundamental for their development. With models of representation more akin to their identities, students can improve both their social and educational skills, search for identity through identification and social understanding, as well as grow a political consciousness, and reach and keep academic interest and success (Baxley and Boston 4, 19).

OBJECTIVES AND SELECTION OF PRIMARY BIBLIOGRAPHY

The main goal of this article is to analyze children's and YA books of different genres which portray the Latinx (im)migration experience to the United States, both through the voice of Latinx characters and minority authors. In order to select relevant books, research was conducted on children's books activist platforms, such as Social Justice Books and Diverse Books, and on the independent editorial book site Book Riot.¹ All platforms are concerned with important sociocultural issues, such as fair representation of minorities, voices, and diversity. After careful selection, four titles comprised the corpus: Yuyi Morales's picture book *Dreamers*, Elisa Amado's graphic novel *Manuelito*, Margarita Engle's poetry memoir *Enchanted Air*, and Jacqueline Woodson's YA novel

¹ Please find their websites at: socialjusticebooks.org, diversebooks.org, and bookriot.com.

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Harbor Me. Besides the dialogic potential among these texts, each book was chosen for its portrayal of Latinx (im)migration to young readers for being considered an interesting example of the genre (picture book, graphic novel, poetry memoir, and YA novel, respectively), and for showing how diverse children's and YA literature can be.

Relying on Rudine Sims Bishop's metaphor of "Mirrors and Windows," this article seeks to explore how the Latinx (im)migration experiences represented in these works may contribute to giving voice to Latinx people, work as "mirrors" for Latinx children, and provide "windows" for other children to gain awareness of different realities, life stories and characters.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF THE CHOSEN CORPUS

Brief summary of the selected books

For the reader to have a better grasp of the content of each selected text, and to offer a better understanding of the analysis that follows, a brief summary of each will be presented.

Children's picture book *Dreamers* (2018) is both written and illustrated by Mexican artist Yuyi Morales. Through acrylic, ink, photographs, and digital scans of several objects made of different materials, Morales tells her and her son's story of immigration and beginning of a new life in the US. A winner of the Pura Belpré Award (a prize awarded to Latinx writers and/or illustrators for their contribution to the portrayal, affirmation, and celebration of the Latinx culture), the book focuses on issues such as the difficulty of having to speak a different language, the challenges found when arriving and living in a different country, and the dreams of migrants—both before and after their journey.

Manuelito is a 2019 graphic novel by Elisa Amado, a Guatemalan author living in Canada, and illustrator Abraham Urias, born in El Salvador, who fled to the US due to the Salvadoran civil war that devastated the country between 1979 and 1992. With simple yet poignant language, and with realistic and emotional black and white pictures, the book follows the journey of a thirteen-year-old Guatemalan boy: first, as both Guatemalan soldiers and Maras (violent drug cartels) take over his village; later, as

he is sent to the US by his parents, and crosses Mexico with the help of a coyote (a human trafficker); and lastly in his journey of entering and briefly staying in the US. *Manuelito* is the story of how the American dream is closely intertwined with danger and menace for any Guatemalan who tries to flee to the US, particularly children. Margarita Engle is a Cuban American author, winner of several children's and young adult book awards. Her poetry memoir *Enchanted Air* (2015) narrates her and her family's own story, travels, and life between Cuba and the US. Besides going through common child and adolescent phases, this young Los Angeles-born girl (the daughter of a Cuban mother and an American father of Ukrainian ascendance) describes several episodes in the common history of both Cuba and the US, but mostly focuses on how she feels divided between geographical spaces, different landscapes, languages, and cultures. Margarita also reflects on her mother's condition as an immigrant, and on the way she clings onto several cultural artifacts (especially her outdated Cuban passport). In fact, the story takes place before and after the Bay of the Pigs invasion and testifies how both Cuban and American citizens dealt with its consequences.

Harbor Me, the 2018 young adult novel by African American writer Jacqueline Woodson, tells the story of a group of six sixth graders with different learning disabilities and special needs at a New York school, all coming from different racial, ethnic, cultural, and class backgrounds. They become friends as they share personal problems while, during a school activity, they are left reflecting by themselves in a former art classroom. With only a few powerful words, Woodson writes a story about friendship and humanity, while touching upon recurrent issues in American society, such as bullying, racism, liberty and, mostly, the drama of immigration. For instance, through the eyes of the main character and narrator, Hailey, the reader becomes aware of Esteban's (a boy born in the US, whose parents are from the Dominican Republic) family troubles, as his father is arrested by the police for being an illegal immigrant. The group of children are spectators to their friend's fear, until the day Esteban, his mother, and sister suddenly leave for the Dominican Republic without saying goodbye. On a similar note, Tiago, a Puerto Rican boy of the group, also shares his experience of discrimination due to his ethnicity, as he speaks about being mocked for his accent. He

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nevertheless remarks on how lucky he and his family are for being American and not having to live with the constant fear of being deported. This group of six children talking in a classroom can be considered a microcosmos of the US itself, not only as the embodiment of diversity, but also of the contrast between several American foundational myths and reality.

Analysis of the books

I will now move on to the parallel analysis of the books using Critical Race Theory (CRT), Latino-critical Theory (LatCrit), Critical Multicultural Analysis (CMA), and Mirrors and Windows Theory as theoretical frames.

Mirrors and Windows Theory

To face the challenges of underrepresentation mentioned above, and claim the increasingly activist and proactive roles of children's and YA literature, Bishop's 1990 essay "Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors" will provide a multicultural theoretical frame for the analysis of the corpus, since it remains relevant even thirty years after its publication (Harris 2007; Brown 2018). Bishop explains the importance for children and adolescents to see themselves reflected in books, view other cultures and experiences, and gain access to different beliefs through varied stories and characters—thus allowing young readers to perceive society differently and take conscious action (Bishop 1990; Harris 2007). The representation of Latinx children's experiences in books allows for them to feel represented and have a voice; other children are also led to feel acquainted with the Latinx (im)migration experience of their peers.

Just as Bishop's theory claims, the four children's and YA books which are the object of this study portray different young people and their (im)migrant identities and backgrounds, with both the good and bad that come with their journeys. These stories and representations not only allow immigrant children to see themselves mirrored in all these characters, they also permit other non-(im)migrant children to look through these windows and take a step inside these sliding glass doors to gain some perspective on the lives of others.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

The analysis of the corpus applies CRT (Delgado and Stefancic 2017), mainly regarding counter-storytelling—that is, the narration of a story by the ones who actually live it, instead of by the ones in positions of power. According to Delgado and Stefancic, CRT deals with race, racism, and power, while also taking into consideration other aspects of narratives, such as settings, history, interests, emotions, and the unconscious (2017, 18). Despite having started in the field of law, this theory has moved beyond it, to fields such as education, where themes regarding school hierarchy, discipline, and controversies concerning the curricula and multicultural education are debated (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, 20). Even though CRT has several main tenets,² this paper will focus mostly on the one regarding the existence of a unique voice of color (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, 20-22). This concerns the fact that “because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, Black, American Indian, Asian, and Latin writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know” (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, 22). That is why counter-storytelling is of relevance to the analysis of the selected books for this paper. Not only is it a method which opens a space for telling what is frequently left out (such as the Latinx (im)migrant experience), it is also a tool that challenges stories of power and dominant discourses (such as stories about White characters and their lives) (Solorzano and Yosso 2001, 475). The main functions of counter-storytelling are building community bonds, challenging established belief systems, opening new windows that allow less represented peoples and their experiences to be seen and recognized, and constructing another world through a combination of elements from both the story and reality, therefore allowing for an enrichment of both (Solorzano and

² According to Delgado and Stefancic, CRT’s other tenets are the following: racism is embedded in society; it is difficult to eradicate it because it is not properly acknowledged and because it serves the interests of those in power, namely whites; race is a social construction; racialization changes according to time and the needs of the dominant group.

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Yosso 2001, 475). This supposedly new world could therefore be more aware, conscious and respectful of differences.

All four books analyzed here provide important insights into the subject of (im)migration from Latin American countries to the US. All authors and/or illustrators (Morales, Amado and Urias, Engle, and Woodson) belong to so-called minority groups and all, besides Woodson, have immigrational backgrounds. Even though it is not the aim of this article to debate questions of authenticity and who gets to write about which communities, it is relevant in this regard to analyze CRT's tenet concerning the existence of a unique voice of color. As such, we can acknowledge that all authors come from informed backgrounds and bring an insider perspective on the matters of (im)migration, exclusion, and Otherness to their work. All of them use counter-storytelling, since all stories reflect upon Latinx (im)migration, a subject frequently left out from dominant White discourse.

LatCrit

Latino-critical Theory (LatCrit) is considered to be a branch of CRT which deals with how Latinx people and legal scholars relate to CRT in the US (Gonzalez, Matambanadzo, and Martínez 2021, 1319). It claims that the Latinx identity is complex and diverse, not only in matters of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, and class, but also in terms of language (usually, Latinx (im)migrants are made fun of for their accent and are continuously asked to suppress their language), and immigration/citizenship status (Gonzalez, Matambanadzo, and Martínez 2021, 1326, 1327; Trucios-Haynes 2000, 3). The Latinx identity is often used to refer to people with nationalities and/or ancestry from countries with Hispanic cultures—in the US, Latinx identity is mainly used to refer to Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Cuban Americans, but not exclusively (Gonzalez, Matambanadzo, Martínez 2021, 1318). Anti-subordination is the main value of LatCrit and it “refers to a positionality that challenges practices and policies that by intent or effect enforce the secondary social status of historically oppressed groups” (Gonzalez, Matambanadzo, and Martínez 2021, 1322). Given that all books analyzed here deal with the Latinx (im)migration experience, as told by Latinx

characters and minority authors, it is possible to apply LatCrit, particularly regarding language and issues of immigration/citizenship. Yuyi Morales starts her and her son's story with the symbolic crossing of a bridge from Ciudad Juarez (Mexico) to El Paso (Texas), and later recalls their first times in San Francisco (California). Her son, Kelly, was already an American citizen (because his father was American), but Morales was not. On the first double spread page, she declares to her baby son: "I dreamed of you/ then you appeared./ Together we became/ Amor -/ Love-/ Amor." (4). Right from the beginning there is evidence of the importance of Spanish as her first language and how both Spanish and English became part of both their lives and identities. She goes on telling: "Migrantes,/ you and I./ The sky and the land/ welcomed us in words/ unlike those of/ our ancestors." (10-11). Once more, the relevance of language is underlined by these lines. However, it is important to remember that *Dreamers* is a picture book composed of both words and images. I would argue that probably even more important than the aforementioned lines is the presence in the background of the images of clouds and smoke that create mirror-inverted sentences, such as "Soy something" (meaning "I am something"³) and "Speak English." When the text claims neutrality ("words unlike those"), the image seems to reveal indignation for objectification ("Soy something"), and the claim of suppression of the native language coming from American citizens ("Speak English"). Yuyi and Kelly travel with a backpack full of elements of Mexican culture (note the symbolism of the backpack, which can be perceived as their cultural baggage), that are present throughout the whole book. They are a skeleton from Día de los Muertos, an *ahuízotl* (a mythical creature shaped like a dog), traditional Mexican fabrics and embroidery, and a *harana* (a traditional folk guitar of Vera Cruz). To add to this cultural symbolism, the first time that Yuyi shows up with a bandana with a Mexican print (which she carries until the end of the story) is when she starts to cross the bridge to the US. In the beginning, while still living in Mexico, she does not wear it.

³ My translation.

Once in the US, she finds a public library that changes hers and Kelly's lives forever—she claims that books became their language and allowed their voices to be heard (Morales's first exposure to picture books took place in American public libraries and later she became an author of picture books herself). She ends her story stating "We are stories./ We are two languages./ We are lucha." (30). Even in the end, the importance of language and counter-storytelling are underlined. Looking closely at the jacket of the book, this constant immigrant struggle is also present—according to the angle one inclines the jacket, the character of Morales appears happy (when looked at vertically) or sad (when viewed horizontally), which reveals both sides of the immigrant journey.

Regarding LatCrit applied to *Manuelito*, this graphic novel has both a Spanish and an English version,⁴ which means it is intended for a wider audience. The English version of this book also has several words in both languages from the first pages on, particularly salutations (*Hola*), characters' family names (*Tío, Tía, Abuela*) and proper nouns and nicknames (*Rosita, Domingo, Coco Loco, Adela*). However, it is the concepts of (im)migration and citizenship that draw the attention of the reader. Manuelito's journey from his home country, Guatemala, to Mexico and then to the US evokes all the dangers and perils of a child making this trip almost alone. After crossing Rio Bravo to reach American ground, Manuelito asks the Border Patrol for asylum. The next black and white pictures have no words, as the images speak for themselves—the reader sees Manuelito seated in the back of the border patrol truck and then behind metal bars. "I was put in a jail with lots of other kids" (60), he clarifies later. After this episode, he is temporarily put in the facilities of an organization that teaches English to migrants, but which later closes, since "there was no more money from the new government" (70)—which may be interpreted as a critique to the Trump administration. Following the instructions of the organization's director, Manuelito takes a bus for several days to meet his aunt Adela, who already works in the US. After he lived with her for a while,

⁴ The English version of *Manuelito* was chosen for the corpus of this paper to facilitate linguistic comprehension.

several agents of the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) knocked on their door and took them out by storm: “You are illegals! You are going back where you came from! We don’t want you here!” (85). Once again, an image with no words follows—at the bottom of the page is a close-up of only Manuelito’s tearful and scared eyes.

In *Enchanted Air*, the importance of the Spanish language is also evident. The title of the poetry memoir is itself a wordplay in Spanish, something which is clarified twice in the book (10, 144): “Air” means both “air” and “dangerous spirit.” The air seems to be the common element which connects Cuba and the US. If the air, at the beginning of the story when Margarita’s parents meet in Cuba, is “enchanted” (3), in Los Angeles where the family later lives the air is “damaged” (26), and after the Bay of the Pigs invasion it is “poisoned” (137) and “dangerous” (139). The symbolism of air works as a premonition: the once-enchanted air, which brought Margarita’s parents together when Cuba and the US kept good diplomatic relations, became the dangerous spirit that announced the embargo on Cuba and the end of diplomacy between the two countries, as well as the permanent separation from her Cuban relatives. Margarita feels the “in-betweenness” Gloria Anzaldúa theorizes about. Her identity is split into her “two selves” (11). After the Cuban civil revolution, when asked by her classmates “What are you?”, she thinks “It’s a question that requires fractions,/ and I don’t like math./ Do I have to admit/ that I’m half Cuban and half American [...]/? Or am I just entirely American,/ all the fractions left behind/ by immigration from faraway nations?” (43). This feeling of in-betweenness is permanently present and also associated with language: “Living in between two ways/ of speaking/ and hearing/ makes me feel as divided/ as the gaps between/ languages.” (101). Even though Margarita is not an immigrant, her mother is. The girl calls her mother “Mami” and her father “Dad,” which are clear allusions to their native languages and cultural identities. But it is relevant to notice that Margarita starts calling her mother “Mom” the exact moment they are no longer allowed to travel back to Cuba due to the conflict between the two countries. This fact denotes the importance of the travels for her mother, whose cultural and national identity was such a big part of her persona. Margarita declares: “Mami turns into Mom, changing/ before my eyes/

from an ordinary person/ who left her homeland/ believing that she would return/ every year –/ to this strange, in-between-nations/ exile, a lost wanderer” (124). “We think they took my papi” is the opening sentence of Jacqueline Woodson’s YA novel *Harbor Me*. As the plot develops, we learn from Hailey (the main character and narrator of the story) that her classmate Esteban’s father is missing. Esteban’s family comes from the Dominican Republic and both his parents are illegal immigrants in the US. One day, the ICE police arrested his father while he was coming out from work in a factory in Queens and took him to a detention center for illegal immigrants in Florida. Even though Esteban and his sister are American citizens (since they were born in the US), his mother is not and is afraid the police may come after her as well, thus separating both parents from their children. Towards the end of the book, we learn that Esteban’s mother fearfully returns to the Dominican Republic to protect what is left of their family. Another Hispanic character, Tiago, narrates an episode regarding the issue of language: “Once when me and my mom were walking down the block speaking in Spanish, this guy yelled at us, ‘This is America! Speak English!’ But I’m from Puerto Rico, and Puerto Rico is part of the United States of America too, so Spanish should be American, right?” (126). This time the issue is more complex than language as a part of individual identity, as mentioned in the previous books. In *Harbor Me* language is debated as part of the American national identity. The subject here concerns the fact that English is considered by dominant American groups to be the US official language, when there is no official national language at all, and Spanish is spoken by about 42% of residents (Statista 2020). The group of friends question the use of English as the supposed official language, and how detrimental it is for thought-to-be minority groups who speak other languages. (Foreign) language becomes an element of “Othering” and consequent discrimination.

Critical Multicultural Analysis (CMA)

Critical Multicultural Analysis (Rogers and Soters 1997) discusses the importance of a multicultural education through reading, particularly in a country so diversified as the US. When applied to children’s and young adult literature, it targets power relations

present in societies, namely what gets to be published, written and/or illustrated (Rogers and Soters 1997, 101). Since books for youngsters reflect these power relations, CMA is important for questioning both the dominant culture and ideologies of the US society, in order to deconstruct binaries and fight white privilege and the notion of “Otherness” as an inferior category (Rogers and Soters 1997, 101-103). It provides a critical lens on multiculturalism, since it requires an analysis based on historical, sociopolitical, and cultural contexts that have influenced the construction of a work (Rogers & Soters, 1997 101-103). When analyzing a text through CMA, it is important to keep in mind the following aspects: contradictions, construction, and effect. The first concerns how the different meanings in a text are combined to convey a message; the second how the meanings are constructed; and the last how these contradictions may affect people both as individuals and as a society (Rogers and Soters 1997, 108). Botelho and Rudman (2009) consider CMA as a “multi-layered lens” through which one can analyze a children’s text (119). For that they use the center of the lens as the focal point of the story, answering the questions: “Whose point of view? Who sees? Who is observed?” (Botelho and Rudman, 2009 119, 120). Then they analyze the sociocultural processes of the characters [“How is power exercised? Who has agency? Who resists and challenges domination and collusion? Who speaks and who is silenced? Who acts? And who is acted upon? Who waits? What reading subject positions are offered by these texts?” (Botelho and Rudman 2009, 120)]. Finally, the end/closure of the story is the last aspect of the analysis [“How did the writer close the story? What are the assumptions imbedded in this closure? Is the ending ideologically open or closed?”] (Botelho and Rudman 2009, 120). The article will also further focus on these questions to analyze its corpus, since CMA analysis of the texts will allow for a better comprehension of how the Latinx (im)migration experience is one of inferiority, when it should not be considered so.

Applying CMA is also crucial for this analysis, particularly in terms of whose point of view is present, who claims a position of power and what the end of the stories reveal ideologically. In Morales’ *Dreamers*, the story is told through her point of view, one of a Mexican immigrant in the US who at first is both unable and afraid to speak.

In one of the double-spreads, while playing in a public water fountain with her son, one can read “we made lots of mistakes” (13) and one can see a US police officer standing tall and facing Morales. This authority figure represents the country and is in a position of power, whereas she shows up curved and embarrassed, denoting her submission. In *Manuelito* we find a very important point of view: one of a Guatemalan migrant child. Manuelito is never in a position of power—not at the beginning, when his village is taken by soldiers and maras, nor during his journey to the US (when he is taken advantage of by the mischievous coyote and must obey the ones who truly help him), nor when he is in the US with his aunt and is taken away by the ICE police. If children are usually perceived as having no agency and being powerless, migrant children seem to be at even greater risk of that. *Enchanted Air* comes from the perspective of a bilingual Cuban American girl who, even though she is also mocked for not being “completely American” nor “completely Cuban,” is not afraid to use her voice. Engle claims her power when she declares “I do dare to sing/ and that is what matters/ on this island” (8). Later, when one of her teachers accuses her of being ungrateful for Cuba not wanting American citizens in their territory, she argues: “Why should such an ignorant grown-up/ imagine/ that she knows me?” As for *Harbor Me*, the story is told from each of the six children’s point of view and all of them are silenced in some way (for racial, ethnic, language and class reasons). What is relevant to keep in mind is that, in all the four books, the point of view comes from Hispanic (im)migrant characters and that (im)migrant children do not come from a position of power—not only because children rarely do, but also because of their (im)migrant condition. When analyzing the end of each work, it is possible to find some common aspects. *Dreamers*, *Enchanted Air*, and *Harbor Me* all mention dreams. The first claims agency, and citizenship not as national but as a global category [“We are dreamers,/ soñadores of the world./ We are/ Love/ Amor/ Love” (30, 31) and now that the family is in the US, the English word is repeated twice, whereas at the beginning of the book, “Amor” was the repeated word, which may also denote closure and a full circle]. *Enchanted Air* also mentions dreams on a hopeful note. In the closing poem one can read: “Someday, surely I’ll be free/ to return to the island of all my childhood/ dreams.” (185). *Harbor Me* speaks of ancestors’ dreams and

future hopes through the voice of Esteban (recorded by Hailey, since he is no longer in school) reading one of his father's poems sent to him from jail: "We are all the dream come true of the people/ who came before us./ And when he asks, [...]/ Tell him I am free./ Tell him the mountains go on and on/ and where they stop, Pico Duarte's peak points up/like lips/telling God a story" (168, 169). It is meaningful that Pico Duarte is the Dominican Republic's highest geographical point, and here it represents a beacon of hope. By contrast, while the US is mythically purported to be the beacon of hope for immigrants and the rest of the world, this representative immigrant family is forced to return to their home country for the harbor they did not find in the US. The cover of the book—the silhouette of six children against a sunny-golden background illuminating the Statue of Liberty—alludes to the unfulfilled promise of Emma Lazarus's 1883 *The New Colossus* poem ("Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand/ A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame/ Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name/ Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand/ Glows world-wide welcome") and the supposed liberty immigrants could find in the US. However, one can also perceive a sense of hope for the future, represented by the group of children. The end of *Manuelito* is the exception to the hopeful closing tone of the other books. At the beginning of their journey with the coyote, Manuelito and his best friend, Coco Loco, are still full of hopes and dreams. Coco Loco declares joyful: "We'll get rich. It's the USA—the land of everything" (28). As the two boys are locked away in a cement hut by the coyote, Coco Loco starts screaming for help. Afraid of getting into trouble because of all the screaming, the coyote hits and drags Coco Loco out of the hut, and both disappear. Manuelito's friend is nowhere to be found—a repetition of what had happened to Manuelito's Tío Domingo when he was also a child, many years before. The last page of the book reveals Manuelito's thoughts when he is back in Guatemala, to which he had been forced to return: "Are the maras going to kill me now?" (87).

CONCLUSION

Even though children's and YA literature is still perceived as simple and undervalued by many, these four books (*Dreamers*, *Manuelito*, *Enchanted Air*, and *Harbor Me*) clearly

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show that it is possible to discuss important and intricate matters such as Latinx (im)migration with young people in respectful and enriching ways. No matter the genre (picture book, graphic novel, poetry memoir, or YA novel), children's and YA literature are able to portray characters and their life experiences in a dignified way, along with all their historical, social, and cultural backgrounds. This paper wanted to prove that it is possible not only to use children's and YA books as primary bibliography to discuss complex matters, but also to show that these books have the capacity to act as "windows and mirrors," allowing for children and young adults to see themselves represented and to have a grasp of other people's experiences. According to Sciorba, Hernandez and Barton, "alternative perspectives about (im)migration can enter into and transform the minds of young audiences. Children's literature about Mexico-US (im)migration [...] has the potential to raise children's level of consciousness above that of the people making everyday decisions and enacting policies that dehumanize human beings" (15).

It is possible to find parallels among these books, especially concerning what surrounds Latinx (im)migration to the US, which makes it a shared journey. *Dreamers* and *Manuelito* both speak of crossing bridges and the act of crossing Mexico to the US. *Enchanted Air* and *Dreamers* talk about immigrants as wanderers and *caminantes*, respectively. *Manuelito* opens with an introductory note on immigrant people and refugees:

Sixty million people around the world become refugees every year. Half of them are under 18 years of age. [...] It is happening in North America. Over 200,000 unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle of Central America [...] have made the very dangerous trip across Mexico [...] in the hope of finding safety and refuge in the United States." (1)

Enchanted Air is dedicated to "the estimated ten million people who are currently stateless as the result of conflicts all over the world" (dedication). That is why it is so important to help giving voice to (im)migrants, through their own counter-storytelling, which deals with issues of language, immigration and/or citizenship—especially when these narratives are told from the point of view of (im)migrant characters, particularly (im)migrant children full of dreams. Lastly, every single one of the four analyzed works

speaks of the US as the land of dreams for all, and of the bleak reality of it harboring far fewer (im)migrants than promised.

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THE “CITIZEN SAVAGE”: WHITE MASCULINE DEGENERATION IN THE INDIAN HATER NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

While commonsense tells us that the 19th-century US was obsessed with individual rights and individual success, there remains evidence that civic duty continued to be a significant component of national identity. In fact, we might say that the conflict between individual rights and civic duty organizes one of the most popular forms of literature in the antebellum US: frontier fiction. In this article, I turn to James Hall’s *The Pioneer* and Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Nick of the Woods*. In these significant narratives, Hall and Bird expose the dangers of negative individualism on the frontier without the checks of civic duty and martial spirit. By closely attending to 19th-century politics, Indian policies, and military/militia history, I explore how the Indian Hater narratives of James Hall and Robert M. Bird are anxious about men whose passion for vengeance and violence transform them into the very “savage” they are hunting, and how this “degeneration” bars them from returning to civil society. Indian Haters abandon the virtues and morals stereotypical of the frontier hero; that is, their emotions and their bloodlust overtake their sense of duty to the polity; such degeneration undermines the nation because it very closely resembles the threat posed by Indians. A close look at Bird and Hall reveals that both authors are attempting to document this irony. Bird and Hall show how the Indian Hater motif highlights the reality of white degeneration of wayward/emotional men without the safeguards of martial virtue and civic duty. Even though the Jacksonian anti-Indian thought celebrates these Indian Haters, literature confronts readers with the self-destructive nature of uncontained Indian Hating. I observe that these narratives do more than present the Indian Hater as a self-sacrificial hero but rather closely diagnose how a man can become lost in his passions and become an Other from society without civic constraints.

Keywords: Frontier; Masculinity; Violence; Individualism.

INTRODUCTION

Frontier literature often celebrates the heroic frontiersman as an agent of national expansion and masculine self-control. According to Richard Slotkin’s *The Fatal Environment* (1998), the frontier hero is “always masculine[,] and he enters the wilderness willingly, even enthusiastically [...]. He is the heroic agent of an expansive colonial society” (64). Later, Slotkin (1998) expands on this claim by arguing that literature invites readers to emulate and approve of the frontier hero, who enters the wilderness to both tame the dangers of the unknown and regenerate or reinvent himself (63). Therefore this character-type is known for being in control of himself and his

surroundings. In turn, however, there is a more complicated character-type in frontier literature—the Indian Hater. Indian Haters become controlled by their passions for violence and bloodshed on the frontier and degenerate from productive members of society into “savage-like” individuals. Specifically, I attend to this degeneration in close readings of Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Nick of the Woods* (1837) and two of James Hall’s Indian Hater narratives, “The Indian Hater” (1828) and *The Pioneer* (1835).¹ By exploring degeneration in Indian Hater narratives, I uncover how Hall and Bird narrate anxieties about misguided individualism and the subsequent need for martial duty as a moralizing agent.²

Indian Hater narratives all have a similar plot: a young man and his family fall victim to the violence of a group of “rogue” Indians, and the male protagonist becomes consumed by his passion for revenge while struggling to remain a virtuous citizen.³ Bird’s Indian Hater, Nathan, is mocked by his fellow men as a pacifist and blamed for his family’s death. Unbeknownst to society, when Nathan is alone in the woods, he transforms into Nick of the Woods or Jibbenainosay—a legend (as neither man nor beast, or even the devil himself), who indiscriminately hunts and kills Indians (Bird 1837, 21). In Hall’s narratives, each protagonist responds to the death of their family by regressing into an Indian killer. In “The Indian Hater,” Monson is regarded as a man willing to kill any Indian simply for being an Indian. In *The Pioneer*, the protagonist

¹ As readers will notice, this article omits James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo. While Bumppo is indeed one of the most famous Indian killers, he is not an Indian Hater. Indian Haters are men who lose control of their emotions, become obsessed with revenge, and will murder any Indian within sight. Bumppo does not fall within these motifs. Instead, as Slotkin (1998) tells us, “Leatherstocking is a man frozen in stasis between the opposed worlds of savagery and civilization. That stasis is his protection from degeneration toward renegadery on the one hand, and social climbing on the other... Leatherstocking’s role as mediator between Indian and white is possible because he wants nothing of either world” (105). Leatherstocking, therefore, is not a man who loses “civility” because of his inability to contain his passions; he is a man who chooses to remain between worlds. Finally, whereas Indian Haters kill with murderous intent, Leatherstocking resists such degenerative actions and only kills to protect or save others.

² I use the phrase “martial duty” over military duty because, in many frontier novels, the protagonist briefly sets aside his personal interests for the greater good, often in moments of combat or war-like situations. Yet, these men do not always formally enlist in an army or militia. Then, the term martial duties encompasses a more comprehensive range of frontier-style conflicts from war to unsanctioned rescue missions.

³ The term “Indian” was largely used in the nineteenth century culture and literature up until the mid-twentieth century when the term “Native American” was adopted.

(only ever referred to as the Pioneer) seeks to become the strongest warrior in the forest by indiscriminately hunting and killing all Indian men.

THE HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAILURE AND WHITE/INDIAN CONFLICT

While the Indian Hater as a character type is indeed a victim of crime, he is ultimately a product of his own failure to remain in control; therefore, this article’s study of the Indian Hater first begins with an understanding of the concept of failure. According to Scott Sandage (2005), “[w]e sprint as much to outrun failure as to catch success” (2). So, while the Indian Haters are sprinting to outrun their tragic pasts, they are ironically rushing towards another failure that animates these narratives—degeneration. In their monomaniacal drive for revenge, the Indian Haters perform “savage” acts such as scalping and indiscriminate killing—acts white Americans attributed to the “rogue” Indians.⁴ In a study of American literary racism, Louis K. Barnett (1975) tells us, “[i]f the [frontiersman] carries his hatred of the Indian too far, he becomes equally cut off from the white community as an Indian hater. Although the Indian hater technically remains on the side of civilization, he, too, has effectively lost his white identity” (137). Indian Haters perform a certain kind of failure by regressing into something other than “civil,” and therefore threaten what it means to be a “civilized” man in America.

Ultimately, Indian Haters’ biggest failure is their inability to maintain self-control while pursuing vengeance, as self-control was one of the major pillars of American masculinity. According to Dana Nelson’s study on *National Manhood* (1998), “the new fraternal modeling of white manhood would accumulate imperatives for self-management and -regimentation” (11). Drawing heavily from founding father and social reformer Benjamin Rush, Nelson suggests that the demands of boys/men are often contradictory and impossible to perform: “In his seemingly inexhaustible and

⁴ Another difference between the Indian Haters and Leatherstocking is that Leatherstocking never kills indiscriminately nor takes the scalps of his enemy. Leatherstocking is not driven by emotions nor vengeance; rather, he kills “to make the world safe” (Pearce 1988, 202).

contradictory list of what republican boys must learn to exemplify and perform, we can see this emerging civic mandate for ‘self’ control; we can see how national political and economic concerns are handed off onto individual men, with the demand that they ‘learn’ how to internalize and balance incompatible and even antagonistic claims as an expression of their ‘own’ personal civic responsibility” (1998, 12). Specifically, Nelson refers to Rush’s claim that boys must love their family but not let that influence their duty to the nation: “Let him be taught to love his family, but let him be taught, at the same time, that he must forsake, and even forget them, when the welfare of his country requires it” (qtd. in Nelson 1998, 12). Ultimately, *Indian Haters* fail to prioritize the nation over their own need for revenge. *Indian Haters* are incapable of moderating and channeling their passions effectively.⁵

Indian Haters’ need for vengeance arguably reminds readers of darker American history episodes, such as the Paxton Boys uprising during Pontiac’s War. The Paxton Boys were a group of men who assumed it was their patriotic duty to kill all Native Americans in response to Pontiac’s War.⁶ Believing that they were protecting society from enemy spies, the Paxton Boys massacred and mutilated Native American refugees. Yet, the Paxton Boys were responsible for damage to the nation and its relationships with the Native Americans. According to Jeremy Engels (2005):

On the morning of December 14, 1763, dozens of men “equipped for murder” from the towns of Paxton, Donegal, and Hempfield on the Pennsylvania frontier rode to Conestoga, a small hamlet 60 miles west of Philadelphia, murdered six sleeping Native Americans, and burned the town to the ground, thus coloring the snow-covered Pennsylvania hills blood red. The 14 survivors were moved by the government to nearby Lancaster, but on December 27 a second mob from Paxton broke into the workhouse where these Native Americans had been sheltered and hacked them to pieces. These broken and mangled bodies suggested to settlers that Native Americans, thought to be unnaturally strong,

⁵ Anthony Rotundo’s (1993) study on early American Masculinity argues that a “man defined his manhood not by his ability to moderate the passions but by his ability to channel them effectively” (3).

⁶ The Paxton Boys were initially formed as a defense against Indian raids; members of this militia often lost friends and family during this conflict. According to Gerald Orlo Van Slyke, Jr. (2005), “[t]hey had learned to hate Indians even more because they and their families had suffered horrible, unspeakable atrocities during the last few years of the French and Indian War and Pontiac’s Rebellion, a situation they largely blamed on the Quakers” (46).

were no longer a threat to resist colonial violence. For the Paxton Boys, as they were known, this massacre was both an effort to gain political power on the frontier by ridding it of Native Americans and a play for political authority via violence. As one Paxton Boy bragged, "tell me not of Cassius, Brutus, Caesar, Pompey, or even Alexander the Great! We! we Paxton Boys have done more than all, or any of them! We have, and it gives me Pleasure to think on't, Slaughter'd, kill'd and cut off a whole Tribe! A Nation at once!" (356)⁷

The actions of these men not only caused political tensions, but their drive to kill all Indians animated a divide within the nation, as some men believed that the city elite cared more for their Indian refugees than the men and women on the frontier.⁸ According to Engels (2005), "[s]adly, colonial violence like this, which was already too familiar, would repeat itself countless times in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as American politicians failed to control the violent aggression of frontier settlers against Native Americans" (357). The anti-Indian efforts of the Paxton Boys endured well beyond this episode and are replicated in the Indian Hater narratives. As this article will show, Indian Haters believe that it is their right to hunt and kill Indians to satisfy their thirst for revenge and prove their masculinity. These men are not tamed by the boundaries of civilization or the rules of military duty, but instead, they become defined by their hyperaggressive/degenerate monomaniacal need for vengeance.

In what follows, I closely examine how Indian Haters abandon the virtues and morals typical of the frontier hero. That is, their emotions and bloodlust overtake their sense of duty to the polity; such degeneration undermines the nation because it very closely resembles the supposed threat posed by the Native Americans they sought to remove. A close look at Indian Hater narratives reveals that Hall and Bird are attempting to document this irony. Even though the Jacksonian anti-Indian thought celebrates these men, literature confronts readers with the self-destructive nature of uncontained Indian Hating. I observe that these narratives do more than present the Indian Hater as

⁷ Engels draws heavily from *The Paxton Papers* (1957), an arrangement of Pamphlets surrounding these events.

⁸ See Engels (2005), 371.

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a self-sacrificial hero by closely diagnosing how a man can become lost in his passions and become an Other from society without civic constraints.

REACTING TO LOSS

In literature, Indian Haters are a product of their response to personal or familial loss at the hands of enemy combatants. They become obsessed with revenge and bloodshed at the cost of their civilized self. As David Leverenz (1989) identifies, “[m]anhood functions to preserve self-control and, more profoundly, to transform fears of vulnerability or inadequacy into a desire for dominance” (73). The problem, however, arises when men are unable to cope with failure and fall into a “vortex of self-hating” that drives them to dominate (Leverenz 1989, 73). For Leverenz, dominance is acceptable as long as it is channeled into something productive. The issue, as we see with the Indian Haters, is how failure can contaminate this need to dominate to the point where it controls the entire essence of a man’s life. He further elaborates on the matter explaining that “[a]s a short-term defensive strategy in competitive situations, manhood can be undeniably inspiring. The problem develops when manhood comes to feel like one’s whole self. Then an ideology designed to manage and master fear becomes, paradoxically, a way of intensifying and burying fear, so deeply that...it generates a monstrous need to dominate” (1989, 73). Leverenz suggests that men are driven by this intense need to rectify or overcome a previous failure. In response to their humiliations, these men become dominated by revenge and spiral downward into something other than civil. Rather than using these intense emotions as a short-term coping mechanism, revenge and anger consume their whole identity.

In Hall’s *The Pioneer*, the protagonist suffers tragic losses on three separate occasions: his father is killed by Indians during a war party; his sister is abducted (and presumably killed); his mother is murdered by “rogue” Indians. The Pioneer lives in a state of anticipation, waiting for the next threat to his community. In Hall’s other Indian Hater narrative, “The Indian Hater,” the protagonist Monson loses his entire family in one dreadful event: “[t]his was my home. Here I built a house with my own labor. With the sweat from my brow I opened this clearing. Here I lived with my wife, my children,

and my mother" (1828, 11). On this night, "a gang of yelling savages" came, forced him to witness the death of his family, took him hostage, and made him feel "helpless as a child" (1828, 11-12). In Bird's *Nick of the Woods* (1837), Nathan, too, loses his family and friends at the hands of a "rogue" Indian party:

Ten years ago I was another man,—a poor man, friend, but one that was happy... There was the house that I did build me; and in it there was all that I held dear, my gray old mother...the wife of my bosom, and the child of my heart, the children, friend, for there was five of them, sons and daughters together, little innocent babes that had done no wrong; and, truly, I loved them well. Well, friend, the Injuns came around us: for being bold, because of my faith that made me a man of peace and the friend of all men, I sat me down far on the border... Friend, I had arms in my hand, at that moment, a gun that had shot me the beasts of the mountain for food, and a knife that had pierced the throats of bears in their dens. I gave them to the Shawnee chief, that he might know I was a friend...With my own knife he struck down my eldest boy! With my own gun he slew the mother of my children! ... Thee may think I would have snatched a weapon to help them then! Well, thee is right:-but it was too late!-All murdered, friend!-all-all,-all cruelly murdered! (152-153)

All three tragedies invite readers to feel anger towards the "savages" and sympathy towards these men. In fact, Nelson (1994) argues that these stories offer readers "a reason to hate Indians that arises from a sense of innocent personal loss," and that they "implicate its readers in its drive for revenge" (43-44). While I do not disagree with this statement, I do suggest that this argument does not fully acknowledge how these Haters fail to respond appropriately. Undoubtedly, readers would feel sympathetic for the Haters' loss, but the most unforgivable failure is the Indian Haters' inability to preserve their self-control as they all become consumed by their need for vengeance and bloodshed against all Indians not just those accused of murder; in general, Indian Haters constantly seek out more violence.⁹ There is little, if any, redemption for the hyper-aggressive responses that all three of these Indian Haters ultimately adopt because they

⁹ According to Slotkin (2006), "[t]he myth of the hunter...is one of self-renewal or self-creation through acts of violence. What becomes of the new self, once the initiatory hunt is over? If the good life is defined in terms of the hunter myth, there is only another hunt succeeding the first one" (556).

are constantly seeking new opportunities to satisfy their thirst for vengeance. While the frontier myth invites readers to celebrate frontier heroes, these narratives do not inspire heroism in gendered terms. Ideal masculinity is always in control. None of these protagonists are ultimately able to retain a sense of self-control.

MILITARY/CIVIC DUTY AS A MASK

For a brief period, there is a sense that Hall's Pioneer and Bird's Nathan are able to channel their energies through military or civic duties; they are offered opportunities to both redeem their masculinity and protect society from future attacks. According to Mark Bernhardt (2016), "[t]he opportunity to fight a war that could be thought of as a masculine endeavor linked to continued westward expansion resonated with certain segments of the population concerned that the environment developing in the eastern United States due to long-term settlement and an emphasis on sober, restrained living was having a detrimental effect on men" (205-6). Military expeditions were thought to help men hone their masculine identity (206). Initially, the Pioneer is a virtuous member of the militia. In fact, in *The Pioneer*, Hall celebrates martial spirit at multiple points within the narrative. The Pioneer argues that "martial accomplishments are held up as exemplary virtues worthy of the highest admiration" (1835, 174). As a boy, the Pioneer believed that "in killing a savage [he] performed [his] duty as man, and served [his] country as a citizen" (1835, 186) and, specifically, Indians are the enemy "whose extirpation was a duty...[the] slaying of an Indian [was] an act of praiseworthy public spirit" (1835, 172). Martial duty offers the Pioneer an opportunity to develop as a man and provide value to society. Bird, too, gives moments where his narrative celebrates martial spirit and civic duty. Before being ousted as the infamous Nick of the Woods, Nathan helps Roland, a Virginian traveler, to save his sister, Edith, from Indian raids and, later, Indian captivity. In particular, Nathan expresses that "I fight to save the lives of thee helpless women!" (1837, 98). The narrator continues to express that "then as if the first act of warfare had released him for ever from all peaceful obligations, awakened a courage and appetite for blood superior even to the soldier's, and, in other words, set him entirely beside himself" (1837, 98). Hall and Bird identify how men can channel

their passions through some sort of service. The problem, however, is the way in which their passion for violence exceeds the bounds of their service. Indian Haters are ultimately unable to remain in control of their actions while serving society. Their passion for vengeance soon becomes the driving force of their actions, as opposed to a drive stemming from martial spirit.

As these Indian Hater narratives identify, the problem is not just the Indian Hater himself but also how society overlooks this man’s violence so long as it serves a purpose. According to Matthew Brophy (2011), “Jackson’s response [to Indians on the frontier] was that of the Indian hater’s—to not rest until all Indians were expelled or vanished. Due to a supporting culture that increasingly represented Indian-hating as a ‘necessary evil’ that was not without heroism, he was able to work towards this goal with devastating efficacy” (113). For example, in Bird’s (1837) *Nick of the Woods*, Roland appears to remain in blissful ignorance of Nathan’s “savagery.” Nathan tells Roland to “bear witness that he was shedding blood, not out of malice or wantonness, or even self-defence, but purely to save the innocent scalps of poor women, whose blood would be otherwise on his head” (1837, 101). Later, after Nathan saves Roland from capture, he again attempts to justify his violence as necessary: “thee does not altogether hold it to be as a blood-guiltiness, and a wickedness, and a shedding of blood, that I did take to me the weapon of war, and shoot upon thee wicked oppressors, to the saving of thee life?” (1837, 141). Roland refuses to see the “extraordinary metamorphosis of Nathan, the man of amity and good will, into a slayer of Indians, double-dyed in gore,” and therefore he is an example of how men are willing to overlook wicked actions so long as it serves a greater purpose (1837, 146). Roland justifies Nathan’s actions as “the noblest and most virtuous act” because of how they have served a purpose (1837, 146). But, as it is later revealed, Nathan experiences “nameless joy and exultation, and [becomes] forgetful of everything but his prey” when given opportunities to kill defenseless Indians (1837, 188). While Nathan’s violence functions within the confines of duty at this moment, his bloodlust cannot always be justified, and his true nature is revealed to society. There comes a moment in Indian Hater narratives where violence can no longer be justified

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as an act of service, and readers begin to see how these characters are not agents of expansion, but rather wayward individuals.

CORRUPTED BY BLOODLUST AND A MONOMANIACAL DRIVE FOR REVENGE

Even though the frontier was believed to be a space of regeneration, Indian Haters degenerate because of their inability to contain their own drive for violence and revenge. As Slotkin addresses: “[t]he pioneer submits to regression in the name of progress; he goes back to the past to purify himself to acquire new powers, in order to regenerate the present and make the future more glorious” (1998, 63). Slotkin continues, “[i]f they can maintain their racial/cultural integrity in that world, if they can seize the natural, original power that is immanent in that world, and if they can defeat the forces that seek to prevent their return to civilization, then on their return they will be capable of renewing the moral and physical powers of the society they originally left” (1998, 63). Slotkin argues that young men were encouraged to enter the wilderness to progress themselves and, subsequently, society. Indian Haters do not fit this mold because they are not concerned with their civic virtue, but rather are driven by an intense passion for revenge that can never be satisfied; they do not seek to progress society or themselves, only retribution.

If masculinity is about self-control, these men fail at even the most basic level. Indian Haters do not control their actions; their emotions and bloodlust control them. In both of Hall’s narratives, Monson and the Pioneer repeatedly admit that the rules of civilization do not contain their revenge. Indian Haters believe they have a “right to destroy the savage” (Hall 1835, 186). These Haters kill not as an act of civil service but as a way to serve themselves. In *The Pioneer* (1835), Hall argues that these men relinquish self-control to their passions:

I had supposed, previous to this event that the gratification of my revenge would give peace to my bosom; but this is a passion that grows stronger by indulgence; and no sooner had I tasted the sweets of vengeance, than I began to feel an insatiable thirst for the blood of the savage. Resuming my secluded habits, but without rejoining my former companion, I now lived entirely in the woods,

occupied with my own thoughts, and pursuing, systematically, a plan of warfare against that hated race whom I regarded with invincible animosity. (183)

The Pioneer's inability to see beyond his feelings of revenge causes him to lose control of his own actions and therefore represents this fear that individualism without guidance can decimate a man's ability to remain a virtuous citizen. Once the Pioneer rejects the constraints of his militant duty, he chooses to view all Native Americans as his enemy, even if they are innocent bystanders. Thus, The Pioneer regresses into an immoral, unvirtuous combatant who does not feel "obliged to meet an Indian on fair terms" (1835, 183). He begins to hunt and kill indiscriminately and therefore begins to resemble a "savage" more than he resembles a civilized, white man.

These narratives suggest that men who become estranged from society and civilization are more susceptible to degeneration and wayward individualism. This fear is repeatedly documented in frontier history. Arthur K. Moore's (1981) study of the frontiersman tells us some frontiersmen "lacked moral and intellectual means to behave independently and yet rationally in a civilized state" (247). Nearly fifty years before Hall and Bird published these Indian Hater narratives, J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur (1782) observed that without the "power of example and check of shame," some men on the American frontier "exhibit the most hideous parts of our society" (72). This, of course, is reflected in Indian Hater narratives. As the Pioneer tells us, "It [the drive to hunt and kill] kept me estranged from society, encouraged a habit of self-torture, and perpetuated a chain of indignant and sorrowful reflections" (1835, 187). In his mission of vengeance, the Pioneer continues to stray further and further from society and "began to discover the injurious effects of [his] mode of life upon [his] own character" (1837, 186-7). Without the checks and balances of society, the Pioneer attempts to justify his killings because of his family's death; in response to his tragic childhood, he pursued a "systematic plan of destruction, which kept [his] hand continually imbued in blood, and [his] mind agitated by the tempest of passion" (1835, 186). According to the Pioneer, the "right to destroy the savage...was a principle deeply ingrained in [his] nature" (1835, 186). Without the moralizing safeguards of civilization, the Pioneer becomes consumed by his thirst for vengeance: "My thirst for revenge was unbounded. It filled up my whole

soul. I thought of little else than schemes for the destruction of the savage” (1835, 180). By leaving the military, the Pioneer becomes further estranged from society and its moral code and begins to replicate the very “savage” he sought to remove.

Bird’s *Indian Hater*, too, explores how isolation is a component of individual regression: “The soldier had heard that injuries to the head often resulted in insanity of some species or other; he could now speculate, on better grounds, and with better reason, upon some of those singular points of character which seem to distinguish the houseless Nathan from the rest of his fellow-men” (1837, 153). The tragic death of Nathan’s family, Roland finds, ended with a violent blow to his head, causing him to have seizures and, according to Roland, to transform into something different than the civilized man. Nathan’s lack of self-control is a symptom of being dominated by the “savage” Indian.¹⁰ Yet, while readers are sympathetic to his injuries, we cannot ignore how he can remain civil within society and turn into the *Indian Hater* while secluded on the frontier.¹¹ Nathan is able to perform being civil but even admits that he is consumed by an obsession to kill: “by night and by day, in summer and in winter, in the wood and in the wigwam, thee would seek for their blood” (1837, 154). Even after getting revenge and killing the chief, Nathan is described as having moments of “insane fury” (1837, 220). *Indian Haters* lose control of their passions and therefore are only motivated by this belief that they have a *duty* to murder any Indian.

However, in both *The Pioneer* and *Nick of the Woods*, the protagonists must face the realization that their actions resemble “savagery” more than civility when confronting their bloodlust through the eyes of white society. In Hall’s pivotal scene, the Pioneer finds a secluded home of a Native American and his wife. The Pioneer’s bloodlust is most evident when he “felt a malignant delight in the idea of invading this family as mine had been invaded” (1835, 188). The Pioneer plans to torment this family, making him no better than the “savages” of his childhood. While planning how he will

¹⁰ For more on this see John Bowen Hamilton’s “Robert Montgomery Bird, Physician and Novelist,” which does attribute some of this regression to Nathan’s physical trauma and head injury.

¹¹ In fact, most of Chapter 4 consists of Nathan’s fellow citizens criticizing him for being too much of a pacifist.

kill the Native American, he finds out that the wife is his long-lost sister, who he had believed was murdered at the hands of Indians. After realizing that he was about to harm his own sister, the Pioneer begins to reflect on his actions: "if they were murderers, what was I?" (1835, 195). The Pioneer starts to realize that he is also not innocent: "I began to think it possible, that mutual aggressions had placed both parties in the wrong, and that either might justly complain of the aggressions of the other" (1835, 196). In this scene, the Pioneer contemplates how his revenge/aggression only continues the cycle of violence: "But had *they* suffered no injury? Was it true that they were the first aggressors? I had never examined this question" (1835, 195). However, these thoughts only arise after realizing he nearly killed his own sister, another white person. Likewise, after being ousted as Nick of the Woods by his companions, Nathan struggles with his "savage" way of life. In a pivotal scene, Nathan has the opportunity to kill an old Native American woman but hesitates: "With knife in hand, and murderous thoughts in his heart, Nathan raised a corner of the mat, and glared for a moment upon the beldam. But the feelings of the white-man prevailed; he hesitated, faltered, and dropping the mat in its place, retreated silently to the door" (1837, 190).¹² Both of these protagonists have what we might call a "civil awakening" after their identity as an Indian Hater is revealed to their peers. Again, this might suggest that the checks of civilization and civic duty can mitigate the degeneration of Indian Haters. They are embarrassed by their actions only when their fellow white men (or family members in the case of the Pioneer) find out about their new identity.

CAN THEY BE REDEEMED?

These protagonists ultimately degenerate to the point where they resemble the "savage" they set out to obliterate more than the "civilized white man" they are supposed to embody/symbolize. Indian Hater narratives expose this fear that white men are not

¹² Even though the Indian Hater character-type critiques the wayward frontiersman, Bird's novel still participates in nineteenth-century racism by suggesting that it was Nathan's *whiteness* that prevents him from murdering the Native American woman.

immune to the dangers of the frontier; instead, these narratives are anxious about a man's ability to govern himself and remain virtuous while removed from the checks and balances of society. Monson, for example, is the only character to return to civilization, but he is never entirely accepted as part of the community due to his regression while on the frontier. Monson's fellow citizens think that even though he performed heroic acts, he cannot turn off his bloodlust within the boundaries of society. A farmer tells the narrator that while Monson is "a very good neighbor," "he is rather too keen with his rifle" (Hall 1828, 3-5). The farmer continues to contemplate the Indian Hater's place within society:

But is it possible, that in a civilized country, within the reach of our laws, a wretch is permitted to hunt down his fellow creatures like wild beasts; to murder a defenseless Indian, who comes into our territory in good faith, believing us a Christian people?

Why it is not exactly permitted; we don't know for certain who does it, nor is it any particular man's business to inquire more than another. Many of the settlers have had their kin murdered by the savages in early times; and all who have been raised in the backwoods, have been taught to fear and dislike them. Then Monson is an honest fellow, works hard, pays his debts, and is always willing to do a good turn, and it seems hard to break neighborhood with him for the matter of an Indian or so. (1828, 5)

Here we are presented with an anxiety about aggressive masculinity and its place in civilization. There was this concern that hyper-masculine men might not be able to contain their passions nor embrace the morals of society. In this passage, Hall's (1828) quote questions Monson's ability to let go of his bloodlust. Bird's Nathan, too, is often described as a devil or creature, something antithetical to a civilized man (21-22). In these examples, we see a character trope wherein Indian Haters are viewed as less than civil by their own societies due to their violent treatment of Indians.

In *The Pioneer*, Hall's Indian Hater attempts to redeem himself by becoming one of the "circuit-riders": "hardy tenants of the wilderness," who preach to frontiersmen and help them curb "their licentious spirit, and [tame] their fierce passions into submission" (1835, 149). These circuit-riders function to guide men and women through

the wilderness, and therefore the Pioneer can work at making amends for his violence by serving others in the name of religion:

They are the pioneers of religion. They go foremost in the great work of spreading the gospel in the desolate places of our country. Wherever the vagrant foot of the hunter roams in pursuit of game—wherever the trader is allured to push his canoe by the spirit of traffic—wherever the settler strikes his axe into the tree, or begins to break the fresh sod of the prairie...They carry the Bible to those, who, without their ministry, would only "See God in clouds, or hear him in the wind." They introduce ideas of social order, and civil restraint, where the injunctions of law cannot be heard, and its arm is not seen. And these things they do at the sacrifice of every domestic comfort, and at the risk of health and life. (1835, 149)

The Pioneer seeks to prevent others from becoming as wayward as he had by instilling a sense of order and guidance in the frontier. Without constraints, he became "savage-like," but the Pioneer and the circuit-riders use religion to instill order on the frontier. Hall's protagonist voices this anxiety that law and order need to be present for men to remain civil; thus, we return to this fear that men cannot govern themselves. For Hall, specifically, men need other men to check and balance their actions. At the start of his narrative, the Pioneer was kept in check by his community and other hunting parties. As an Indian Hater, he was only guided by his passion for becoming and remaining the best hunter and his own personal vengeance. Therefore, the only appropriate act of redemption for the Pioneer is to guide those without guidance: "I had trod through life; and I determined, by the usefulness of my future years, to endeavor to make some atonement for my former guilty career of crime and passion" (1835, 197). The Pioneer is an outcast; he rejected social constraints and regressed. He can only hope that his new sense of duty—helping others—will atone for his actions and help prevent more white men from regressing, as he himself did.

Bird's Nathan also recognizes his failures to maintain civility; rather than making amends and rejecting his actions as un-Christian, he chooses to remain outside of society. Nathan's solution for his hypermasculinity is that he, too, must vanish so as not to disrupt society:

"I, friend!" exclaimed Nathan, with a melancholy shake of the head; "thee would not have me back in the Settlements, to scandalise them that is of my faith! No, friend; my lot is cast in the woods, and thee must not ask me again to leave them. And, friend, thee must not think I have served thee for the lucre of money or gain: for, truly, these things is now to me as nothing. The meat that feeds me, the skins that cover, the leaves that make my bed, are all in the forest around me, to be mine when I want them; and what more can I desire?...all that I ask is, that thee shall say nothing of me that should scandalise and disparage the faith to which I was born." (1837, 237)

Nathan's response offers a few significant points of view. First, Nathan reminds Roland that he has not "served thee for the lucre of money or gain" (1837, 237). Nathan has regressed so much that he does not need the comforts of money, shelter, etc. Second, though, he still feels obligated to serve, protect, and redeem himself. Even though he is embarrassed when found out to be Nick of the Woods, he feels no remorse for killing Native Americans. Nathan's regression leads him to disappear and remain behind as society progresses; his "lot is cast in the woods" (1837, 237). The only aspect of civilization that Nathan seeks to hold on to is his faith and his community remembering him as faithful. He asks Roland not to tell anyone about his degeneration, so society may still view him as a peaceful Quaker. He would rather be remembered as a useless pacifist than a heroic, though wayward, "savage."

The endings of Hall's and Bird's narratives present an interesting debate. Both authors argue that these men who live in excessive violence and are unrestrained by civic or martial values cannot participate in the polity. Neither Nathan nor the Pioneer re-enters society at the end of their narratives. What is problematic, however, is that only one is blatantly apologetic. While Nathan disappears into obscurity, Hall's Pioneer chooses to redirect his skills to serve society better. The Pioneer attempts to make amends through a renewed sense of civic duty that seeks to alleviate tensions on the border and, more importantly, protect America's moral identity. Hall's protagonist functions to keep the peace and offer mediation on the frontier, allowing the nation to expand without sacrificing the sanity/civility of its citizens. Interestingly, by alleviating his guilt, the Pioneer seeks to lessen the guilt of the nation's expulsion of the Indian race. Hall argues that a moral code should contain American masculinity on the

frontier; the Pioneer not only becomes a guide for readers through his failures but also becomes a guide for future men on the frontier within the narrative.

In contrast to Hall's narrative, Bird's novel does not signal any remorse or desire to change; Nathan simply disappears into the wilderness. Nathan "was never more beheld stalking through the gloom; nor was his fearful cross ever again seen traced on the breast of a slaughtered Indian" (1837, 241). Like the Indians in America's fantasy of Manifest Destiny, Nathan too must vanish. According to Jared Gardner (1998), "[t]he black or India...represents the fate of the hero should his claims ultimately be unsuccessful. Denied a national identity, the white American thus risks becoming marked as racial other—in the racist imagination of the late eighteenth century, marked as uncultured, unpropertied, uncivilized, unknown, and unknowable" (2). If the threat of race and the presence of racial Others threatened the myth of America's foundation and brought white men together "to recognize each other as Americans," then the presence of these Indian Haters undermined the common denomination. Men like Nathan, though by birth a white American, had degenerated into something other than "civil" and therefore must follow the fate of all other "savages"—expulsion.

In answer to the question "can they be redeemed," these narratives argue "not entirely." While Monson does rejoin civilization, even his peers view him as an outsider, thus preventing him from being fully welcomed back into the fold. On the other hand, the Pioneer must remain outside of civil society, but finds some self-forgiveness in helping ensure others don't fail in the same ways he did. Finally, Nathan is completely without redemption: he is neither allowed back into society nor finds a way to atone for his actions.

CONCLUSION

James Hall and Robert Montgomery Bird explore the complicated relationship between masculinity, nationhood, and the "savage" frontier. By focusing our attention on the avenging Indian Hater, a character-type present in many frontier narratives during the Jacksonian era, we see a common denominator—failure. These men fail to protect their families and fail to maintain control of themselves. Hall and Bird use these characters

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as a warning against the violent and often uncontained actions taken against the Native Americans in the name of the American nation, and for personal retribution. Their narratives expose what happens when martial spirit goes from civic duty to a method of perpetrating personal prejudices. American men sought to establish a unique identity—something separated from both the Old World and the Native Americans that occupied the new nation. These Indian Haters are not participating in the nation’s development; instead, their selfish, uncontained actions are antithetical to the “civil” or “virtuous” American citizen. Bird and Hall, then, comment on the violent nature of hypermasculine men; these Haters embody the hero who is unsuccessful and therefore denied a national identity. It would be wrong, of course, to suggest that Bird and Hall were against westward expansion. Still, their narratives are animated by this anxiety that men can lose their virtue and civility, and become destructive to themselves and society.

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UNITED BY WHITE SUPREMACY: WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO A 'WHITES ONLY' CITIZENSHIP ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how white women in the US have centered their right to citizenship on the maintenance of white supremacy. While current scholarship primarily focuses on white male supremacy and women's promotion of racist ideologies, little is dedicated toward establishing a connection between some women's white supremacy and their organizing efforts to maintain the whiteness of 'the citizen' across the generations. Through a close examination and analysis of existing literature, I demonstrate how different groups of women in varying spaces and times assisted to create a 'whites only' citizenship by emphasizing their whiteness and femininity and claiming their right to agency and privilege because of their ideological distance from Black women's supposed uncivilized, masculine, and promiscuous nature. They asserted themselves as the 'civilizing' fair sex who is educated, chaste, pure, and domestic. From the fair sex advocates of the founding era to the tradwives of today's digital world, seemingly disparate groups of women united to advocate for a 'whites only' citizenship using every avenue possible: committing violence against Black women and other people of color; writing letters and ads; holding protests and rallies; participating in grassroots organizing; building far-reaching political networks; publishing articles; and creating social media accounts. These white women positioned themselves as the enforcers and sustainers of an exclusive US intended to privilege whites and marginalize non-white 'others.'

Keywords: Whiteness; Femininity; Citizenship; White supremacy.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, a resurgence of far-right politics has infiltrated the US with white women as its backbone. On January 6, 2021, crowds of mostly white men and women violently attacked the United States Capitol. Incited by Trump, they claimed election fraud and opposition to a newly elected president who stated in his first joint address to Congress, "White supremacy is the most lethal threat to the homeland today" (Biden 2021). The rioters proudly flew their white-supremacist flags, wore shirts with racist and anti-Semitic slogans, burned Black Lives Matter banners, flashed "WP" hand gestures to symbolize "white power," and erected a "Day of the Rope" noose meant to punish "race traitors" (Washington Post Staff 2021). Some conservative

and many liberal white women were shocked at the insurrection, appalled at such an affront to democracy. However, it should not come as a surprise that such an event would occur. White supremacist ideology has been integral to America's identity since the inception of the republic. An historical analysis reveals that white women have helped to facilitate what I am calling a 'whites only' citizenship, a construct of exclusion that equates 'the citizen' with whiteness.

While current scholarship primarily focuses on white male supremacy and women's historical campaigning for citizenship, little is dedicated to establishing a connection between women's white supremacy and their organizing efforts across generations. Research largely explores white supremacy in general terms, frequently neglecting white women's particular form of organizing. Mainstream narratives focus on white men, obscuring the roles white women have played in white supremacist politics, leaving some whites confused as to why a substantial contingent of women would support it today. Additionally, some scholarship has addressed citizenship as it pertains to the exclusion of people of color (Anderson 2016, 2018; Roediger 1991; Harris-Perry 2011; Feagin and Ducey 2019; Lipsitz 2018) and how white women perpetuate white supremacy (Jones-Rogers 2019; McRae 2018; Freeman 2020; Davis 2008; Anderson 2021; Brüchmann 2021; Phillips-Cunningham 2020; Gilmore 1996; Darby 2020). However, few have connected seemingly disparate groups of women across centuries to demonstrate how they advocated for a 'whites only' form of citizenship. Through a close examination and analysis of existing literature, I argue that different groups of women in varying spaces and times assisted to create a 'whites only' citizenship by emphasizing their whiteness and femininity.

THE ORIGINS OF A GENDERED 'WHITES ONLY' CITIZENSHIP

An exploration of a gendered 'whites only' citizenship is necessary to foreground white women's organizing. Their white supremacist political campaigns are intimately connected to the concepts of whiteness and femininity that originate with colonizers' encounters with indigenous and African women's bodies during the 1500s (Morgan 2004, 17-21). Although whiteness is a relatively modern invention from the 1600s

(DiAngelo 2018, 65), the concept of “white woman” can largely be attributed to Europeans distinguishing the familiar white woman from African women’s bodies (Morgan 1997, 167-190). European colonists and slaveholders described Black women in stark contrast to white women (Morgan 1997). The gendered and racialized construct of Black women is directly linked to white femininity. Since the colonization of Black and brown bodies, there has been a systemic effort to legitimize the institution of slavery by comparing the “purity” of white women with the “savageness” of African women (Morgan 1997, 167). An historical overview of the connections between white women and Black women’s identities is an essential component to understanding the complex dynamics of a gendered ‘whites only’ citizenship.

European notions of femininity shifted to highlight what colonizers considered to be the apparent differences between African and European women’s bodies. African women’s bodies became the antithesis of European women’s bodies. Jennifer L. Morgan (1997) explains the “gendering of racial ideology” that contributed to shaping the social constructs of race, gender, and sexuality. Both Amerindian and African bodies were depicted as deviant from the white “feminine” body. Morgan states, “femaleness evoked a certain element of desire, but travelers depicted black women as simultaneously un-womanly and marked by a reproductive value dependent on their sex” (1997, 168). Colonizers compared the familiar “feminine” white woman’s body with the unfamiliar masculinized African or Amerindian bodies of women of color. As raced women, “Europeans found a means to articulate shifting perceptions of themselves as religiously, culturally, and phenotypically superior to those black or brown persons they sought to define” (168). White women were portrayed as subservient, pure, delicate, modest, fragile, domestic, and overall culturally superior through white femininity (Schloesser 2002, 8). Thus, Black women’s deviation from white women’s “feminine” bodies, and the links made between sexuality and savagery “fitted them for both productive and reproductive labor” (Morgan 1997, 184). Whereas the English woman’s work was exclusively domestic and viewed as feminine, the African woman was depicted as an extractable reproductive laborer who could be forced to provide masculinized labor (Morgan 2004, 40). These perceptions of African women as savage and masculinized

became the framework for understanding whiteness, femininity, and ultimately citizenship.

THE ORIGINS OF WHITENESS

During the late 1600s, “white” appeared for the first time in colonial laws (DiAngelo 2018, 17). People were asked to designate their race on the census in 1790 and in 1825, blood counts were being used to determine classification as non-white. The immigration boom of the 19th century solidified the notion of whiteness, and the first part of the century became the most critical and formative years in constructing working-class whiteness (Roediger 1991, 14). David Roediger argues that whiteness was a strategy in which white workers responded to their “fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline” (13). Racial identity and independence became associated with whiteness in contrast to the ‘savagery’ of racialized others: Native Americans and Black people. The racial inferiority and barbarism of indigenous people and Africans was justified by comparing their nudity, skin color, and other characteristics to whites (Gallay 2009, 3). Prior to the revolution, not all whites could describe themselves as free within the institution of white indentured servitude (Roediger 1991, 20-21). However, whites desired to eliminate the model of “slavish Europe” and adopt a “republican liberty” in the US (49).

Between the revolution and the onset of republicanism with its emphasis on independence, white workers distanced themselves as much as possible from Black enslaved people. Race has been a ‘determinant’ for a person’s access to politics, the labor market, and their understanding of identity since the beginning of the 18th century (Omi and Winant 2015, 7-8). One of the primary ways in which working class whites distinguished themselves from Black enslaved people was through language. “Hireling” was disassociated from “slave,” “boss” replaced “master,” and “freemen” the exclusion of Black people (Roediger 1991, 46-49). Attempting to assert their white femininity, white women who performed domestic labor distinguished themselves from Black servants by choosing to call themselves “help” or “hands” (49). Herrenvolk republicanism, as Roediger terms it, describes how Black people were framed not only as anti-citizens, but

also as a threat to republicanism (1991, 172). Through its association with servility and dependency, blackness was considered a threat to white freedom. Hence, the establishment of the white working class helped to justify the continuation of Black enslavement and solidify whites' dominance.

During the eighteenth century, white women were labeled the "fair sex" (Schloesser 2002, 7). The phrase mirrors previous understandings of women's political position in Europe. In 1340, the term "fair" was used to describe women who were morally pure, clean, unstained, or free from blemish (54). After the English made their first contact with Africans, fair became associated with skin and hair color, giving birth to dichotomies such as light versus dark, white versus black. The term "fair sex" was then used to distinguish those who were of lighter complexion – white – and sex was a reference to women (7). It was a term created to exclude all non-white women from the category of woman. As Pauline Schloesser explains, "because discourses on the fair sex took *white* women as their object, they were already bound by race and class. Articles on the fair sex or the 'ladies' were directed at white women from the property-owning classes, not women of color, enslaved, or indentured women" (2002, 8). Although the fair sex was originally intended to support white men, the ideology allowed white women's "subjectivity and agency" by placing nonwhite 'others' and children under their surveillance (8). In many ways, the fair sex was credited with maintaining "civilization," a racial code for whiteness (56, 80). Therefore, as Schloesser argues, the concept of citizenship has been too narrowly conceived. Rather than equate citizenship with the right to vote, the 'citizen' question must be broadened to consider how white women's adoption of white supremacy made room for their agency and access to oversee and oppress non-white persons since the inception of the republic. Through fair sex ideology, Anglo women became white through positioning Black women as the antithesis to white femininity (the fair sex) and their adoption of white supremacy (81).

WHITE WOMEN SLAVEOWNERS

The typical narrative of white women's involvement with enslavement is that it was extremely limited, dependent on extenuating circumstances, or highly regulated by

their husbands (Jones-Rogers 2019, xiv-xv). Stephanie Jones-Rogers challenges this assumption in her historical analysis of formerly enslaved interviewees that were collected shortly after emancipation in the South. In her study, Inge Dornan estimates that women made up about 7 to 10 percent of all slaveholders in the low country during the colonial era (2005, 389). When the interviewees spoke about their experiences of masters and mistresses (white women slaveowners), they expressed an equal distribution of power and control by both sexes, and an increased brutality from white women in comparison to men (Jones-Rogers 2019, xvi, 480-482). Although married women were regulated by coverture laws that regarded them as belonging to their husbands, their whiteness and economic investment in slavery gave them access to more agency by using “legal loopholes” to negotiate these legal impediments (xvii). White slave-owning women’s active involvement in enslavement disrupts the notion of white men’s omnipotent dominance during the antebellum era (xvii).

White women took every measure to ensure their “property” remained intact. In the courtrooms and in their own households, they publicly and privately challenged anyone who attempted to claim ownership of the enslaved people they owned (Jones-Rogers 2019, 46). When others accused them of lying, they presented evidence to the contrary by filing petitions that asserted their rights to the enslaved persons in question. These women supplied documentation of their involvement in the slave markets and beyond. In fact, slaveholding widows had equal legal rights to the white men who had previously owned enslaved people; they became their property (4). Inge Dornan found that many slaveholding women would place ads in the local papers when enslaved people ran away stating they wanted their return, “dead or alive” or “severely flogged” (2005, 386, 402). They took aggressive direct action by asserting their authority over enslaved people in their efforts to retain them. Women also had to appoint trustees for their “property” and when confronted with the decision, they often chose their mothers, aunts, or sisters as trustees rather than their husbands (Jones-Rogers 2019, 47-48). This is an indication that they were unwilling to relinquish control of the enslaved people they owned. These slave-owning women would let no man or court stand in the way of their economic investment in slaveholding.

White women enforced disciplinary techniques that ranged from “kindness to brutality” to ensure their economic investment was profitable, and to maintain their power as white slaveholders (Jones-Rogers 2019, 62). Kristen Wood explains that some former enslaved people “recalled women attacking domestic slaves and children with pokers, irons, brooms, or whatever else came handy” while others remarked that they were “too compassionate or too weak” to beat them (2004, 50). Evidence demonstrates that at times, they would intervene in the beatings of their enslaved people by husbands or overseers (Wood 2004, 51), which may have been an effort to sustain profits lest their enslaved people become unable to work or unsellable in the slave markets (Jones-Rogers 2019, 64). At other times, enslaved people remarked on the special cruelty of their mistresses (Jones-Rogers, 78-79; Wood, 51-52). Like men, women slaveholders likely used extreme methods to punish enslaved people (Dornan 2005, 400; Wood 48). Although brutality that results from disfiguration or murder may seem “counterproductive” for profit, it served as an important method to assert women’s power over enslaved people and in the community at-large (Jones-Rogers, 79). They used force “deliberately and instrumentally” toward enslaved people (Wood, 50). Jones-Rogers explains, “[...] a slave-owning woman’s decisions to abuse, maim, or kill her slaves was simply an ‘extreme version’ of her ‘right to exclude’ others from reaping the benefits of having access to the slaves she herself abused or destroyed” (2019, 79). As a strategy to ensure their dominance, some women forced enslaved people to watch as they tortured the enslaved person. This kind of treatment was within their purview, because slave-owning women had laws that protected them nearly without impunity if they maimed or killed enslaved people.

According to formerly enslaved people, the slave market was not bound by a slave yard, pen, auction house, or road; it was in households and white women were fully engaged. Contrary to previous understandings that framed slave trading as a masculine endeavor, Jones-Rogers documents how white women facilitated the sales, purchases, and exchanges of enslaved people in their homes (2019, 83). The *Georgia Gazette* and the *South Carolina Gazette* had “numerous” ads written by women asking people to purchase their slaves (Dornan 2005, 386). Some chose to employ relatives or

family friends to do this for them, while others chose to directly involve themselves (Jones-Rogers 84-85). Southern white women were intimately familiar with the slave market and used that knowledge to their economic advantage (Jones-Rogers, 100; Wood 2004, 53).

After abolition, former white women slaveowners wrote about their experiences of slavery (Jones-Rogers 2019, 200). They thought of enslavement as a positive force to civilize African “savages” (201). Slavery was part of God’s plan to help these ‘inferior people,’ and white women were simply adhering to his directions. They were immersed in the system of enslavement, so they had to support it. These views reflected their own experiences of slavery, but they did not write about how they economically benefited from it. To justify their involvement in slave trading, they explained that it was a necessary evil, only a last resort, and felt tremendous “anguish” because of it. This largely contradicts the accounts of enslaved people who intimately experienced the detached cruelty of the mistresses who violently beat them and sold them (Jones-Rogers 2019, 201-203).

White women were not passive bystanders within the institution of slavery; they were active participants in it. Through their involvement, they enforced the dominance of whiteness and what it meant to be a woman within the institution of slavery. Although many of them deviated far from the acceptable behavior of a lady at the time, they were able to retain their status within their respective communities. White slave-owning women couched their authority to enslave Black people within the construct of whiteness. They claimed their privileged position by exerting their agency to oppress non-white others deemed as savages. They negotiated—whether through courts, markets, or the privacy of homes—their entitlement to own Black people and commit ruthless acts of violence against them. And when their actions were challenged to be ‘unladylike,’ they constructed a narrative to fit within the confines of femininity. White women were not helpless victims of a sexist society; they strategically used their whiteness and womanhood to establish power within the existing structure of slavery. As slaveowners, white women located themselves as enforcers of white supremacy and the makers of a “whites only” citizenship.

THE FAIR SEX ADVOCATES

Despite powerful and progressive white women of the founding era identifying with the ‘others,’ they mostly asserted their whiteness as superior and as a means to meet their political agendas (Schloesser 2002, 201). They distinguished themselves from black and indigenous women, establishing themselves as the “fair sex,” the markers of civilization (Schloesser 191-192; Newman 1999, 8). White women who subscribed to the fair-sex ideology incurred benefits from the dominant culture that included some political agency, property, and power (Schloesser, 94). Many of the frontrunners were educated and literate; their privileges associated with their race and class (94). Schloesser explains, “Through fair sex ideology, Anglo-American women ‘became white’ [...] because whiteness underwrote women’s middle-class standing and their limited autonomy and authority as ‘civilizing’ beings” (2002, 94). Disrupting fair sex ideology would have meant challenging the racial hierarchy, a risk most were unwilling to take. They chose to challenge gender issues in isolation from race to help facilitate the beginnings of a “whites only” citizenship (Schloesser 2002, 95; Newman 1999, 4-5).

Mercy Warren, Abigail Adams, and Judith Sargent Murray were some of the most prominent women in the founding of the US. They were all well-read, articulated their own views on politics, and participated in debates during the Revolution (Schloesser 2002, 188-189). These women envisioned a world in which rights could have been extended to people of color, but they ultimately signed onto white supremacy. They understood gender inequality to be socially constructed, yet were unwilling to identify racial constructs in a similar vein. Warren argued that women were as rational as men, but she could not assign rationality to Black people (Schloesser 2002, 190). Adams critiqued women’s oppression but stopped condemning slavery. She opposed immigrants’ influence on politics and identified indigenous people as “odd savages” and accepted their genocide (Miller Center 2021; Schloesser, 190). Murray, a fierce advocate for women’s natural rights, was blatant in her white supremacist views. Not only did she economically benefit from her brother’s plantation, but she also feared that enslaved people would negatively impact her nephews’ racial purity (190). Despite their progressive philosophies on women’s rights and citizenship, they ultimately succumbed

to fair sex ideology that upheld both a gender and racial hierarchy during the founding era.

Their acceptance of racial dominance and gender subordination sustained some benefits. The fair sex ideology helped construct “white women as an exclusive group, just as white men were an exclusive group” (Schloesser 2002, 192). Juxtaposed against the masculinized savagery of Black and indigenous women, the fair sex was tender, proper, delicate, and civilized (204-205). Their importance was linked to the oppression of ‘others’: people of color and immigrants (192). Though white women were not accepted as full citizens of the early Republic, they certainly advocated for a racial hierarchy that would mark the beginnings of a ‘whites only’ citizenship for future generations.

THE SUFFRAGISTS OF THE NORTH AND SOUTH

White suffragists of both the North and South knew that uniting themselves under a racist banner would be key to gaining the right to vote. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Carrie Catt among other nineteenth-century women purported that there were essential differences between white men and women, and between whites and people of color (or immigrants) to demonstrate their right to vote (Schloesser 2002, 188; Newman 1999, 60). As the “fairer sex,” they notably argued that white women were peaceable, empathetic, and loving, giving them more capacity to balance out or mitigate the “destructive forces of men” (Schloesser, 188). Although these women voiced support for abolition, they did not identify people of color as equal counterparts. As the ‘civilized’ race, they deserved access to the vote more than the savage uneducated people of color and immigrants. To demonstrate their right to enfranchisement, white women positioned themselves as the arbiters of assimilation for nonwhites (Newman 1999, 56). They would argue both their racial proximity with white men and their racial superiority to people of color.

Most of the early women’s rights and suffrage movements consisted of middle-class, educated, white, native-born women (Davis 2008, 62). As they did not represent the most exploited workers or Black women, their politics reflected a ‘whites only’

approach (129). After the Civil War, Stanton's platform became about distinguishing white women from black men and immigrants. When Frederick Douglass wrote that black male suffrage should come first, she responded by saying that she would not support "ignorant negroes and foreigners" creating laws that would apply to her (Davis 2008, 137). These white suffragists supported the ideology that white women were the "rightful, natural protectors of uncivilized races' whose enfranchisement would not challenge sexual difference and would promote the progress of civilization" (141). This became their specialized racial responsibility: to 'protect' nonwhites; and in doing so, claimed their rights as white, woman, and citizen (Newman 1999, 57). Hence, their combination of education and femininity would supposedly counteract men's destructive nature and people of color's uncivilized nature (Davis 2008, 141).

Many white women outright refused to include Black women as an integral part of suffrage. Alice Paul, President of the National Woman's Party, banned Addie Hunton, a black secretary at the NAACP, from speaking at the National Woman's Party about including suffrage for Black women in 1921 (Newman 1999, 6). Paul argued that black women's enfranchisement should be taken up by racial rights rather than a women's organization. Frances Willard, a prominent suffragist and president of Woman's Christian Temperance Union, insulted Black women as a common method to secure the vote (Fields-White 2011). Similar organizations such as the National Woman's Party and The National American Woman Suffrage Association followed suit. Willard and other suffragists argued that only the literate should be admitted to citizenship and the vote (Giddings 1984, 124), knowing that it would simultaneously eliminate the poor, Black people, and immigrants from the ballot (Davis 2008, 149). Stanton said it "would also be our most effective defense against the ignorant foreign vote" (150). Black women countered by saying that character should be a criterion rather than educational requirements (Giddings 1984, 124). Ida B. Wells, an advocate for black people's suffering and anti-lynching legislation, also challenged white women's exclusive views. She slandered Willard for her racist commentary and questioned white women's detachment from Black people's lives (Fields-White 2011).

White suffragists used their whiteness and femininity as a weapon against Black women and all oppressed groups of the time. They attained suffrage under the guise of a ‘whites only’ citizenship in 1920. As a bargaining chip, they promised to maintain white supremacy in both the North and South (Giddings 1984, 125). The National American Woman Suffrage Association nationally proclaimed, “White women’s vote would give supremacy to the white race” (125). White women willfully excluded Black women and other people of color from the vote for another generation, and the suffrage movement became yet another iteration of white women’s fight to sustain a ‘whites only’ citizenship.

THE SOUTHERN BELLES OF WHITE SORORITIES

Founded in 1902, the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) desired to represent the epitome of white femininity: the southern belle (Freeman 2020, 2). She was thought to be pious, pure, and physically alluring. From the 1920s to 60s, both nonsouthern and southern sororities held rush parties that were plantation-themed, with costumes, food, and drinks that were supposed to be southern. Sororities practiced a “southern aesthetic” which mythologized the heritage of the South and southern women’s beauty (Freeman 2020, 3). Black people’s experiences of the Old South were either completely erased or created to conform to their imagination. This southern aesthetic practice connected the entire NPC and continues to this day (Freeman 3; Beatty and Boettcher 2019, 39). Margaret Freeman explains, “Nonsouthern sorority leaders simultaneously desired and othered the southern aesthetic as they privately supported segregation, while also pointing to white southerners as the reason they needed to uphold their whites-only membership policies” (Freeman 2020, 3). They discriminated against anyone who did not conform or submit to the epitomized southern belle image. They additionally wrote white clauses in their constitutions to ensure the exclusion of anyone who did not fall under the parameters of whiteness (Harris et al. 2019, 19). The white southern belle was called upon to emphasize racial hierarchies and became a symbol to voice fears about shifting demographics and racial issues (Freeman 2020, 5).

Freeman argues that it is important to explore both southern and nonsouthern areas of the US to provide a framework for use of the southern aesthetic (2020, 3). These historically white organizations created a national network for women's conservative activism. Throughout the 1900s, sororities worked to ensure their members were imbibed with conservative ideology. They relied on the southern belle image to construct a model for American womanhood and trained sorority women to mold themselves after it across the US. Beginning in the 1930s, sorority women aligned with anti-radical conservative thought out of concern for liberal influence and the "destruction of 'American democracy,'" which was racially coded language for white America (Freeman 2020, 3). The NPC sororities were part of a grassroots network that helped to facilitate and grow the conservative movement in the twentieth century and largely continue that trajectory today.

As a response to the civil rights movement, the demographics of college campuses were changing during the 1960s. Desiring to keep NPC sororities as 'whites only,' they reacted by clinging to conservative ideology that proclaimed an anticommunist and a "pro-America" rhetoric (Freeman 2020, 127-128). They cloaked their 'whites only' policy under the political right to individual freedom, freedom of association, and anti-federal government intervention (Freeman 128; Salinas et al. 2019, 30-31). To defend themselves, NPC sororities said their "American way of life" would be attacked if they gave in to liberals and communists (Freeman, 128). Critics of their racial exclusivity were constructed as either "communists" or "communist sympathizers" (129). National officers created citizenship trainings to indoctrinate their members to espouse the "all-American values of individual freedom, private property rights, free enterprise, and adherence to the Christian faith" (142). These programs taught that the southern belle conservative aesthetic and ideology were vital for an upright citizen. Members were told that it was important for them to take an active role in promoting conservatism. Meanwhile, they attempted to downplay their engagement in politics, saying that it was part of their maternal role – another form of caregiving. Their stance was that the federal government was trying to intervene into their homes, an invasion of privacy to include non-white 'others' (Freeman 2020, 129).

According to the sororities, they were the ‘authentic’ American citizens who were pushing back against others’ attempts to destroy democracy (Freeman 2020, 130). White middle- and upper-class women defined themselves by othering those who did not fit NPC sorority membership qualifications: people of color (Freeman, 130; Harris et al. 2019, 18-19). Sorority women felt threatened by anyone who looked ambiguous, different, not a ‘true’ American and began to question potential members about their “backgrounds,” i.e. their whiteness (Freeman, 131). Leaders like Mary Love Collins, a national delegate of an NPC, warned against “racial mixing” as part of a communist plot. Freeman explains, “by linking the continuance of sorority exclusivity to displays of wartime patriotism, the committee paved the way to argue for their ‘right’ to discriminate in membership as a basic American freedom in the 1950s and 1960s” (133). The Citizenship Committee connected the threat of desegregation with American freedom, and reasoned that white power was under attack (146-147).

When there were governmental or other public objections to their ‘whites only’ policy, the NPC termed it “discrimination hysteria” (Freeman 2020, 135). The Supreme Court rulings against racial segregation fostered fear in NPC members that their state and private rights to discriminate were in jeopardy. They encouraged their members to exclude by stating, “Those who have the capacity to discriminate, [...] give quality to what they do” (135). The NPC Public Relations Committee explained further, “the heart of discrimination is not racial but an effort to preserve deeply rooted American freedom” (135). The NPC argued that their right to discriminate and choose their white members was akin to choosing their closest friends; it was a private matter, and a ‘democratic’ government would not intervene. Although sororities have eliminated their explicit ‘whites only’ clauses, there is an implicit policy to exclude all non-white others because most of their members remain white to this day. The NPC sororities solidified their right to exclude based on their southern belle aesthetic as white and feminine (Freeman 2020, 135).

IRISH AND ITALIAN WOMEN

The story of Irish and Italian women's assimilation into whiteness differs from men's experiences. Beginning in the late 1600s, one had to be classified as white and male to be considered a full citizen of the US (DiAngelo 2018, 17; Schloesser 2002). Men of various groups petitioned the courts to be reclassified as white (DiAngelo 2018). The Armenians won their case as white because they had the assistance of scientific witnesses who said they were "Caucasian." However, in 1922, the Japanese could not be legally white because they were classified as "Mongoloid." The court also ruled that Asian Indians were not legally white even though they had been scientifically classified as "Caucasian" (DiAngelo 2018, 17). Many groups from Europe were not readily integrated as white in the US. The Irish were lumped together with Black people and labeled as the "Blacks of Europe." (Tehrani 2000, 825; Battalora 2015, 79). The Italians, Slavs, and Greeks retained a low social status that remained for years (Tehrani 2000, 825). To legitimize the inconsistent outcomes, the Supreme Court proclaimed that "being white was based on the common understanding of the white man [. . .] People already seen as white got to decide who was white" (DiAngelo, 17).

For the racial boundaries that were fluid and blurry, racial determinations were based on the groups' ability to perform whiteness and assimilate (Tehrani, 828). Omi and Winant explain, "Concepts of race prove to be unreliable as supposed boundaries shift, slippages occur, realignments become evident, and new collectivities emerge" (2015, 105). People—both individuals and groups—sought to claim "distinctive racial categories and identities" that challenged classifications of race imposed by the states (105). Irish men became white through their clashing with Black people at work, participating in mobs against abolition, and supporting the pro-enslavement Democratic party (Arnesen 2001, 13; Battalora 2015, 81). They earned whiteness by adopting white supremacy and anti-Black sentiment (Arnesen, 15; Battalora, 83-84). Although granted citizenship much earlier, the Immigration Act contained provisions to ensure the legalization of Irish immigrants as late as 1990 (Portes and Zhou 1993, 86).

Irish women were considered non-white immigrants who were "destitute, brutish, lazy, dirty, uneducated, and immoral." (Phillips-Cunningham 2020, 8). Upon their arrival to the US, Irish women were confined to domestic work associated with

Black women's labor (Phillips-Cunningham, 13; Battalora, 82). Black women's relationship to domestic work is tied to the history of enslavement whereas Irish women, constructed as non-white foreigners who held proximity to blackness, were relegated to domestic labor (Phillips-Cunningham 2020, 13). Domestic service was narrowly conceived as exclusively for non-white others and unacceptable for 'ladies' (13). Working predominantly in northeastern homes of white families, these groups of women were characterized as servants who were more submissive than other groups. Irish women were considered brutish, domineering, and ignorant, and Southern Black women as uncivilized and masculine (Phillips-Cunningham 2020, 14).

Irish women used their race and gender to reframe and assimilate themselves into whiteness. They insisted their right to higher wages and better working conditions based upon the argument that they were subjected to "white slavery" (Phillips-Cunningham 2020, 116). The idea of white slavery stemmed from distinguishing themselves from Black people who were considered inherently inferior and thus did not deserve protection (116). In doing so, Irish women asserted their respectability in comparison to Black women and reconceptualized what it meant to be a lady within the parameters of white womanhood. The term 'lady' had been reserved for middle to upper class white women who were native-born and not earning wages. As women earning an income, they had to relocate themselves and expand the concept of ladyhood and whiteness. To do this, they joined women's groups in white labor unions (117). They published in newsletters attempting to hold employers accountable for their exploitation. Danielle Phillips-Cunningham explains that they used "local newspapers to insert themselves into white respectability by taking to task both male and female employers who complained about Irish servants" (2020, 117). Irish domestic servants closely scrutinized housewives when they did not live up to the expectations of ladyhood, and they expanded the concept of 'lady' to include themselves by judging their employers' actions. Because of the combination of their organizing efforts with white native-born women and their reframing of ladyhood in publications, Irish women were able to assimilate themselves into white womanhood (Phillips-Cunningham 2020, 131).

Although they were deemed white, Italian women were not immediately welcomed into the citizenship privileges of whiteness. Italian immigrants were portrayed as “dark,’ ‘swarthy,’ and ‘kinky-haired’” and as such, situated into a despised group (Guglielmo 2010, 5). Largely immigrating from southern Italy, they were poor peasants and considered “racially suspect” (5). The image of southern Italians was an inferior group fitted for menial labor and criminal activity. At the same time, Italian women were considered whites worthy of saving and reforming. They were positioned as hopeless victims who were heavily oppressed by tradition and the men in their lives (Guglielmo 2010, 3). Other European American female labor activists perpetuated the victim narrative by claiming Italian women’s docility and invisibility in the labor movements (3-4). They were often contrasted with the liberated white middle-class women. However, this ‘victim’ image of southern Italian women became most prominent at the peak of Italian women’s involvement in revolutionary activism.

Jennifer Guglielmo explains that by framing Italian women “as victims in need of rescue, social reformers positioned them as entitled to protection and the rights of citizenship” (105). This image of “needing saving” largely contradicted their substantial activism in some of the most revolutionary social movements that included a belief in anarchy and socialism, and their involvement with labor strikes and industrial unionism (2010, 105). Unlike the stereotype, Italian women were not simply victims; they were predominantly garment workers who stood up to their bosses and demanded legal protection (Guglielmo 2010, 205-206). During 1919 and 1920, police raids against labor activists and radicals increased dramatically. The government sought to completely obliterate anyone they deemed an “anarchist” threat (199-200). Italian women’s paths to organize became incredibly repressed. They learned that their assimilation into the US required abandoning their involvement in social movements and adopting nationalism and anti-blackness (6, 200). Supporting nationalism and antiradicalism became their avenue to the full citizenship privileges of whiteness.

Both Irish and Italian women earned white womanhood through their adoption of white supremacy. They were both despised groups relegated to low wage work. Destructive narratives were constructed about both groups to reinforce their

marginalization. However, the Irish were deemed non-white, and Italians, white. They were differentially situated in their proximity to whiteness. However, both groups strategically achieved the full privileges of whiteness: the Irish through framing themselves as ladies and Italians through dissolving their labor activism and embracing white nationalism. They understood whiteness as a status symbol that granted them access to citizenship in the US among other advantages. They knew that their path to full citizenship was through a 'whites only' politics that hinged on their adherence to the constructs of whiteness and femininity.

SEGREGATIONIST WOMEN

To maintain respectability, middle- and upper-class white women identified their political actions with segregation as an extension of their maternal role (Brückmann 2021, 5). Though they were confined to a domestic role, they justified their public organizing by capitalizing on their identification as housewives. They used their positionality as the "fairer sex," the 'maternal' gender, to advance the cause of school segregation. This maternalistic narrative was a strategy to expand their participation in public protests against equality for all races. White women of every class status legitimized their involvement in grassroots organizing and politics through maternalism (Brückmann 2021, 5). Segregationist women, however, did not limit themselves to politics associated with maternalism. They leveraged their positionality to become active in multiple issues to advocate for a 'whites only' citizenship.

Working-class white women deviated from maternalistic politics and created a state of emergency regarding desegregation after the federal *Brown* ruling (Brückmann 2021, 12-14). They held public protests to incite anger with the conviction that their privileged positionality was rightfully theirs (12-14). Integration threatened the 'whites only' way of life and they cultivated support from white elites to loudly assert their claim to white power. This strong reaction to *Brown* in 1954 marked the beginnings of white women's massive resistance. Theirs was a method of public agitation, using their bodies to fill the streets and elevate the 'crisis.' However, their public protests waned and middle- to upper-class white women's maternalistic methods outlasted theirs.

Southern white women became motivated by suffrage and showed up in high numbers at the polls (McRae 2018, 61-62). They upheld their end of the bargain to maintain white supremacy in their support of segregation. Elections gave them access to organize around social issues that ultimately structured a segregated south (62). They built local and national networks around a colorblind narrative that promulgated strict immigration policies and, states' rights, slandered the New Deal, opposed anti-lynching legislation, and urged states to reject federal paths into social welfare and election reform (McRae 2018, 83-84). White women segregationists did everything in their power to prevent their communities from being touched by any of the shifting national politics that might threaten segregation.

Although segregationist women participated heavily in electoral politics, their white supremacist grassroots efforts were multifaceted (McRae 2018, 136). White women lived and breathed segregation in their homes, schools, hospitals, and workplaces. These spaces are where their 'whites only' privilege and power would be felt, and they knew their daily practice of exclusion was starting to crumble. Fearing their loss of support from the Democratic party, they elevated the narrative. Supposedly, communism was now an imminent threat, soldiers' votes would compromise states' autonomy in elections, and white women would suffer from black men's sexualization of their bodies. Segregationist women challenged every shift, change, or agenda that would potentially threaten whites' control of everything and every person of color around them. Their massive resistance to what they deemed an unconstitutional federal intervention and an infringement upon states' rights gained traction, and ultimately appealed to those political organizations that prioritized white people. Their strategy was successful due to their facilitation of nation-wide networks through building connections with conservative organizations.

Segregationist women used politics to eliminate challenges that posed threats to the racial hierarchy. They maintained that "separate but equal" was a fair system for inferior non-white 'others.' Southern white women violently fought to uphold Jim Crow laws that excluded people of color from citizenship by organizing rallies, protests, and creating conservative anti-integration networks across the US. They gave massive

resistance a national platform (McRae 2018, 137). They created a metaphorical stage that reached beyond the South by framing integration as an attack on the Constitution, something that necessitated the activism of every white citizen (Brückmann 2021, 162). To lose segregation would mean that the ‘whites only’ privileges of a full citizen—preferential treatment and adequate medical care, education, transportation, jobs, parks, stores—would be opened up to the ‘savages’ and foreigners. Segregationist women would not let that happen. To prevent integration, white women positioned themselves as the maternal protectors of a white supremacist society.

TRADWIVES, MOMMY VLOGGERS, AND TRUMPETTES’ CLOAKED WHITENESS

In light of the above, it should be no surprise that white women are the backbone of today’s white nationalist movement. Tradwives, Mommy Vloggers, Trumpettes, and other white women’s groups are the hidden movers of today’s white supremacist politics. They cloak their racism in colorblindness—values, ideologies, classifications—that serves to reify and elevate alt-right views to sustain a ‘whites only’ white supremacist citizenship within US institutions (Anderson 2021, 5). Because white women have been historically excluded from formal politics, they employ online spaces as their digital platforms to signal whiteness and coded racism (13-14). Appropriating terms from the Civil Rights Movement, they use terms like “freedom of speech,” “diversity,” and “American” to hide their racist ideology (18). Their online presence has largely contributed to the mobilization of the white nationalist movement.

Like their white supremacist foremothers, contemporary white nationalist women employ a maternal ‘feminism’ that emphasizes their individual choice to confine themselves to domesticity. As mothers who are dedicated to preserving whiteness, they have the privilege of choosing the right white person and producing white babies as part of their maternal role. Their goal is to marry a white man and have white children (Anderson 2021, 111-112). By adhering to maternal ‘feminism,’ they establish themselves as “mothers of the movement” (112). However, the feminism they espouse does nothing to dismantle power structures. Instead, they use their individualistic feminism, ‘white’ mothering, and internalized sexism as a way to reinforce white supremacist structures.

Within the confines of maternal ‘feminism,’ white women bestow some power and assurance of protection, but their gender oppression is completely dismissed. According to Wendy Anderson, white men are the knights in shining armor and white women are the “shield maidens” with some agency that serve to “soften and normalize” a ‘whites only’ citizenship (2021, 19; Love 2020, 2).

Some white nationalist women are calling themselves traditionalists who claim to access their limited agency and power within traditionalism (Anderson 2021, 115). Although they appear similar to maternal feminists, they have tried to create some ideological difference between themselves and anyone who associates with the word “feminism,” Black Lives Matter, socialism, Marxism, or anything that is deemed destructive to the nuclear family. These mommy vloggers and tradwives have cropped up on social media within the past few years. They purport that being a good housewife—having kids, being subservient to their husbands, being at home—is the epitome of what’s defined as a traditional wife (Kelly 2018). They post pictures of themselves in dresses, heels, and red lips. They post recipes and beauty advice, but interwoven throughout those seemingly innocuous pics are strains of white nationalism. To disguise their authoritarian ideology, they exude white femininity, giving a “friendly face” to the white nationalist movement (Christou 2020). Like many other white women throughout history, they use their ideological location—as white and feminine—as a means to maintain a ‘whites only’ citizenship that excludes people of color.

CONCLUSION

White women—north, south, liberal, conservative, Italian, Irish, poor, wealthy—strategized to maintain a ‘whites only’ citizenship that subscribed to white supremacist ideology. Since the 18th century, they have reasoned that their whiteness makes them superior to all other races. White women’s articulation of identity hinged upon the dominance and exclusion of people of color. Using Black women as the benchmark and antithesis of white womanhood, they argued that their identity was well-suited for white power and privilege. After all, they are the epitome of whiteness and femininity.

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They are the “fairer sex,” the educated, civilized, maternal ladies. They ‘deserved’ more agency than the non-white others they sought to exclude and dominate.

White women in various spaces and times demonstrated their shared belief in the importance of every day white supremacy. As Rebecca Brückmann eloquently observes, the understanding of “white people’s essential superiority, and spatialized power, resting on the assumption that all spaces, public and private, physical and social” belong to white people and people of color are intruders, is a basis for understanding the depths of white women’s uniting for a ‘whites only’ citizenship (2021, 15). White women positioned their whiteness and femininity as legitimate grounds from which to enforce white supremacy. From the fair sex advocates to the tradwives, they built networks and campaigned for white supremacy with letter writing, protests and rallies, publications, and citizenship training programs. They used every avenue possible to ensure their dominance for generations to come. They were largely successful. To this day, behind every campaign to maintain white supremacy, is a white woman in heels, red lipstick, and a smile organizing for a ‘whites only’ citizenship.

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AMERICAN NATIONHOOD IN TRANSITION: SEXUAL ORIENTATION, RACE AND THE MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of race, ethnicity and sexuality circumscribes the boundaries of American identity. Historically, homosexuality was tethered to unpopular racial, ethnic, and ideological minorities. In recent years, mainstream film and television have contributed to redefining non-heterosexual peoples' place in the American national imagination: from outcast to partial insider. While the history of the LGBT movement is replete with racial and ethnic diversity, the US popular media have repeatedly emphasized one dimension--its whiteness. As homogenizing agents, the media have helped to generate a false image of an ethnically and racially homogeneous LGBT community. In this paper we examine popular television and films' changing depictions of sexual minorities. We contend their quasi-accepted status comes at the cost of reinforcing whiteness as the apex of American authenticity.

Keywords: American identity; Film; Homonationalism; Race; Television.

INTRODUCTION

As all social phenomena are inherently multifaceted, scholars have long argued that any thorough analysis must consider how these elements intersect with one another generating intersections that may appear contradictory (Crenshaw 1991; Hindman 2011). In that spirit, we understand that race, ethnicity, and sexuality intersect in the fluctuating parameters of American nationhood. We examine this dynamic process by focusing on perceptions of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people in the United States in television and film. Historically, sexual minorities were tethered to *un-American* and *undesirable* racial, ethnic, and ideological minorities (Canaday 2009; Conrad 2001; D'Emilio 1992; Somerville 2000). In recent years, however, the popular media have helped redefine the image of LGBT people. The homophile and

gay liberation movements of the twentieth century were replete with racially and ethnically diverse activists. Ignoring that diversity, US popular media recurrently showcase one portion: its white segment. Effectively, the media have helped incorporate sexual minorities via a highly-racialized portal that finds the LGBT community worthy of acceptance by presuming they are *more like us* than are people of color.

THE CONTOURS OF AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

The nation—a polity justified on the basis of peoplehood—has become the most legitimate source of political sovereignty since the late eighteenth century (Connor 1994, 80). Although engineered (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), mythmakers present it as an organic entity (Gellner 1983, 49) by objectifying venerated cultural and ascriptive features aimed at separating *us* from *them* (Hander et al. 1984; Lindholm 2008). The elements elites select to distinguish *us* from *them* are carefully chosen to safeguard elites' in-group privileges (Barreto 2001; Dragojević 2005; Wimmer 2008). Concurrently, this process also foments intragroup hierarchies that differentiate the authentic vs. the inauthentic, the pure vs. the impure, or the worthy vs. the undeserving (Barreto and Lozano 2017; Barreto and Napolio 2020; Billé 2010; Jones 2016). Traditionally, nationalism empowered straight men over women and gay men (Greenberg 2005; McClintock 1993; Nagel 2000) and, in the Americas, whites over nonwhites (Guss 2000; Kaufmann 2019; Sawyer 2006).

Scholarship on American national identity falls into three main schools of thought: the civic, the ethnic, and a hybrid variant. The civic camp, the country's official *creed* of equality and liberty, rejects any ancestral qualifications (Kohn 1957; Lipset 1990; Spalding 2009). Consistently, this approach has failed to explain historic anomalies such as slavery and the genocide of Indigenous peoples (Edwards and Weiss 2011; Lipsitz 2006; Smith, R. 1997) all the while clinging to the "mythic march of progress and prosperity at home, as to the noble effort to export democracy abroad" (Giroux 1995, 45). Of the three approaches, the civic is the most *liberal* interpretation of US national identity.

Alternatively, others claim American identity is ethno-racial. Nineteenth-century nativists limited American authenticity to white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Their twentieth-century counterparts expanded its parameters, claiming that the US is “European and Christian” (Buchanan 2011, 2) or “Judeo-Christian” (Gingrich 2011, 100). While European immigrants to the US were compelled to join this new collective identity (Steinberg 1981, 42), non-whites were cast out (Baldwin 1988, 56; Olson 2004, 54). The ethnic camp is, therefore, the narrowest of all three and the most conservative, if not reactionary.

Placed between the civic and ethnic camps is the hybrid approach. Combining ethnic and civic features, this model is truly an amalgam—an identity based on “multiple traditions” (Smith 1993, 550). Alternatively, Kaufmann (1999 439; 2000 134) conceived Americanism as a nested identity, namely as a civic layer covering an ethnic core. In this light, as Kaufmann sees it, the hybrid identity is sham because what one is left with in reality is an ethnic identity in a civic guise.

National identities rely upon “constructions of gender” (McClintock 1993, 61). Through the state-sanctioned institution of marriage, women’s subordination was regarded as a “natural fact” and a form of “hierarchy within unity” (McClintock, 1993, 64). All identity groups—whether racial, ethnic, confessional or national—are based on heterosexist gender inequality (Richardson 1998, 38-39), and nationalists have employed racism, homophobia and misogyny to juxtapose the righteous or worthy national from those they deemed inferior (Bjork-James 2020, 58-59; Nagel 2000, 119). Sexual minorities were relegated to a subservient status (Billé 2010, 195) owing to their “partial citizens” reputation (Richardson 1998, 88).

The American public at large was largely unaware of gay *communities* until the Cold War, and when the topic arose it did so in the context of criminality or mental illness. As “sexual difference” equaled “sexual deviance” (Billé 2010, 192), homosexuality was deemed a blight on the face of bourgeois nationalism (Conrad 2001, 125). During the Second World War, the armed forces began to expel suspected gays and lesbians from the military in large numbers, and in the 1950s Senator Joseph McCarthy launched his notorious witch hunts where he deemed gay *pink* as simply another shade of Marxist

red (D'Emilio 1992, 58-60). In the popular imagination, sexual deviance was associated with maligned groups such as immigrants and racial minorities (Canaday 2009, 29, 55; Conrad 2001, 133-134; Somerville 2000).

Gay and lesbian activists borrowed liberally from the Civil Rights movement's well-honed rhetorical and political frameworks (Adam 2003, 271). Forging alliances with nonwhite activists intensified in the 1960s as activists from the Gay Liberation, Black Nationalist, and Latino movements advocated greater collaboration (Armstrong 2002, 20; Newton 2009, 153-155; Retzliff 2007, 146). Not everyone, though, celebrated black alliances with the gay community. Socially conservative elements in the black community shunned collaboration with homosexual organizations (Hill 2013). Still, that opposition did not prevent a new generation of black, straight politicians, who came into their own in the 1980s, from embracing gay rights for strategic reasons (Stewart-Winter 2016, 6). Calls for greater intergroup cooperation fed the false impression that membership in sexual and ethno-racial communities were mutually exclusive, thus fomenting the stereotype that gays were "implicitly white" (Murib 2016, 49). Adding to this sense of mutual exclusivity, it was not infrequent for white gay folks to exclude gay people of color from their spaces (Bérubé 2001; Duberman 2018, 40-41).

THE NATION AND THE MEDIA

Topmost among nationalists' mythmaking instruments is the state apparatus. In this framework, academic literature has equally gravitated towards studies focusing on the state's role in generating, promoting, and disseminating national identities (e.g., Bulag 1998; Danforth 1995; Lynch 1999). Indeed, governments have at their disposal numerous socializing agents, particularly school textbooks—the primary tool for inculcating the next generation of citizens with the official national narrative (Kaplan 2006, 78; Moreau 2003; Williamson 2014, 1). However, Anderson (1983, 74-77) did not overlook the power of the mass media in forging and disseminating national identities. The mass media "produce fields of definition and association, symbolic and rhetoric, through which ideology becomes manifest and concrete" (Gitlin 1980, 2). While newspapers were crucial to diffusing American national identity in an earlier era (Smith-Rosenberg 2010,

22-23), television has become the new “national cultural meeting place” (Walters 2001, 27).

What kind of identities are the media circulating? Critics on the political right accuse the U.S. mainstream media of a leftist bias (Goldberg 2002, 12; Novak 1996, 151). While Romney (2010, 47) complained about the leftist “media elite,” Palin (2010, 53) attacked the unholy leftist cabal of “the self-described truth tellers of Washington, the main-stream media, Hollywood, and academia” who all conspire to “demonize Christianity and America’s traditional values.” Similarly, Buchanan (2011, 49) castigates the “anti-Christian elite ruling the academy, Hollywood, and the arts.” For the political right, the mainstream media are the shock troops of a left-wing conspiracy attacking American values.

Most academics contend that claims of media bias are a hallmark of right-wing partisans (Lee 2005, 58; Watts et al. 1999, 166). Domke and co-authors (1999, 50) suggest that conservative allegations of media bias are tactically employed to seize “control over their message.” They are intended to subdue “journalism’s watchdog function” (Alterman 2003, 266). Even the most left-leaning portions of the mainstream media advocate a reformation of capitalism, not a displacement of it. In fact, as a profit-making industry, the mass media endeavor to skew the political conversation’s right of center (Alterman 2003, 24, 259; Herman and Chomsky 2002, 18; Sykes 2017, 16). The mass media’s business interests shape our political discourse to such a degree that we often fail to perceive it (Herman and Chomsky 2002, 302). To maximize audience and readership, the mass media generate an oversimplified and homogeneous national identity (Calabrese and Burke 1992, 69; Fiske 2011, 37, 158).

Examining media bias is crucial to understanding the kind of national identity they generate. If the mainstream media have a liberal penchant, they would broadcast a civic interpretation of American national identity. Alternatively, most academics presume the media’s bias is conservative. Historically, that meant articulating a series of hierarchies: white over non-white, Christian over non-Christian, the pious over the secular, and straight over queer.

LGBT REPRESENTATION IN TELEVISION AND FILM

At the peak of the AIDS pandemic, media depictions of gays and lesbians reflected a toxic environment where homophobia was given a freer hand than prejudice toward racial minorities (Gross 1991, 26). “More often than not, lesbians and gays have been depicted in coded terms, their identity hidden from mainstream viewing and knowable only to the astute (often gay) filmgoer. Otherwise, gays entered the silver screen as tortured, self-loathing creatures of an exotic and dangerous subculture” (Walters 2001, 131). More often than not, the media chose to remain silent, confirming the role omissions serve, as one of the most effective means to suppress historic representation (Behdad 2005; Trouillot 1995).

While censors endeavored to render gays and lesbians invisible, there were films in the 1930s and 1940s that used the “sissy” or “pansy” to hint at a gay male character – thespian foils to help solidify the preeminence of the masculine, American leading men (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 366; Russo 1987). While tomboys did not present the same threat to American identity and masculinity as sissies did, they still subverted orthodox sex roles. Reinforcing classic masculine tropes, both sissies and tomboys presented a character against whom societal norms could be measured (Russo 1987, 63). Censorship decreased as the Production Code—the industry’s moral guidelines—lost sway in the 1960s. The Motion Picture Association of America stated that homosexuality, or “sex perversion” could be mentioned so long as it was handled “with care, discretion, and restraint” (in Russo 1987, 121). To the degree they were presented at all, gays and lesbians were staged as unidimensional characters (Russo 1987, 248).

In the 1960s, the mass media opened the proverbial closet door. In 1964 *Life* magazine issued a series on homosexuality in San Francisco—a move that precipitated a gay *stampede* into the City by the Bay (Boyd 2003; Sides 2009, 84; Stryker and Buskirk 1996, 4). Noted journalist Mike Wallace narrated an hour-long *CBS Special Report* entitled “The Homosexuals” (Gray 2009, 150). The first gay character on network television was a blackmail victim on the pilot episode of the crime drama *N.Y.P.D.* (“Shakedown” 1967). A few years later, an episode of *All in the Family* featured a gay football player, and in an episode of *Marcus Welby, MD* our venerable physician was assigned to “cure” a patient afflicted with homosexuality (Walters 2001, 60).

Representation of gays and lesbians on television were cyclical rather than static (Capsuto 2000). The high point of the 1970s was followed by a decline in the 1980s, coinciding with the outbreak of the AIDS pandemic, and by an upturn in the 1990s—a reflection of limited successes in the political arena, and greater acceptance in the workplace (Chasin 2000, 29). By the late 1990s and early 2000s, popular television programs such as *Will & Grace*, *Ellen*, *Queer as Folk*, *The L Word*, and *Six Feet Under* were centering on gay and lesbian characters. While these shows are not without criticism (Chambers 2009; Demory and Pullen 2013), they were important from a representational standpoint.

The improved standing of the LGBT Americans is associated with their commodification (Badgett 1997, 66-67; Campisi 2013, 49; Chasin 2000, 35-41, 125). It is also associated with AIDS. At the height of the pandemic middle-class, white gay men successfully used their class and racial privileges to publicize their plight, thus further linking in the popular imagination gayness with whiteness (Kohnen 2016, 72-74). The *new homonormativity* “does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but up-holds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumptions” (Duggan 2003, 50). *Homonationalism* is a “form of sexual exceptionalism” that reinforces entrenched racial and ethnic notions of national belonging (Puar 2007, 2). Similarly, Milani and Levon (2016, 70) described it as a “discursive process through which both state and non-state actors bring sexual diversity into the very definition of the nation-state so as to legitimise the exclusion and/or repression of others who are portrayed as lacking in this crucial criterion of ‘tolerance of sexual diversity.’” Since the heteronormative state is presumed to be white, so must be heteronormative queerness (Kohn 2016, 28). Let us examine three types of portrayal reflecting a racial-sexual orientation link: inaugurating a founder, depictions of the Stonewall Uprising, and representations of same-sex marriage.

QUEERS IN THE NATION

Anointing a Founder

Analogous to a biological family, nationalist mythmakers reinforce misogyny by insisting on anointing a founding *father*. The US mainstream mass media along with US government officials have consecrated Harvey Milk to that role. Sworn into the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in January 1978, Milk was one of the first openly gay people to run for public office. One of his fellow legislators assassinated him later that year. Posthumously, Barack Obama awarded Milk the Presidential Medal of Freedom (“President Obama” 2009). In 2014, the US Postal Service issued a Harvey Milk commemorative stamp, making him the first openly LGBT official to receive that honor (Thomas 2014). And in 2016 the US Navy announced plans to name a ship in his honor (LaGrone 2016).

Why should Milk receive more attention than his predecessors, including José Sarria and Harry Hay? Sarria ran unsuccessfully for a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1961, the first campaign run by an openly gay person in the US (Boyd 2003, 60; Stryker and Buskirk 1996, 42-43). Although Sarria was a strong and early supporter of Milk’s campaign (Shilts 1982, 75), and was “secured a revered place in pre-Stonewall gay and lesbian history,” as Retzlöff underscored (2007, 148), he still remains, unlike Milk, a largely unknown figure. Retzlöff (2007, 143) suggested that Sarria’s ethnicity—Latino—may have played a role in downplaying his legacy. His gender-nonconforming history as a drag performer was likely another factor contributing to his unknownability (Hirshman 2012, 87). Harry Hay co-founded the Mattachine Society—one of the earliest LGBT organizations—in 1950 (D’Emilio 1992), and the Radical Faeries in 1979 (Kilhefner 2010, 21). Like Sarria, Hay challenged mainstream gender norms, and in his youth was a member of the Communist Party. Capitalism’s opponents have been disqualified from holding the privileged position of national leaders in the US.

Unlike Sarria and Hay, Milk came closest to the American ideal. Milk’s *sanitized* image fits the mold of a model American: “white, middle class, gender normative, able-bodied, and male” (Murib 2016, 4). He was a military veteran and a small business owner. Homonormativity does not challenge traditional heteronormative assumptions;

it caves into their neoliberal, depoliticizing demands (Ammaturo 2016, 38; Duggan 2002, 179; Murib 2016, 49).

We see Harvey Milk's *suitability* in the Oscar-winning 2008 biopic *Milk*, directed by Gus Van Sant and written by Dustin Lance Black. Milk's assassination opens and closes the film, thus emphasizing the subject's premature death by situating him in the sepulcher of American martyrs who died before their visions were fully realized (Villa 2010). Equating "gay" with "white," Milk also erases the diversity within San Francisco's LGBT community (Dillard 2017; Lenon 2013). By omitting the Tenderloin's transgender population and the Mission District's gay Latino community, by default, the film makes the Castro, "a monolithic emblem of all queer history in San Francisco" (Dillard 2017, 3). Lenon (2013) compares the film's depiction of the fight against Proposition 6 (an effort to ban homosexuals from teaching children) with the fight against Proposition 8 (which, successfully, banned same-sex marriage) that was going on before and after the time surrounding the film's release. The film's sole portrayal of a lesbian—Milk's campaign manager Anne Kronenberg—minimizes both the role of lesbians in San Francisco's LGBT community in the 1970s, and their role in Milk's political rise (Lenon 2013, 47). Founding mothers—including Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, co-founders of the Daughters of Bilitis—take a back seat to founding fathers. That is, if they are even allowed in the vehicle at all.

People of color are also nearly absent. Other than Milk's second romantic interest in the film—Jack Lira (Latino)—none are significant or developed characters. As Dillard (2017, 5) says, *Milk* "deploys ethnicity as a punchline rather than an integral component of the city's identity." While Lira's relationship with Milk is given "little or no validity," and is seen as a hindrance to Harvey's political career, Milk's relationship with his first lover, Scott Smith, who is white, is portrayed as "true love" (Lenon 2013, 47).

This erasure is compounded by the timing of the release and the immediate aftermath of the passage of Proposition 8. Lenon (2013) contends the LGBT community attempted to blame black voters for Proposition 8 even though marriage-equality proponents failed to do sufficient outreach to non-white communities. In addition, as

film critic Armond White (2008) wrote: “focusing on Milk gives the movement a white idol. It’s a mainstreaming ploy.” *Milk*, and thus Milk, are made palatable to the mainstream by fitting into the standard conception of American identity, and by emphasizing Milk’s whiteness, middle class respectability, moderately progressive politics, and masculinity (Dillard 2017).

Stonewall: The Riots and the Films

Nationalist mythmakers need to hallow one fragment in time as the group’s *golden age* (Renan 1990; Smith, A. 1997). For instance, while Americans extol their country’s birth on July 4, 1776, the bullets started flying fourteen months earlier at the Battles of Lexington and Concord. One cannot glorify the past without juxtaposing it to a *less-than-magnificent* present (Thapar 2000, 17). A disdain for the secular, multicultural, multiracial, and urban present attracted many white American nationalists to Donald Trump’s idealized pre-Civil Rights era (Gorski 2017). Québécois nationalists set their golden age in colonial, Catholic, New France (Handler 1988, 5). In Spain, the *Siglo de Oro* (Golden Century) was in the 16th century (Kohn 1967, 154-155). When was the gay golden age?

New York City Police stormed the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar, in the early hours of June 28, 1969. Its location at the hub of major transportation lines, its proximity to many gay cruising areas, and its longevity made it a popular watering hole with a diverse clientele (Carter 2004, 11; Faderman 2015). In that era, raids on gay and lesbian bars were not uncommon (Armstrong and Crago 2006; Hirshman 2012). But that evening, the patrons and local street youth fought back, triggering the famous Stonewall Riots. The following year activists commemorated the event with the first Gay Pride march (Bruce 2016). Although celebrated around the world on different days, Gay Pride remains *the* high-holy day on the LGBT calendar (Armstrong and Crago 2006, 725; Hodges and Hutter 1979, 20).

Few have had as dramatic an impact as President Barack Obama in elevating the Stonewall’s place in the official nationalist narrative. He designated the area around the Stonewall a National Monument—the first LGBT site to gain that level of federal

recognition. In his Second Inaugural Address, Obama linked Selma, Seneca Falls, and the Stonewall as the embodiments of the civil rights', women's rights', and gay rights' movements. It is clear that the legacy of the Stonewall Riots continues to grow and remains an important moment in the movement's history (Duberman 1994; Faderman 2015; Frank 2014).

Interestingly, the 1969 Stonewall Riots were not the first time the LGBT community challenged police abuse. On January 1, 1965, police raided San Francisco's New Year's Ball, a fundraising event featuring drag queens. In 1966, at Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco, a riot involving many members of the transgender community broke out (Armstrong and Crago 2006, 733; Carter 2004, 109-110). Again, in 1967, in Los Angeles, there were riots at the Black Cat Tavern.

Depictions of the Stonewall Riots have limited the role non-white, non-gender conforming, working-class people played in the uprising (Kohnen 2016, 18). There are two primary published accounts of the Stonewall riots. Martin Duberman's *Stonewall* (1994) provides a rich history of riot participants and the organizing that both preceded and followed it. David Carter's *Stonewall* (2004) focuses more on the riots themselves. Carter's account carries more breadth in describing the people involved that night, whereas Duberman goes into significantly more depth on a smaller number of riot participants. In terms of race, both note individual accounts of non-white rioters. According to Carter, most of the rioters were young, white, from middle class families, but living closer to the margins of society. Others dispute this, emphasizing the role of people of color, women, and the transgender community.

The Stonewall Riots have been depicted in two key feature films. Despite a limited release, the first—a British film directed by Nigel Finch in 1995—received generally positive reviews. The second—an American film directed by Roland Emmerich and released in 2015—opened to wider release, but proved to be a flop, critically and commercially. Emmerich seems to draw much of his source material from Carter's *Stonewall*. The director faced significant criticism for both whitewashing the riots and downplaying the role drag and transgender communities played that night, among other inaccuracies (Reynolds 2016; Smith 2015). The director asserted that he

was not making a film for the LGBT community alone, but rather for the entire American community. According to Emmerich, straight audiences could relate to Danny, the lead character, because he was white, middle class, and straight-acting (Keating 2015). Additionally, Danny is not from New York City; he arrives there from the heartland. Emmerich's belief that for *Stonewall* to be accessible to mainstream audiences it must center on a heteronormative lead reflects the way LGBT people must be perceived by the mainstream in order to be considered part of American society.

Emmerich *did* attempt to diversify the cast. Marsha P. Johnson, a black, transgender drag queen, appears in several scenes. She does not, however, play a central role in the dramatic events. Another character, Ray—effeminate, homeless, and a hustler—seems loosely based on Sylvia Rivera. He is, however, neither portrayed as trans nor as drag queen. Although apolitical, his character does participate in the riots. One final character, Cong, another member of the group of street kids that Danny befriended, is black and more feminine. But, again, he is not clearly portrayed as trans or a drag queen. As the riots and surrounding story unfold, the focus remains on Danny—the straight-acting, white, mainstream lead character. Danny is *on* the street, but not *of* the street.

Let us juxtapose Emmerich's 2015 American interpretation of the Stonewall Riots with the 1995 British film directed by Nigel Finch. The film's credits note that it is based on Duberman's *Stonewall* book. Like the 2015 Stonewall film, Finch's involves a traditionally masculine, white male arriving in New York City, going to Greenwich Village and socializing with a group that frequents the Stonewall bar. Although this character, Matty, gets involved with a member of the Mattachine Society, he appears too radical for this organization. This being said, the British film presents itself much more racially diverse than its American counterpart. Matty's romantic interest is a femme Latino, La Miranda, who frequents the Stonewall. Bostonia, a black trans woman, has her own story arc and, central to the plot, throws the first punch the night of the riots. This is noticeably different from the later movie. In Emmerich's version of the riots, the black character literally hands a brick to the heteronormative white lead to throw.

The background actors in the earlier film are also racially diverse and highlight the drag and transgender community more prominently than the more recent film. The characters in the 1995 *Stonewall*, unlike its film successor, reject the limited definition of what it means to be American. As Miranda says in the film, drag queens are as American as apple pie. Both the 1995 and 2015 films emphasize the differences between the traditional American ideal of masculine, white, middle class respectability and the gay subculture of New York City in the 1960s. The 1995 UK film succeeds in questioning—and to an extent celebrating—those differences while its 2015 US counterpart privileges a more conventional American identity.

Marriage, Citizenship, and the LGBT Rights Movement

Equality of citizenship remains a core facet of the civic interpretation of American national identity: that equality was centered on institutionalized heterosexual privilege (Brandzel 2005, 172; Richardson 1998, 88-90). Yamin (2012) outlined the history of marriage in the United States as a political institution tied to citizenship. Prior to the Civil War, the marriages of enslaved people were not legally recognized. As immigration law developed, marriage was used to further define who was properly American and who was not. American men who married foreign women retained their citizenship, and gave citizenship to their new wives. American women who married foreign men, on the other hand, lost their citizenship (Cott 1998; Gardner 2005). These gendered differences further emphasize the masculine nature of American identity.

Like marriage, weddings are also important cultural and legal markers (Ingraham 2008, 7). Many couples go into significant debt to finance these elaborate status-symbol rituals. Newspapers routinely feature wedding announcements. Including gay and lesbian couples in the *New York Times* wedding announcements reflects a growing acceptance of same-sex couples. But, perhaps more importantly, it also situates these couples into traditional heteronormative institutions (Ingraham 2008, 160). In the LGBTQ community, discussions of same-sex marriage date back to the 1950s (Frank 2017), and attempts to legalize same-sex marriage date back to the 1970s (Frank 2017). These early efforts did not gain much traction.

Legal recognition of same-sex marriage ultimately culminated in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the 2015 United States Supreme Court decision that required all states, pursuant to the 14th Amendment, to provide gay and lesbian couples equal access to marriage. This campaign was for entry into one of the central markers of full participation in American society (Kammerer 2016). Rather than embrace marriage rights, some in the LGBT community advocated a more liberationist view—one that questioned any kind of marriage (Ettelbrick 1989). At the same time, most conservatives saw marriage equality as a symbol of national decline (Yamin 2012, 100).

Representation of same-sex marriage has a long history on television. The early references to same-sex unions were not accounts of formal legal marriage. Instead, they were representations of a culturally significant relationship akin to marriage, often accompanied by a wedding party. The earliest example aired in 1976 on NBC's *Sirota's Court* where the judge marrying the male couple pondered its legality ("Court Fear" 1976). Given that the networks were not willing to go too far, the couple's ceremony ends with a handshake and not a kiss (Capsuto 2000). Another example traces back to 1977 specifically from *All in the Family* where the characters Edith and Archie Bunker attend the funeral of Edith's cousin Liz, who, Edith learns, was a lesbian. Liz's "roommate" explains their relationship to Edith by saying it was "like a marriage" ("Cousin Liz" 1977). The focus here was not on the legal standing of their relationship but familial and social acceptance. These episodes aired at a time when significant news coverage of attempts by gay and lesbian couples from the US to marry in several states were being undertaken (Lichtenstein 1975, 49).

In the 1990s, the question of same-sex marriage was again in the news as Hawaii's courts seemed poised to mandate recognition of same-sex couples' right to marry. *The Golden Girls* broached the subject through Blanche's brother, Clayton ("Sister of the Bride" 1991). Two of the characters on *Northern Exposure* have a commitment ceremony ("I Feel the Earth Move" 1994). *Roseanne* showed the wedding of longtime recurring character Leon to his partner Scott ("December Bride" 1995). *Friends* aired "The One with the Lesbian Wedding" (1996)—the episode where Ross's ex-wife married her new

girlfriend. Despite the progress made in LGBT representations on television since *Sirota's Court* aired in 1976, none of these ceremonies end with a kiss.

Television discussions of same-sex marriage, particularly in the years before legal recognition, often included a character who questions the need for non-straight to wed. On *The Golden Girls*, Blanche is supportive of her brother, but questions his need to marry his partner. In a moving scene between Blanche and Sophia, Sophia asks Blanche why she married her husband. Blanche talks about love and wanting to share a life. Sophia says those are the same reasons why Clayton wants to marry his fiancé. This is quite similar to the *Friends* episode where Ross's ex-wife is marrying her girlfriend. Ross does not understand why they need to marry since they already live together. Monica's reply echoes Sophia's: they want to declare and celebrate their love with the people who matter most to them. Even the episode of *All in the Family* from the 1970s links same-sex relationships to marriage, family, and similarity to heterosexual couples.

Equality of citizenship means the right to marry. Yet, it is important to note that most of these episodes featured white couples. In 1991, on the sitcom *Roc*, viewers did see an interracial gay male couple and their commitment ceremony ("Can't Help Loving That Man" 1991). Such instances of racial diversity in television depictions of same-sex couples are, however, rare. Lists of important same-sex marriages on television published by *Rolling Stone* (Kroll 2013) and *Advocate* (Allen 2014) feature mostly white couples. Neither list featured couples where both spouses are played by people of color. Indeed, in a list of over 100 LGBT couples compiled by *Out* ("A Timeline" 2018), approximately 30 included at least one non-white member. Greater acceptance of gays and lesbians does not trickle down to everyone (Brown 2012, 1065), being that "This benevolence towards sexual others is contingent upon ever-narrowing parameters of white racial privilege, consumption capabilities, gender and kinship normativity, and bodily integrity" (Puar 2007, xii). The lack of non-white, or interracial, LGBT couples on television reinforce the simple formula equating marriage with citizenship, and citizenship with whiteness and authentic American-ness. Governments and the media exploit homonationalism with its greater tolerance toward sexual minorities to mask

excluding and even repressing unwanted racial and ethnic communities (Mepschen, Duyvendak and Tokens 2011; Milani and Levon 2016; Sekuler 2013).

DISCUSSION

Homonationalism has *reimagined* a nation willing to tolerate, if not embrace, their gay and lesbian brethren. This process was not without precedent. A drawn out and lethargic process annexed non-Protestant, white, Christians into the American fold in the early twentieth century. While commercial ventures welcomed gay and lesbian assimilation into the American mainstream, they did so to confirm the citizen-consumer nexus (Chasin 2000; Richardson 1998). Moreover, as commercial interest in the gay and lesbian market was connected to an increasingly prevalent pattern of niche marketing, media executives considered the queer market too small to target with their programming (Becker 2006, 125, 177). Then who was the primary target of these non-straight characters and plots in mainstream television and film? “Like the liberal concept of tolerance, the trope of the helpful heterosexual offers a reassuring image of an empowered gay-friendly heterosexuality. The notion of tolerance reaffirms heterosexual privilege by positioning heterosexuals as agents, and gays and lesbians as passive recipients of their largesse. Straights tolerate; gays are tolerated (Becker 2006, 191).

Including gay-themes in television and film primarily targets heterosexuals, thus reinforcing their *hip* credentials (Becker 2006, 188, 196). Since the median heterosexual audience member is not a person of color, we should not be surprised that the media have featured gay characters who are “disproportionately white” (Becker 2006, 179). But the media’s audience target is also reflective of the white, male corporate boardroom (Gross 1991, 21). All too frequently, the typical depiction of gays and lesbians in the mass media is the lonely individual—a person devoid of community except among heterosexuals (Becker 2006, 188; Walters 2001, 148).

Greater visibility does not assure equality. The increased presence of sexual minorities in popular culture has not altered sexual minorities’ marginalization in mainstream society (Harris 2009; Walters 2014). As Walters (2014, 263) contended,

tolerance is inherently “circumscribed and doled out.” Similarly, Vaid (1995: 3) warned us: “The liberty we have won is incomplete, conditional, and ultimately revocable.” To the degree that an updated national narrative now accepts sexual minorities, we should not discount the distinct possibility that this whiteness is honorific and impermanent (Ong 2006, 127). If sexual minorities have been welcomed into the fold as *honorary white*, we could also say they have been accepted, for now, as *honorary heterosexuals*.

CONCLUSION

The successes of the LGBT community in merging into the American mainstream cannot be denied. In only a few decades, LGBT people have gone from criminals, deviants, mentally ill, or sinners to legal and social equals. But only for some. Pete Buttigieg’s 2020 presidential campaign is an example of how far the LGBT community progressed toward assimilating into US national identity. His run for the White House also raised important questions about the relationship between LGBT people and that national identity.

For many, Buttigieg represented progress: a gay man who was a serious contender for a major political party’s nomination for president. For others, his campaign highlighted the limits of acceptance. Buttigieg’s race, class, Christian faith, military service and other experiences marked him as closer to mainstream heterosexual society than many in the queer community were. For these people, his prominence demonstrated the price of tolerance. These divergent responses to his candidacy demonstrate the differences between assimilation of gays and lesbians into the national identity, and a more radical liberation from the confines of that national identity.

These differences, we contend, structure how sexual orientation and gender identity fit into the idea of American national identity. Media representations painted a picture, never accurate, of the LGBT community as white, middle class, respectable, and thus, fitting the ideal of American identity. This assimilationist portrayal is what allowed Buttigieg to advance as far as he has in American politics while at the same time limiting the ability of other, more radical, and more queer, people from achieving the same level of success.

The media continues to play a critical role in disseminating and altering national myths. Collectively gays and lesbians are increasingly accepted as integral parts of the nation. But that admission is conditional upon the degree to which they deviate from a pre-established image of American authenticity: Christian, straight-appearing, middle-class, capitalist loving, and, of course, white. Gays-as-Americans is not the fulfillment of the classic Civic Creed. It is only an amendment to a well-entrenched ethno-racial national identity that privileges particular racial, confessional, and ethnic groups above others, even if they're queer. Despite critics' assertion of a liberal bias, the media have demonstrated, in the case of sexual minorities, a penchant to eschew the promise of equality found in the civic creed in favor of the latest amendment to a well-established ethnic and racial hierarchy.

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“SHUT UP AND DRIBBLE”: FRACTURED RACE RELATIONS IN THE NBA IN TIMES OF (PERCEIVED) CORPORATE CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

The The National Basketball Association (NBA) is first and foremost a company which tries to generate revenue. As such, the NBA is embedded into a system of mass media and thereby influenced by cultural, social, and political events. Simultaneously, the NBA can also (partly) cause such events. Lastly, the NBA (and professional basketball at large) has always featured a racial component. Thereby, the NBA features three key American concepts and/or conflicts (corporate interest, meritocracy, race) and, through critical as well as historically-oriented analysis, allows to grasp the interplay of these concepts, at least in a temporally and spatially defined context. This article discusses three individual cases in which the NBA had to react as a race-related image crisis doomed or, in other words: a representative of corporate America had to react to fractures appearing on its otherwise coherent and shiny outside caused by (implicitly or explicitly) racialized aspects. As such, the NBA can be read as a larger extension of American culture and life. In order to understand these three cases as well as the corporate responses in their specific context, the paper will start by providing an overview of professional basketball's history with special consideration of racial aspects. This is followed by the illustration and critical discussion of the three cases and results in a short summary. The overarching focus of the paper is the question of what keeps the NBA—as a company plagued by racial fractures—together at heart. It is assumed that the NBA, as a proto-American sports league, is held together by the same unifying moments which keep America (at least partially) intact and running.

Keywords: Basketball; Corporate narratology; Corporate crisis; Racism; Culturally sensitive marketing.

INTRODUCTION

As the United States is considered the land of freedom and equal opportunity, it often attracts ambitious foreigners, adventurers of all kinds, as well as entrepreneurs. However, the US has also established itself as the land of contradictions with regard to the ideals of opportunity and freedom, at times standing out as “peculiar, even paradoxical” (Kurth 2016, 13) in US society. Such domestic contradictions have been exemplarily verbalized by hip hop artist J Cole in his song “High for Hours” when

he states: “American hypocrisy, oh, let me count the ways they came here seeking freedom then they end up owning slaves” (Spotify 2017). These internal inconsistencies also gain momentum when one widens the viewpoint: the country’s proclaimed primacy of meritocracy lacks credibility vis-à-vis the enormous opportunity gap, and the strong focus on the individual and individuality is, at times, contested by an overshadowing nationalism which addresses collective needs. Therefore, it can be argued that “any objective measurement of the American social order will reveal the sad fact that [American] national history is an entire system of contradictions” (Daniels 1976, 3), that actually struggles to keep the great promises it declares to make to everyone—among them freedom, (the pursuit of) happiness, and meritocracy. In other words: there are plentiful fractures in the otherwise United States of America. Because the majority of the conflicts taking place on national territory are both historically rooted and have evolved in time, they contribute to shaping present day American politics, media, culture, and other social forms alike. However, these conflicts are barely discussed publicly in their nuance. For this reason, a multitude of critical voices is often required to investigate the apparently harmonious and unperturbed surface of America’s (self-)image. From this perspective, movements such as Occupy Wall Street or Black Lives Matter can be understood as powerful gatherings or critical masses that, by exposing the country’s racial legacy and by contesting America’s social divide, have galvanized activists from various communities into shaking the country’s seemingly democratic surface. Remarkably, the movements’ open discussions on the nation’s long-time racist political establishment have prompted inquiries into the country’s historical as well as cultural foundation.

Reflections on the color line have long been at the core of the public debate, interfering with other central sociopolitical conceptual forces, such as the idea(l) of meritocracy, public representation, equal opportunities, and the promise of (financial) safety and fulfillment. In particular, this article will focus on professional basketball in order to analyze how these partly conflicting interests have shaped and still shape the National Basketball Association (NBA) as well as its multiple outlets and associated media. Focusing on a widely recognized organization such as the NBA allows us to

analyze, contextualize, and interrogate simmering conflicts that would otherwise remain abstract and elusive.

From the wide range of possible basketball *foci*, this article zeroes in on the representational strategies of the NBA to market its (primarily black) players to a (mostly white) audience. Simultaneously, the NBA only has limited opportunities to alter its players due to financial ties but also due to their fostering of national values such as meritocracy, which can also be considered a central pillar of sports culture. In this light, one might be blinded by a reading of sports as “a bastion of fair play and equal opportunity,” which underlines the meritocratic principle and thereby creates a “world [seemingly] free of racism.” (B’beri and Hogarth 2009, 90). By doing so, professional sports cater to “the[ir] commitment to[wards] provid[ing] everyone with a fair chance to develop their own talents to the fullest, [which is] a central tenet of the American creed” (Sawhill 1999). This unidimensional conceptualization of the world of sports often results in demanding that “[politics be] kept out of sport” (MacClancy 1996, 2). Nevertheless, the NBA is not simply a collective of professional basketball players, but primarily a commercial business intertwined with the system of mass media (Stichweh 2005), and concerned with generating revenue (Wollert 2009, 75). Thereby, it must satisfy its target audience within the confined rules of the game. Simultaneously, the NBA’s target audience—key to revenue and economic success—deliberately feeds into race-related dynamics and politics, as race is a constant (non-)topic in professional basketball as well as in its marketing efforts. A look into the league’s history shows us that race has always been very present within the NBA. More to this point, prior to David Stern’s term as commissioner in 1984, the NBA was considered “too black and drug infested” (Kiersh 1992, 28), a reference indicative of a public perception that, at the time, resulted in the severe disenfranchisement of its predominantly white following (B’beri and Hogarth 2009, 91), preventing 16 out of 23 teams from being economically profitable in 1983/1984 (Nick 2009, 79). Consequently, during Stern’s term, the NBA changed its marketing strategy, in response to the commissioner’s claim that race would not be an issue if handled correctly (Maharaj 1999, 232). Within the first ten years of Stern’s thirty-year term, the league’s annual revenue grew by 1600% (*ibid.*); a financially

meaningful change, indeed fostered by the commissioner’s strategic call on the necessity to change marketing plans by *handling race correctly*. Some argue that Stern’s tactic was thought to make “black men safe for (white) consumers in the interest of profit” (Hughes 2004, 164). However, by doing so, the NBA actively created images of black masculinity, changed consumer culture, and—as a proto-American sport—contributed to the United States’ racial discourse. Simultaneously, one can argue that in the course of its activity, the NBA has constantly absorbed diverging cultural influences and changed its outlet accordingly, arguably in the most economically profitable way. As such, the NBA has always been affected by racial tensions in the United States while also contributing to these same articulations. Again, these sometimes articulated, sometimes unarticulated fractions are noticeable only when specific socio-political frictions emerge. In its double function, the NBA can either be affected by external tensions/fractions, which must be addressed immediately, or it can itself actively cause these tensions.

This article will focus on three exemplary forms of misconduct from which it can be derived how the NBA has responded to particular challenges in the past. These three infringements comprise the brawl known as *The Malice at the Palace* (2004), Donald Sterling’s racial comments in the light of *Black Lives Matter* (2014), and the NBA’s handling of the social justice movement, which widely expanded after George Floyd’s death in 2020. In order to better understand and contextualize the NBA’s reactions to these three moments, we decided to integrate this study with a brief history of the association itself, by specifically focusing on issues of race and representation (section 2). We will then move on to the analysis of the three cases of misconduct (section 3), and conclude our investigation with a few remarks on the factors which hold the NBA together at heart (section 4), and on NBA’s strategies for maintaining a strong national status.

A (RACIAL) HISTORY OF BASKETBALL AND THE NBA

In 1891, James Naismith envisioned basketball as a gap filler for the winter season (Sahre and Pommerening 1995, 168). Basketball promptly gained popularity in the networks of

YMCAs and colleges before the first professional league was introduced in 1898, and the first international tournament was staged in 1919 (Kränzle and Brinke 2003, 52). The National Basketball League (NBL), which pioneered organized basketball from 1925 onwards, faced bankruptcy after only six years (ibid. 72), and even though the NBL continued to exist, teams/franchises migrated to alternative leagues. Due to the leagues' limited degree of continuity, only specific teams solidly established themselves as brands. The two most famous teams at the time were the *The New York Renaissance* and *The Harlem Globetrotters*—the Globetrotters being founded and managed by the Jewish entrepreneur Abe Saperstein in 1926. They rose to fame after providing space for black players, who, at the time, were not allowed to participate in professional sports. In 1946, the Basketball Association of America (BAA) was created, and in 1948/1949 it incorporated the National Basketball League (NBL), later rebranded as the National Basketball Association (NBA) (ibid. 73).

As the NBA authorized participation of black players in 1949, teams began to absorb black players who had been previously prevented from playing professional basketball. As a result, the Harlem Globetrotters lost most of their competitive players to NBA teams, and were reduced to an exhibition team only. Even though the Globetrotters were employed to promote American values and culture during Cold-War times, they still lost their competitive- basketball-team status (Thomas 2011, 778). By having the Minneapolis Lakers and their superstar George Mikan in the league, the NBA managed to outpace numerous ambitious associations and establish itself as the most competitive league in the 1950s (Rader 1990, 271). The Lakers were then succeeded by the Boston Celtics, who dominated the league from 1957 to 1966 with their two superstars Bill Russel and Bob Cousy (ibid.). During these times, professional basketball's viewership rose from less than 2 million spectators in 1960 to 10 million in the late 1970s (Rader 1990, 271), after incorporating various rule changes and integrating an array of awe-inspiring teams and talents. As viewership and potential revenue evolved, the American Basketball Association (ABA) emerged as a fierce competitor for the NBA, installing superstar Julius Erving as a black counterpart to the still chiefly white NBA network (Criblez 2015, 374). Despite advertising its openness towards r all

kinds of players, (and also featured black star players), an unspoken color line still existed within the NBA, as they exposed the images of the now Hall of Famers Jerry *The Logo* West and *Pistol* Pete Maravich to publicly represent the league. This clash of competitors led to a categorical segregation along racial lines happening within basketball in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s (Eitzen and Yetmann 1980, 333). Nonetheless, the ABA was only able to elude bankruptcy for nine years before being incorporated into the NBA. This being said, the 1970s marked a turning point in NBA history, now witnessing a significant increase in the number of black players compared to the number of white players, and an exponential salary rise, fostered by high levels of competition and a registered growth in public interest.

It is during that period that black players gained visibility and used their newly found social and public stage to support the Civil Rights Movement and its more bellicose Black Power division. Lew Alcindor’s conversion to Islam and change of name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar personified these developments while lending the 1970s the label of “Black Power and white backlash [era]” (Goudsouzian 2016, 2), significantly impacting the NBA. While the white backlash resulted in a staggering drop in viewership, it also damaged the NBA’s public image in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Cady 1979, 15). In fact, as we mentioned earlier, the public perceived the NBA as “a drug-infested, too-black league with dwarfish Nielsen ratings” (Kiersh 1992, 28). Within the constant struggle “between ‘Blackophilia’ and ‘Blackophobia’ [...]” (Andrews and Silk 2010, 1627)—a recurring issue not only within the league but also in American society—the NBA contributed to reinforcing the very palpable black/white dichotomy dividing American society

In 1984 David Stern took over the association and centered his efforts around two defining terms: consumer-friendliness and marketability. To achieve these paradigms, Stern’s attention settled on getting NBA fans to identify with certain teams and players in order to increase the viewership’s willingness to pay higher game prices, attend games more frequently, and consume more related merchandise (Meng, Stravos, and Westberg 2015, 199). To assure ongoing competition, Stern also implemented an abundance of rules and regulations, such as salary caps or drafts. Stern’s underlying

rationale was that tension and electricity generated by fierce competition would result in higher revenue (Caudill, Mixon, and Wallace 2014, 246). Despite his efforts to guarantee competition, Stern still needed to establish certain ‘faces of the league’—star players around which the league is marketed—because, as Funk and James remark, devotion towards a product is the result of “peer group acceptance, vicarious achievement, nostalgia, and star players” (2006, 206). Stern assembled these players’ image based on specific principles, values, and ideologies that supported corporate narratology, so that fans and sponsors would empathize with NBA players (Gwinner 1997).

Intending to cater to a wider audience, Stern resorted to a dual strategy: build a rivalry narrative between Earvin *Magic* Johnson (a black player) and Larry Bird (a white player) while simultaneously uplifting Michael Jordan as the player who transcended color lines. As such, the NBA could appeal to earlier-times fans while reaching out to new generations. In other words, Erving Johnson and Larry Bird met the times’ needs as Stern understood them, as they matched the clean-face player profile, being both free from public scandals, therefore contributing to “the (racial) re-assemblage of the NBA” (Andrews 1999, 505). When examining the Bird/Magic rivalry, one always has to factor in the specific ethos guiding their respective teams—the Boston Celtics and Los Angeles Lakers. While the Lakers were thriving with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar leading the way, taking them deep into playoffs, and having them serve as one of the most exciting franchises in the league (Smith 2011, 3), the Boston Celtics were struggling to win games, and therefore needed Larry Bird to lift the team up again. By adding Earvin *Magic* Johnson to the roster, the Los Angeles Lakers were able to ultimately design an impressively competitive team known as the *Showtime Lakers*. However, Johnson’s and the Lakers’ nicknames still leave a sour taste in many mouths, testifying to the dominant stigma ascribed to black success during the 1980s. In addition, black achievements were customarily played down as effortless or related to genetic constitution, a stereotypical idea which depreciated the considerable amount of hard work, commitment, and ability that went along with the very achievement (Carrington 2007, 4689). Again, as Williams remarks, “black athletic success was not ascribed to strategy but to attributes like height

| “Shut up and Dribble”: *Fractured Race Relations in the NBA* and strength” (2006, 62). Magic Johnson playing point guard at 6 foot 9 inches and the Los Angeles Lakers’ rapid-paced, highlight-centered offense epitomized the stereotypes perpetuated in the previous decade while supporting the oversimplified narrative of the genetically superior athlete meant to entertain the crowds and create showtime moments. Meanwhile, Larry Bird, who was not as athletically gifted as Johnson, embodied the stereotype of the white player who in order to overcome physical disadvantages must fascinate spectators with toughness, teamwork, intellect, and bravery (Criblez 2015, 374). Hence, not only did the Bird/Magic rivalry represent two superstar basketball players competing for championships; it also reinforced the idea of the black player as a genetically superior athlete, magically gifted with superpowers. The physical description of the black player was often opposed to the intellectual bravery of its (Kränzle and Brinke 2003, 96) white counterparts, who against all odds succeed with team play, toughness, discipline, supreme basketball IQ, and hard work (Smith 2011, 3). These dynamics were not embraced or fueled by the athletes themselves or taken from in-game statistics—Johnson was famous for his marvelous basketball IQ and jaw dropping assist totals, both traits usually assigned to team-first players. They were instead cosmetically built around specific players by media and advertisement, both (partially) controlled and/or influenced by the NBA. These tactical workings become all the more evident when one examines the description of former (white) Celtics greats, namely John Havlicek or Dave Cowens. Both players have often been adorned with descriptive qualities that emphasized their intellect, solidarity, and toughness (ibid., 5). They were portrayed based on the 1970s’ trends, yet experienced enormous success in the 1980s.

After Michael Jordan was drafted into the NBA in 1984, he took the league by storm and amassed six championships in the 1990s. His unprecedented athletic advantages and leaping ability led to the nickname *Air Jordan*. After Jordan and the *Dream Team* dominated the 1992 Olympics, the NBA capitalized on their victories through a great globalization strategy, from which Jordan emerged as “perhaps the best and most well-known athlete in the world” (Dyson 1993, 64). Jordan’s unstoppable ascension towards iconic status developed religious-like dimensions when he was

granted the title of “basketball’s high priest” (Bradley 1991, 60) “more popular than Jesus,” while also cashing in on “better endorsement deals” (Vancil 1992, 51). Jordan’s capability to engage audiences was beyond compare at a time when, as David Stern recognized, TV and media exposure was indispensable to the fabrication of the player’s persona. Among other factors, the emerging importance of media exposure led to the commercialization of professional sports, economic principles gaining utmost priority (Dauncey and Hare 2014, 11), and media and sponsors shaping the images of the sport’s brightest stars in unprecedented ways (Steen 2013, 2234). Generally speaking, when Michael Jordan entered the league in 1984, a plethora of media related measures was being established. When the media reached their full communicative potential, Jordan, too, was at the peak of his career, made all the more successful thanks to a positive feedback loop consisting of media coverage, on-court success, and endorsement (which again, resulted in more on-screen time). Moreover, Jordan signed an endorsement deal with Nike in 1984 prior to playing his first NBA game, and had a shoe customarily designed for his needs. Nike used Jordan to establish itself as the world’s top sports outfitter and had him star in numerous commercials—Jordan powered Nike’s success and vice versa. Surprisingly, Jordan was kept away from the stereotypical image of urban black Americans (Andrews and Silk 2010, 1629), and even though the NBA embraced hip-hop culture in an endeavor to sell black culture to a white audience (Lorenz and Murray 2013, 28), Jordan was not involved in urban-related marketing activities. Therefore, it can be assumed that the marketing strategy tailor-made for the persona of Michael Jordan presumably aimed at disassociating him from multiple stigmas usually attached to urban blackness, such as misogyny, violence, hyper-masculinity, and the magnification of material wealth (Rose 2008, 1-2). Nike and the NBA presented him as the “embodiment of American virtue” (Naughton 1992, 154), as Jordan had been cut from his high-school team, yet still managed to play collegiate basketball in North Carolina, and to turn professional. Contrary to Erving Johnson as well as other black athletes, Jordan’s supreme ambition and work-ethic took center stage, while discussions on his astonishing talent made him a poster child of Reaganite ideology (Andrews and Silk 2010, 1627). In various forms, Jordan’s story served as a counterplot to the stereotypical

narrative of the black player. Not only was he the hardest worker in the room, but he also primarily played for the pure sake of competition instead of money or personal fame (Vancil 1992, 76). However, Jordan still re-bargained his 1996 contract to earn \$30 million in a single season (Denzin 1996, 324)—a move which is partly contradictory to the image of the hard-working, competition-embracing, and not interested in material wealth persona. Therefore, it can be argued that Jordan’s depiction was highly artificial and aimed at creating a black (American) hero. By revolutionizing the representation of black athletes, Jordan came to epitomize the maxims of an economically productive and patriarchal member of (primarily) white corporate life (Maharaj 1999, 230).

Even though hip-hop imagery had no impact on Michael Jordan, it was all the same applied to other superstars. As a matter of fact, the NBA tried on the one hand to embrace hip hop culture and sell it to white audiences, and on the other hand to commodify black bodies—as Michael Jordan’s fabricated image undoubtedly demonstrates—and to monetize both (Leonard 2006, 160). After Michael Jordan’s reign as basketball’s famous flagship, the NBA redirected their superstars’ representational focus and rejuvenated alliances with companies which embodied attributes the NBA had previously avoided. As Kobe Bryant rose to notoriety and served as a *Michael Jordan 2.0*, he was described as ‘hardworking’ and ‘ultra-competitive’ between his fourth (2009) and fifth (2010) championship runs. Prior to those years (in the early 2000s), the NBA attempted to merge black urban culture with corporate ideals by introducing a growing number of players to the league who brought in and exhibited a more pronounced hip-hop imagery. A common theory for this shift is that the sneaker brand AND1 tried to conquer the sneaker market by selling rough and street-proven merchandise (Campbell 2015, 53). By equipping an emerging amount of players with their merchandise, AND1 created an urban influence on the NBA. Another hypothesis argues that heart-warming rags-to-riches stories of black players overcoming their ghetto origins and achieving the American Dream in the NBA, made the league tolerate more black urban associations with basketball as the exposure of meritocratic ideals particularly pleased white audiences (Sailes 2009, 137). Regardless, as the primary customers’ desires changed, the NBA’s approach to audiences and players also had to adapt.

AND1 was trying to develop a consumer-friendly urban blackness that would not interfere with Nike's mainstream approach. However—in order to stand out from its market competitors—AND1 had to put a twist on the hard work, dedication, and devotion themes at the core of the Nike/Jordan campaign. Moving in a different direction, they chose authenticity as their leading theme, and featured streetballers in their commercials in order to achieve credibility for the products they were advertising. Streetball—namely basketball played outdoors, and in a less organized fashion—promotes creative self-expression (Campbell 2015, 54) by embracing a flashy playing style, nonconformist clothing, and a higher focus on individual achievement than team performance.

Accordingly, Latrell Sprewell was chosen as the AND1's brand ambassador because he was considered a troublemaker after physically assaulting his coach during the 1997 season. His 1999 campaign *I am the American Dream* demonstrates how his image fosters both an urbanely- relatable version of the American Dream (ibid., 55-6), and its own mockery. Such an approach was presently copied by sneaker manufacturer Reebok, and made into the Allen Iverson's *I am what I am* campaign, which staged Allen Iverson as a free-spirited, tough-looking streetball player. Iverson was the perfect choice at the time, as he catered to the urban thug image for his jewelry, tattoos, and cornrows while also establishing himself as an incredibly hard-working individual, who overcame his deficiencies in height (5'11/6"0 feet) with tremendous strength of mind and devotion. The attention the Reebok campaign paid to Iverson's individual narrative definitely contributed to achieving an important paradigm shift within the realm of basketball. Iverson's story served the purpose of reconciling significant attributes—such as mental strength—among many other defining features usually ascribed to black players. *Only the strong, a Reebok marketing campaign inspired by one of Iverson's tattoos, also committed to crossing the racial line, an unimaginable endeavor for black players in the 1980s.* Not only did Iverson experience individual success, he also led his Philadelphia 76ers to the NBA finals in 2001. The team, however, succumbed to the Los Angeles Lakers, who were spearheaded by their two superstars: the entertaining but ultra-dominant Shaquille O'Neil and the wunderkind Kobe Bryant. As the Lakers three-

peated from 1999 to 2002, the Showtime Lakers underwent a resurgence. As a result, the 2001 NBA finals showcased the two main imageries associated with black players (the ghetto-underdog vs. the Showtime Lakers 2.0) competing in the early 2000s. This both dogmatic and athletic competition resulted in massive profits as the NBA persisted in its global expansion during the 2000s (Naito and Takagi 2017), and as both teams sold astronomical amounts of merchandise. With the 76ers emerging on the scene, some experts inferred that the NBA was “not running away from associations with urban culture but marketing them to death” (Zirin 2007, 108), providing a prime example of the corporate colonization of racial issues. However, massive profit was made by exploiting the non-conformist streetball image, a move which boomeranged in December 2004.

The following section is going to examine three key transgressions highlighting underlying fractures in the otherwise stellar NBA, starting with the *Malice in the Palace* (2004/2005), followed by Donald Sterling’s racist remarks (2014/2015), and by the NBA’s reactions to the Social Justice Movement sparked by George Floyd’s death (2020).

BRAWLS, SCANDALS, MISDEEDS, AND CORPORATE RESPONSES

In order to fully understand how the NBA deals with the underlying fractures within the US, one has to take a closer look at how the league manages precarious circumstances within its own ranks, because “especially in times of crisis, an organization needs to respond [...] to lessen the damage the crisis may have brought to the organization’s image” (Wan and Schell 2007, 26). However, the image in this case is “not solely controlled by the organization but it is also an audience-determined construct” (ibid.). As we have outlined earlier, under Stern, the NBA fed a polished product to its audience—a relatively simple task if everything went according to the corporate script. However, when an NBA-affiliate steps out of line or the target audience’s desires change, the audience blames the league. (Benoit 1997, 178). As a consequence, the carefully designed self-representation takes a hit and reveals its underlying tensions. The first relevant blow for this article is the event known as *Malice at the Palace*.

The Malice at the Palace

Because of the income urban representation generated, players that identified with the hard-nosed and rough ghetto image of streetball thrived in the NBA. Two of these players were Ben Wallace, who was endorsed by AND₁ and a crucial player for the 2004 NBA champions Detroit Pistons, and Ron Artest, an uprising young player for the Indiana Pacers. The Pistons team of the time was depicted as the Bad Boys 2.0¹ and at the time had a rivalry with the Indiana Pacers, who they had won against in the 2004 Eastern Conference Finals on their way to a championship. As tempers flared during the Pacers/Pistons blowout-game on November 19, 2004, in the Palace of Urban Hills, Artest and Wallace got into a fight (Craig 2016, 21). While referees and teammates tried to deescalate the situation, Artest provocatively laid down on the scorer's table, which animated a fan to throw and hit Artest with a cup of beer, causing him to run up to the stands and physically confront the assumed attacker. Artest's actions sparked a brawl as his Pacers teammates came to his support, which reinforced the widespread image of malicious (black) players attacking harmless (white) spectators (ibid., 22). Even though every involved player was found not guilty in court, the NBA came down with harsh punishments—suspending Artest for 82 games and other players for numerous games as well—as it struggled with a plummeting public image that took their reputation back to 1984: the brawl recalled the too-black and hip-hop-like ghetto mentality-driven narrative (Leonard 2006, 159). The devastating consequences of the Malice at the Palace became obvious when the 2005 NBA finals ratings were 20% lower than the previous year (Lorenz and Murray 2013, 29). The NBA promptly reacted in 2005 by introducing a three-headed redemption strategy consisting of an age limit, a dress code, and an increase in fines for technical and flagrant fouls (Leonard 2006, 161). A particularly interesting aspect regarding black players' representation is the dress code, as it chiefly censored “racialized forms of expressions” (Lorenz and Murray 2013, 24) like snapbacks, jewelry, or bandanas. Pretending to be color blind, the league standardized white norms

¹ The original Bad Boys Pistons team was centered around Bill Laimbeer, Isiah Thomas, and Dennis Rodman, and won two Championships from 1988-1990

not to combat blackness, as they reasoned, but rather to assure professionalism (ibid.), a stance that led them to discriminate between the good ‘other’ (successful, well-dressed, professional) and the bad ‘other’ (bragging, excessive, pompous) (Leonard 2006, 161). It can be argued that black players were presented as “an extension of a broader black community perpetually plagued by ‘social pathologies’” (May 2009, 444)—pathologies which, in the logic of the league, needed to be regulated by corporate professionalism as expressed by the dress code order

When dealing with an image crisis it is not important “whether the business *in fact* is responsible for the offensive act, but whether the firm is *thought* to be [...] by the relevant audience” (Benoit 1997, 178). Therefore, the NBA—desperate for a scapegoat—chose infantilization as the guiding principle for their players’ representation (Hall 2004, 149). They portrayed players as incapable of managing their abilities and assets on and off the court. On the athletic level, a player could only thrive if regulated by white authorities (Ferber 2007, 20-11) coached by a white person, with the player submitting to the greater good of the team, and secondly, bound to those enforced rules on technical and flagrant fouls (Neuhaus and Thomas 2021). Off-court, some players gathered media interest by going insolvent briefly after retiring from the NBA. Probably the most ignominious example is Allen Iverson reportedly spending \$150 million and facing bankruptcy (Carson 2015), which supported the NBA’s—unarticulated, yet present—claim that black players were not able to handle their pecuniary potential properly (Banet-Weiser 1999, 408). The obvious intent to infantilize black players became more blatant as journalists reported that after 2005 Stern unforgivingly pursued his program and “treated players like children” (Cohen 2012). Additionally, the NBA initiated instructional classes on finances (Furman 2015) and thereby corroborated the idea of the compassionate (team) owners and the reckless black players, giving way to a “perverted and romanticized parent-child-relationship” (Neuhaus and Thomas 2021, 185) that overtly promoted corporate professionalism, but covertly established white culture as the exclusively acceptable norm.

Donald Sterling's Racist Remarks

On April 25, 2014, a recording of Donald Sterling—who at the time was the owner of the Los Angeles Clippers—making racist remarks to his girlfriend telling her, among other things, to not “bring black people to [his] games” (Cramer 2019, 272- 3) surfaced and set the (NBA) world on fire. That flame was fueled after “fans soon learned that Sterling had a history of racial discrimination that was overlooked by the league” (ibid. 273). In light of these transgressions, during the 2014 playoffs NBA players were collectively prepared to boycott games, leading them to facing the “possibility of work stoppage and loss of corporate sponsorship, being a toxic combination that the NBA needed to resolve” (Lavelle 2016, 425). Even though players did not go through with boycotting games, the Los Angeles Clippers staged a silent protest during their following road playoff game against the Golden State Warriors on April 27, 2014, by collectively removing their Clippers apparel, placing it at center court, and wearing “the rest of their warm-up gear inside out” (Newport 2014). With the public eye eagerly awaiting the league to take disciplinary action there was no way for the NBA’s new commissioner Adam Silver to further ignore Sterling’s behavior, who had “built a reputation as the worst owner in pro sports by bungling hires, skimping on contracts and heckling his own players” (Jenkins 2014). Consequently, Adam Silver held a press conference on April 29, 2014, in which he announced Sterling’s banishment for life, “vowed to force a sale of the franchise” (ibid.), and fined him \$2.5 million dollars (Cramer 2019, 272). These developments demonstrate how Silver took his time to assess the public backlash and resort to the old reliable scapegoating-strategy. Arguably, Silver chose these radical measures to rapidly resolve and forget about the scandal by sacrificing the NBA’s longest tenured owner. Indeed, he could not afford the media narrative and investigations to blow up and reveal the “historically white and largely unaffected leadership, and the hegemony on whiteness which remains under-critiqued” (Hylton and Lawrence 2016, 2746). However, it should not be forgotten that the NBA only reacted when public attention was directed to the topic, highlighting that the league had not been interested in values *per se* but only when they interfered with economic interest.

Social Justice and the NBA in 2020/21

As NBA players got increasingly active on social media and pushed their own political agendas forward (Xu, Yu, and Hoi 2015, 81), the league had to adjust its course. While a group of athletes led by LeBron James wore *I can't breathe* shirts following Eric Garner's death in 2014 (Feeney 2014), the phrase regained momentum in June 2020 after George Floyd's murder. Six years after the Donald Sterling incident and with the *Black Lives Matter* movement exponentially gaining ground within American society (as well as abroad), the NBA “took a firm and controversial position, allowing players to wear social justice messages on the back of their jerseys” (Pazzano and Spagnolo 2021, 2). This symbolizes an analogous change in the NBA's marketing strategy regarding the inclusion of public discourse or politically driven discussions in their commercial maneuvers, as the league “responded to the crisis as a problem in public relations and a marketing opportunity” (Montez de Oca, Mason & Ahn 2020, 2), because the increasingly socially aware audience and sponsors “expect the same from brands they wish to either buy or invest in” (Pazzano and Spagnolo 2021, 2). Therefore, the NBA timely jumped on the social justice bandwagon by overtly showing that “they are aware of ongoing racial injustice in the United States and conspicuously [demonstrating] the league's moral values” (Montez de Oca, Mason & Ahn 2020, 3) thereby concealing the “prevalence of whiteness at the highest levels of sport governance” (Hylton and Lawrence 2016, 2746) within its own ranks. As a result, Adam Silver dealt with the growing fractures in the United States and evaded potential representational scandals caused by the *Black Lives Matter* movement by simply embracing the respective associations between the social movement and the NBA, “marketing them to death” (Zirin 2007, 108). This could be considered yet another example of “corporate colonization²” (Deetz 1992) as well as corporate-driven re-interpretation of reality.

² Corporate colonization (Deetz 1992) describes the priority of corporate idea(l)s—i.e. efficiency, rationalism, and optimization—over others in associations. All of these ideas correspond to the system of business and put measurable growth (i.e. revenue, market-share, etc.) above all other benchmarks of success. Further, corporate colonization describes how these ideas mutate (within organizations as well as across different organizations), into acknowledged qualities. In his work, Deetz zeroes in on communication and inner-organization procedures. However, his analysis makes use of corporate colonization to partially throw light on the illustration of basketball players. As corporate

While the original focus was on the re-narration of blackness, in times of (perceived) crisis the league extends its corporate narrative onto several more far-ranging aspects. This last case illustrates the interdependence between NBA and its players as the protest, motivated by a desire for social justice, has been broadcasted not only by mainstream media or made known by social activists, but it has also been shared on several players' social media handles. Moreover, the NBA adopted a social justice stance as its core audience seemed to share the same values. On this basis, the mainstream framing of racism as something to be denounced and eradicated from society was adopted as the corporate NBA narrative, this time in line with the players' socio-political viewpoints. We encourage future research to investigate more deeply into the manners in which players, in their public commentary and/or social media handles, actually stray from mainstream narratives and from corporate understanding of events, topics, and (public) discussions. Based on the observations made in the three misconducts outlined in this paper, it can be hypothesized that players' agency is limited to its accordance with mainstream appeals and is, therefore, regulated accordingly.

CONCLUSION: RACE AS THE NBA'S (DAMAGED) CODA

The NBA has had several incidents in which frictions along racial lines had to be managed. Over the last fifteen years, a trend towards (black) player empowerment can be observed, as the NBA shifted from the infantilization and child-like treatment of black players after the *Malice in the Palace* to the crisis aversion strategy set in place after Donald Sterling's racial remarks and the latest *Black Lives Matter* developments, where the NBA acted as a frontrunner for social justice. However, believing the changed approach to solely stem out of benevolence and kindness would be historical amnesia, not to mention thoroughly naïve. The NBA's management of racial tensions is a prime

colonization primarily describes a particular way of thinking and acting, it can also apply to various collaborating instances, such as the NBA as well as associated companies (i.e. shoe producers) Due to the racial lens these issues are analyzed with, corporate colonization has been—at least with regard to the colonization aspect—expanded in its scope, and has acquired an additional meaning (Neuhaus and Thomas 2021, 176).

example of corporate colonization (Deetz 1992), meaning the interpretation of the world and the adjustment of one’s behavior in a way that generates the highest possible revenue. This means, within the frame of this article, that the NBA has constantly adapted its stance on race aiming for the maximum consensus between its financially potent audiences’ desires and the consumable product. Consequently, as the mainstream opinion on social justice and race related issues has changed, the league has modified its output accordingly to ensure revenue. This leads to this article’s conclusion that—at least in the observed and analyzed cases—the universally unifying element that drove the NBA in its decision making was, is, and probably will always be money and corporate interest, regardless of the causes of the (social) fracture or friction. Considering the NBA—the key institution of a proto-American sport—and its handling of racial issues a commentary on the current state of the United States, corporate interest seems to be the dominating principle at hand; an observation which has also been made in other fields (Wolin 2015; Neuhaus, Jacobsen & Vogt 2021). This leads us to ask to what extent the—partly contradictory—ideas and ideals outlined in the introduction are subjected to corporate logic. Further, this also raises the question of whether the observable fractures of the otherwise United States should be re-evaluated and/or reframed as tensions arising from the clash of the interests of corporate actors and larger parts of civil society.

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TO BE ONE WITH NATURE: HOW WEST AFRICAN SPIRITUALISM REWRITES AFRICAN AMERICAN ECOLITERARY NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

Southern US literature and African American literature often speak about racialized and dismembered bodies swallowed by the earth and never retrieved. Nature, in these instances, is hostile and “white,” as even trees become problematic symbols of lynching practices. This essay, however, attempts to retrieve and re-signify the concepts of soil and plants by analyzing the relationship between Black bodies and Nature from an Ecoliterary and Ecotheological point of view. This examination especially focuses on West African beliefs and their role in the African American re-appropriation of natural, earthly spaces and instances of the afterlife. Ethnic resistance and spiritual-medical knowledge have been crucial to African American cultural liberation, and the essay highlights this by analyzing the traces of African spiritualism and syncretism in the works of two African American authors in particular: Toni Morrison and Jesmyn Ward. The result of this re-appropriation is a vivifying, hopeful and ultimately political series of images and literary tropes that overturn mournful and chthonic narratives, resuming positive and life-bearing relationships between Black bodies and Nature.

Keywords: American south; West Africa; Spiritualism; Ecocriticism; African Americans; Toni Morrison; Jesmyn Ward.

“Yes, subordination, subjugation, subaltern, literally ‘under the earth,’ racialized populations are buried people. But there is a lot happening underground. Not only coffins, but seeds, roots and rhizomes.”

(Ruha Benjamin, “Black AfterLives Matter,” 2018)

As to this day, a consistent number of critics has written about African American literary renditions of the horrors of slavery and the exploitation of Black bodies. Some of the literary works taken into analysis adopt enraged tones, some try to find a catharsis for the survivors, and some others wish to find peace and release for the dead. These instances strongly take shape inside novels and poems, when it comes to the narrativization and fabulation of the relationship between Black bodies and Southern land; a relationship which has always been complex, problematic, and ultimately mournful. Patricia Yaeger, for instance, writes how landscapes in modern and contemporary southern women’s literature are “loaded with trauma unspoken, with

bodies unhealed or uncared for, with racial melancholia” (Yaeger 2000, 19). This concept is espoused by other critics who speak of torture and the way Black bodies are tossed to the side once dismembered and bent by white perpetrators; these practices reach the “very depths of the land” and effectively turn Black people into soil—Southern earth is symbolically and literally fertilized with their blood. As Farah Jasmine Griffin posits, blood is then also organically linked to all the crops grown on Southern soil (1995, 16). To many African Americans, the typical idealized image of Southern Nature as painted by white pastoral literature was, and still is, unconceivable, as Nature has often been turned against Black people, both historically and literarily. The practice of lynching provides an excellent and gruesome example: a tree such as the magnolia, frequently used as an emblem of Southern beauty (Martin 2007, 95), was turned into a lynching symbol in the famous song *Strange Fruit* (1936), written by Abel Meeropol and performed by Billie Holiday, in order to address the impossibility of reconciliation between Nature and African Americans (Griffin 1995, 16).

Yaeger goes even further in her analysis and focuses on a grim image concerning soil itself, as she recounts the suicidal practice among African American slaves of eating dirt as an ultimate attempt to find death and peace (Yaeger 2000, x). However, as other scholars report, eating dirt and clay was an ambivalent practice, which could assume the form of an indulgence or become a means of temporary salvation (Starkey 1964, 56-57). Concerning the former, we know of slaves chewing on dirt as if they were chewing on gum or tobacco, whether for oral pleasure or for allaying hunger; as for the latter, we know of people who ingested dirt in order to get sick and avoid being sold into slavery and fall in the hands of African traders (56-57). In light of these examples, I would argue that the nature of dirt is quite ambivalent. Earth, soil, dirt and all its synonyms have often been used to oppress Black bodies, to silence them or to reduce them into nothingness. After all, a buried body is a mute entity. However, there are some redeeming qualities to these elements when adopted as forms of rebellion, resistance or liberation. With these concepts in mind, African American writers have looked upon spiritualism to find comfort and strength, as this essay will illustrate. Toni Morrison is one of these writers: her intent with *Beloved*, for instance, was “to pitch a tent in a

cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts” (Morrison 2016, xi). However, she did not only dwell in the realm of the ghostly and the supernatural. As will be discussed, she also fused African and African American culture together in a narrative that redeemed and gave new meaning to earthly elements that characterized a slave’s existence. The symbolic value of dirt is one of them. An example of this symbolic positive rewriting of soil and dirt figures in a passage of her novel *Sula* (1973), in which Sula herself emphasizes the value of her lover’s body, Ajax, as it resides in “an intricate layering of precious metals and water-seeking earth” (Yaeger 2000, 38): she imagines rubbing one of his cheek bones and finding gold under his black skin, then alabaster, and then “the loam, fertile, free of pebbles and twigs” (Morrison 1973, 130-31). Morrison here insists on treasuring and reevaluating the layered complexity of her characters’ subjectivity, as opposed to the “brute subjected stuff from which whiteness is made” (Yaeger 2000, 38), and places clean and fertile soil at the deepest and most intimate layer of their bodies, stressing an almost atavistic intimacy: “I will put my hand deep into your soil, lift it, sift it with my fingers, feel its warm surface and dewy chill below.... I will water your soil, keep it rich and moist. [...] How much water to keep the loam moist? [...] And when do the two make mud?” (Morrison 1973, 130-31).

As Marco Petrelli states, Morrison suggests that “stories have the power to redeem or to condemn” (Petrelli 2020, 279), and dirt can be redeemed through these very stories. As previously remarked, dirt can be a way to dissolution, as it indicates a path to survival. Surviving the action of dirt and the devouring or suffocating qualities of soil implies the possibility for the survivor to narrate and give voice to the ones who have been lost along the way. Giving them voice means bringing them peace, liberating them. In this perspective, “matters of life and death, soil, and narration seem to be poetically entwined” (Petrelli 2020, 279). This ambivalent aspect of soil and its entwinement to voice-regaining Blacks is part of what Kimberly N. Ruffin calls the “ecological burden-and-beauty paradox” that many African Americans experience (Ruffin 2010, 2): a dynamic influence and entwinement between Natural and Social orders. As Ruffin argues, African Americans suffer an environmental burden because of the way they are negatively racialized, but they also experience ecological beauty due to

“individual and collective attitudes toward nature that undercut the experience of racism and its related evils” (2).

This essay highlights the “ecological beauty” that African Americans experience both in the social and literary landscape, as opposed to the “evils” suggested by the scholars mentioned above. African American authors have addressed the horrors of slavery and racism in their novels and poems, contributing to a solid and important tradition which denounces the vexations of the past and does not spare readers images of violent death and desperate mourning. However, even in the thickest darkness, light can be found: hope, a sense of community, remembrance, life. As Ruha Benjamin argues, these positive and vivifying themes might have been born out of sheer psychological necessity, but the sense of “kinfulness” that they ensue is a source of Black pride (Benjamin 2018, 49). These positive themes which do not present us with morbid and suffering images are there to counter balance a narrative that in certain instances could reveal itself to be toxic to the community, as the stress on systematic wrongdoing could show a “perverse quality” to narration: the struggle of a constantly subjugated people to be admitted into the category of “human,” for which empathy is rationed and must produce empirical evidence of disparity and struggle (53). Benjamin suggests taking advantage of the “subterranean spaces” that the subordinated status entails and use them to create new forms of kinship (56). These forms of kinship are “seeds, roots and rhizomes” (47) that can find their way out of the ground and into the open air through experimenting with fiction, by adopting “speculative methods” to challenge the racist status quo (52), and by creating connections among the living and the dead, humans and Nature.

These narratives stress the concepts of power and resilience and the examples that follow, will show how some of them heavily rely on the imagery surrounding Nature and on different forms of Spiritualism to describe parables of empowerment and resistance. More specifically, hints towards, and reminiscences of African culture, religion, and lore are alive and prosperous in African American narratives, as they are intimately tied to, and integrated in, the literary geography of the Southern United

States. These narratives ultimately bind Black bodies to American soil and plants, giving birth to a new identity, one that is authentic to African Americans.

I will start by briefly addressing the poignant soil-related symbolism that finds its roots at the beginning of the history of African Americans: the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Elizabeth D. Blum writes how: “slave traders reported cases of women swallowing African soil as they left their native land on the perilous journey across the Atlantic” (Blum 2002, 259). As this analysis will demonstrate, this powerful act was seen as the only way for African people to maintain a spiritual connection to their motherland—a vivifying relationship with dirt that is also addressed by scholars when speaking about West Africans being “uprooted” and then “replanted” in American soil (Myers 2003, 6). This metaphor involving roots and plants is a common trope that binds Black bodies even more tightly to the land and to the healing qualities of Nature. These specific tropes have been the focus of ecocritics and ecotheologians. Ecocriticism is intuitively involved in this discourse, as it is “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty 1996, xviii). The fundamental premise in which this definition finds its roots is that human culture both affects and is affected by the physical world, and this is a pivotal point to all ecological criticism. Ecocriticism analyzes the interconnections between Nature and culture, and between the human and the nonhuman. As a result, the concept of “world” is expanded to include the entire ecosphere (xix). The consequent step to take, once the concept of culture has come into play, is to consider religion. And this is where Ecotheology finds its place in literary analyses of African and African American studies: Ecotheology locates its field of exploration in the ancestral traditions of cultural groups within their environment—whether they refer back to book-based religions like Catholicism or Earth-based ones like Yoruba cults (Ruffin 2010, 90).

Since this article predominantly refers to West African culture and religions, its analysis will focus on Earth-based religions. Ruffin describes some of them as “site-specific responses that emerge from indigenous populations who have an in-depth knowledge of themselves” (90) and of the immediate world around them. They are place-centered beliefs. In these social-cultural systems, humans are not conceived as

separate beings, set apart from their natural environment, and religious practices reflect this concept, as they think of forests, rivers, and mountains as sacred spaces (91). However, these sites are not considered sacred because of an abstract religiosity, they are sacred because they procure food through crops, and crops come from rain, and rain comes from happy ancestors, who will be satisfied only if their descendants treat Nature well. Here, “religion is a very practical thing” (Byers 2004, 655) and everything is done to preserve the natural order of things. Ceremonies are performed to gain the favor of ancestors, who keep the land fertile and the community healthy, not just by providing food, but also by growing healing herbs and roots (Blum 2002, 249). These ceremonies, characterized by dances and singing in circle, were practices imported by the Congo region which then became central in slave culture (Stuckey 2013, 10). They had the purpose of both honoring the ancestors and achieving union with God, on whom “the fertility of men and crops” depended (10). The religious gatherings would become occasions for slaves to relate to one another even if cultural and language barriers stood among them (23); they were so preponderant that Christian faith, for African Americans, “answered to African religious imperatives” (29). Religious practices such as the “ring shout” prominently shaped African American culture as, for instance, they helped form the context in which jazz music was created. African Americans faithfully adhered to African tradition through the centuries, with offshoots of Bakongo-based expressions until the 1920s (107).

Meanwhile, the concept of “ancestor” would become a literary trope in Southern migration narratives that, if emphasized in the text, would symbolize the earning of Black birthright to the land, culture, and redemption (Griffin 1995, 5). The ancestor would be a benevolent, instructive, and protective character who would provide a certain kind of wisdom, and could manifest him or herself in rituals, religion, music, or even food; he or she could be a literal ancestor, or not (5). Concerning ancestries, it is true that, in certain instances of African culture, land continues relationships among “current, previous, and future generations” (Blum 2002, 249): a person does not disappear after death, but lingers and shows its presence in ways that are concrete and perhaps distant from the Western concepts of “haunting.” For instance, Ruha Benjamin

espouses and reflects on the concept firstly introduced by Zhaleh Boyd of “ancestral co-presence” (Benjamin 2018, 46), and highlights the ways in which African American culture retained key features of African diasporic traditions by embracing this particular conception of Afterlife (47). When speaking about the relationship between the living and the dead, she stresses the connection between people and earth: racialized people are “under the earth” people, buried. However, Benjamin emphasizes the intense living activity of the underground, where seeds and roots carve their way among coffins. In this habitat, “alternative forms of kinship have room to grow and to nourish other life forms and ways of living” (47). A strong sense of community prevails, and the connection among the living and the dead is never truly severed. In addition to these concepts, the idea of the earth as an “ancient mother” comes into play. Earth might be the final resting place, but interment is often seen as a gathering back “in the womb of the earth” (Chavez 1993, 65). This vivifying image of earth derives from West African religious beliefs. In Igbo culture, for instance, “to discuss the land is to discuss the goddess of the land, Ala or Ana” (Gomez 1998, 129): the earth mother was the most important deity in most Igbo communities and “*ala* (the land) and *Ala* (the earth mother) were inextricably associated” (129). Fertile and generative qualities of soil can also be found in Bambara beliefs, and this is evident in legends as the one of the god Pemba: after transforming into a tree, Pemba created a woman who represented the earth, and then proceeded copulating with her; from the union, animals and plants came into existence (Gomez 1998, 49). This cultural inheritance inevitably influenced African American culture and its concept of Afterlife, as will be evident in the following pages. And as Robert F. Thompson states, “nowhere is Kongo-Angolan influence on the New World more pronounced, more profound, than in black traditional cemeteries throughout the South of the United States” (Thompson 1983, xiv). These powerful identifications that trace a communicative, lively, and motherly relationship between living, dead, and the soil create a chance of reunion rather than tragic division, and it could be further considered a positive counterpart to the “swallowing earth” of the American South (Yaeger 2000, 16), a complementary image that influences and inspires African American writers. When analyzing soil and land, we can identify their active

participation in the maintenance of folk tradition and we can also notice their constant presence in folk dramatization concerned with the meaning of life. These narratives are passed from a generation to the next (Christian 1980, 65). Barbara Christian indicated some of the novels of Toni Morrison as examples of this type of dramatization: *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *Song of Solomon* (1977), which will be addressed in the following pages. As for the tradition they preserve, it is a successful fusion of Christian beliefs and Earth-based religious traditions, so much that many scholars talk about an “Africanist” quality to Black Christianity (Ruffin 2010, 92).¹ All this can be traced back to enslaved communities, who worshiped the woodland and syncretized Christianity with traditional African practices, focusing on the interrelationship between human and non-human (92). In implementing the results of this syncretism into their writings, African American authors participate in an active and effective ecoliterary discourse, from the times of slavery to this day. As an example, we could name renowned sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois—who argued that the African American church “was not at first by any means Christian; rather it was an adaptation and mingling of heathen rites among the members of each plantation” (Du Bois 2007, 132)—and his analysis and problematization of the relationship between the Black man and his environment, which adopted a literary approach that we could call “ecoliterary”: in his novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), the character named Zora manages to buy a swamp of her own, clear it, and then grow cotton in it, in an act of reappropriation of a plant that had become a symbol of oppression. In the novel, the flowering of the fleece becomes a symbol “for the characters’ relationship to the land and their ability to use nature to empower themselves and find self-fulfillment” (Preston-McGee 2011, 48). Along with Du Bois, we could name a number of other authors: scholar Kimberly Ruffin

¹ As scholar Mazi E. N. Njaka defines it, Africanism “seeks to liberate the mind of the black, enabling him to search for old concepts and values, African in origin, and to explore and create new ones. [...] Africanism encourages the creation of a culture characterized by rationalism—a rationalism which gives rise to the discovery of other elements, empirical and/or normative. [...] Its components are so varied as to include the arts, beliefs, culture, history, music, philosophy, politics, science, and concepts such as Nationalism and Pan-Africanism. In its specificity Africanism concerns itself with Africans and the African diaspora: namely, Afro-Americans, West Indians, Afro-Europeans, Afro-Asians, etc.” (Njaka 1971, 12).

addresses the “ecotheological creativity” of writers such as Alice Walker and Octavia Butler, who synthesized through their works of literature scientific phenomena, book-based traditions, and Earth-based traditions (Ruffin 2010, 93). According to her, both Butler and Walker find the Bible useful for ecotheological synthesis; to them, however, the future of Christianity appears potentially antithetical to sustainability, and so they implement their visions with non-biblical religious resources (96). As Ruffin states, this is especially evident in Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Walker’s essays (Ruffin 2010, 95). A contemporary author who could find his place in this lineage of ecologically aware African American syncretized narratives could be Colson Whitehead. According to James Mellis, in his novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016), Whitehead was able to implement the “new, clandestine traditions” of African slaves, who struggled to satisfy their collective needs, into the consciousness of his characters, namely Cora, the protagonist (Mellis 2019, 4).

Part of this rather wide discourse revolves around the concept of re-appropriation. In particular, we could refer to Salamisha Tillet’s considerations on the concept, both ascriptive and affective, of “civic estrangement,” and the need of African Americans to represent themselves in a civic context that has marginalized them in civil myths, monuments, narratives, and so on (Tillet 2012, 3). These texts which commemorate enslaved African Americans are “sites of slavery” that democratize U.S. memory through the preservation of “those aspects of the past that uphold national identity and then legitimate and transmit those histories to present and future generations” (4-5). These predominantly post-civil rights and contemporary authors (such as the ones mentioned above) come at the end of a long democratic process that tried to remodel or own the environment Black people were forced to inhabit. Carolyn M. Jones addresses a form of spiritual attempt: “the landscape of the South, in the beginning so alien to African slaves, became [...] neither legally nor economically their own, but, became spiritually their own through their own labor under most difficult of circumstances” (Jones 1998, 37). This concept of freeing oneself through labor has been salient, and through the decades it has been tackled by a number of African American authors, one of them being W.E.B. Du Bois. However, as I will argue, Toni Morrison was

able to give us a peculiar insight on these processes of re-appropriation, by combining a scientific envisioning of the environment with a psychological, sociological, religious, and historical analysis of Nature. This resulted in the production of an historical narrative for African Americans that was previously ignored by white society (Tolman 2003, 17). According to the author, the slave narrative was the “quintessential site of memory” and so it is important that in this context her characters (and, by extension, African Americans) gain “an interiority and subjectivity denied them in American history” (Tillet 2012, 5). Morrison “fills-in” the previous instances of autobiographical slave narratives, which too often shaped the ex-slave experience in a way that made it palatable to those who were in the position to alleviate it, “forgetting” many other things (Morrison 1995, 91). In many ways, her characters show how Black people have been oppressed by white people’s use of Nature, but at the same time how they regain their agency and come to possess the ability to “understand how nature is interpreted, mediated, and used” in their favor (Wallace and Armbruster 2001, 213).

The plot of Morrison’s novel *Sula* (1973) is rich with earth-related images; Black bodies live in an almost symbiotic relationship with herbs and trees, elements that “intertwine ecology with nature and landscape with race” (Wardi 2011, 11). In this novel, the concept of “place” is as important as the human actors (Christian 1980, 65), since the Bottom is presented as an environment full of indigenous plants and herbs. This place is described right at the start of the novel, addressing its importance and establishing its role as an actual protagonist. The Bottom is a neighborhood that once “stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river” and that was connected to a valley by “one road, shaded by beeches, oaks, maples and chestnuts.” The narrator then adds a nostalgic observation: “The beeches are gone now, and so are the pear trees where children sat and yelled down through the blossoms to passersby” (Morrison 1973, 3). The Bottom, by the time the story is supposedly being told, has gone through a process of deforestation, both concrete and metaphorical. Morrison mentions two herbs being uprooted which are relevant to this discourse, as they inform us that a very specific type of environment and cultural niche is being evoked, both geographically and symbolically: “In that place... they tore the nightshade

and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion Golf Course” (Morrison 1973, 3). The Bottom is abruptly destroyed in order to become a “white space,” as the author herself stresses by presenting to the reader a number of conceptual and physical opposites: “they/neighbors (and implicitly whites/blacks), [...] roots/Medallion, houses/golf course, and past/present,” are placed there to stress the racial division of the land (Page 1995, 62), and the submission of the small Black community to capitalist and entrepreneurial modalities of life which lead to urbanization and social homogenization; it is a “multi-pronged assault to social encapsulation” (Cohen 1995, 44). Morrison then focuses on this memory of nightshade and blackberry plants being torn from the earth, two plants which possess both medicinal and cultural properties. Nightshade has been used for centuries as tonic, appetite stimulant, and against asthma and whooping cough (Kueete, Karaosmanoğlu, and Sivas 2017, 288-89), while blackberries were used as medicinal herbs, curing skin conditions, sore throats and wounds (Verma et al. 2014, 103). The inclusion of both plants emphasizes an interest in pharmacopeia and the “root workers” who used it in their trade. It is a cultural sign and “archeological evidence” that African Americans practiced African spiritual tradition (Zauditu-Selassie 2007, 46). This last aspect is also confirmed by the character of a previously mentioned novel by Morrison: Pilate, from *Song of Solomon*, who is trained by a root-worker through whom Morrison valorizes the figure of the natural healer and of the midwife. She is considered by scholars such as Jessica Gama to be the embodiment of tradition and ecofeminism; as she influences her son in searching for fulfillment through African ancestry, she denies masculine domination (often seen as destructive) in her household, and she economically sustains her family through homemade wine making, a practice that both links her to Nature and proposes a solution to “the sorrow and hopelessness of the displaced northern town of Southside” (Gama 2008, 50-51). In the words of Farah Jasmine Griffin, Pilate is the quintessential representative of the trope of the “ancestor”: she is “both root and leaf, the transitional space between the ground where the ancestors reside and the sky to which they direct all who revere them” (Griffin 1995, 6). Stacy Alaimo defined her “a

kind of earth mother [...] remarkably giving birth to herself,” hardly passive, a symbol of African American culture’s rootedness in Nature (Alaimo 2000, 139).

As it seems evident, this relatedness of Nature and culture is not oppositional, but rather complementary. Zauditu-Selassie argues: “Morrison directs the reader’s attention to the power of culture and the capacity of spirituality to re-center and heal African people” (Zauditu-Selassie 2007, 49), creating a “literary garden” where haints, mojos and root-workers are part of a solid spiritual landscape (Zauditu-Selassie 2007, 39). In this landscape, nightshade and blackberry plants find their place because the whole community participated in “working roots,” and both of them are used by “spiritual adepts” while practicing several rituals or making *minkisi* and spiritual packets (Zauditu-Selassie 2009, 50-51).²

Zauditu-Selassie further states that this strong reverence for the power of Nature, which characterized many literary works that stress its beauty and its mythic potential, is a practice that saved African people from the “traumatic terrain” of American racial landscapes. By bringing Africa to America, slaves extended the geo-political boundaries of their continent, fortifying its spiritual culture and sustaining their own inter-spatial and collective selves (Zauditu-Selassie 2007, 39). This is also why so many West African traditions survived and have left marks on African American spirituality (40).

Toni Morrison faithfully portrays the process of remembrance and shows us its power, which can be salvific to African slaves: they can remember, therefore they can heal one another, and reach spiritual liberation (Zauditu-Selassie 2007, 42). In her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Morrison “links the narrative to ritual in an attempt to restore balance in both the visible and invisible realms through the harnessing of spiritual energy” (Zauditu-Selassie 2007, 42). Her character M’Dear is a healer who lives near the woods, a place defined by a high spiritual charge; the woods, in fact, symbolize the realm of the spirits, as in many West and Central African traditions. Furthermore, the woods

² *Minkisi* is the plural form of the Kongo word *nkisi*. “An *nkisi* is a form of traditional medicine made from animal or mineral, which, under the guidance of an Nganga [Master teacher, priest; ed.] helps to heal people from illness or any other imbalance. An *nkisi* makes it possible to approach a spirit. In the Western hemisphere, the Bantu of Brazil refer to the Kongo deities as Nkisis.” (from Zauditu-Selassie 2009, 209).

used to provide Africans with the organic materials necessary to heal wounds and create charms (42). M'Dear and her fellow healers are the true repositories of indigenous knowledge (43) and slaves go to them with offerings and with the herbs and plants necessary for their jinxes and divinations. In a scene, women bring bowls of liquor extracted from "black-eyed peas, from mustards, from cabbage, from kale, from collards, from turnips, from beets, from green beans" (Morrison 1970, 137); plants and various food items have a strong spiritual charge and are considered "gateways" to the other world, as they do not just contribute to the healing cycle but also harness the energy from the earth, preserving the vital essences of life. This energy is then transferred to human bodies whenever they are used or eaten (Zauditu-Selassie 2007, 45).

These women are "like the baobab trees spreading their roots toward the sky and below the earth providing nurture and spiritual sustenance to the community" (54); the slaves trusted them and their remedies, and so enforced their own sense of cultural self-determination (Covey 2007, 123). This is a way of "knowing things" that evades the Euro-centric definition of "medicine" and "science," although it is valid to those who possess that knowledge and put it to good use (Selin 2003, v-vi). It is an entwinement of the spiritual and the earthly that has been highlighted by Toni Morrison herself:

I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting. And some of those things were "discredited knowledge" that Black people had: discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they *knew* was "discredited." And also because the press toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible. That kind of knowledge has a very strong place in my work. (Morrison 1984, 329-30) [author's emphasis]

Having addressed the poignancy of Toni Morrison's work, I will now focus on her legacy by mentioning another African American author who followed in her footsteps and who contributed to the creation of a new "protest" literature which, according to James

Mellis, is “based on African spiritual traditions, and use[s] these traditions variously, both as a tie to an originary African identity, but also as protection and a locus of resistance to an oppressive society” (Mellis 2019, 1). The contemporary literary environment that emerges from this definition is the latest expression of the concepts Morrison was describing in the previous excerpt, and it comes after a string of numerous Black women writers who challenged political and social issues through the recuperation of folk medicine, spiritual African tropes, and benefic relationships with the natural landscape, namely Toni Cade Bambara (1980), Ntozake Shange (1982), Paule Marshall (1983) and Gloria Naylor (1988).

The author I wish to mention is among the other African American writers who are at the end of this string, entering today’s socio-political debate through their fiction: Jesmyn Ward. The story of her novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) is set in the Southern, fictitious town of Bois Sauvage, and follows little Jojo and Kayla, two siblings of African American and Native American descent who are journeying with their mother and her drug dealer friend to Parchman prison to pick up their father, who has just been released. Of great importance are two secondary characters: Pop and Mam, the protagonists’ grandparents, who connect the whole family to the spiritual world, inhabited by ghosts such as Richie. Ultimately, they will all be forced by Richie’s unresolved nature to face the past and its cultural irruptions in the present (Petrelli 2020, 283). These “cultural irruptions” include African herbalist traditions and spiritualism as means of empowerment: her characters use them to control, punish or protect themselves from a hostile society. In so doing, the novel gives new generations a historical and literary model in which cultural resistance can be found (Mellis 2019, 2).

While writing her novel, Ward researched magical and spiritual artistries such as voodoo and hoodoo, in order to give credibility to characters such as Mam and Richie, who represent Haitian Vodou and the concept of the afterlife respectively (Bryant 2017).³

³ A clarification on the uses of the words voodoo, hoodoo, and Vodou is due. According to Jeffrey Anderson, “Voodoo proper is an African creole religion [...] As a developed system of belief, it has its own gods, priests, sacred ceremonies,

The clues that enable us to locate the character of Mam as a Haitian Vodou symbol are plenty: her French name (Philomène), the references she makes to Marie Laveau,⁴ her invocation of Loko (the *loa* of healing and plants in Haitian Vodou)⁵ and her opening up to the *mystère*. These elements provide a geographical and cultural context: Mam's practices are most likely emanated from the New Orleans area, and are practiced in Mississippi and the Gulf South (Mellis 2019, 9). As for the character of Richie, he represents a successful blending of African-based spiritual tradition and the African American contemporary concept of "fictive kin-making" implied in the "Black Afterlives Matter" theory, formulated by Ruha Benjamin. In her essay "Black Afterlives Matter: Cultivating Kinfulness as Reproductive Justice," Benjamin bases her concept of "fictive kin" and its networks of kinship on the experience of the African diaspora. In order to resist the dehumanizing effects of slavery, Black people recreated African notions of family and extended kin units. A person could experience both being nurtured and held responsible for their siblings and their fictive kin—cousins, friends—and so stimulate a generalized ethics of caring and personal accountability (Benjamin 2018, 47). In a broadest sense, Benjamin's Black Afterlives Matter concept takes the diasporic practice of kin-making and extends it "*beyond* biological relatives," and in so doing she includes "the materially dead/spiritually alive ancestors in our midst," those who "are animated by a stubborn refusal to forget and to *be forgotten*" (47-48). Richie, the ghost of a murdered boy, seems to fit in this contemporary mode of fabulation.

By adopting Benjamin's point of view, we could say that his story produces meaning and material with which Jesmyn Ward can both "build (and destroy) what we

and magic. [...] scholars frequently use *Voodoo* to refer to a West African religion that is more properly called *Vodu* or *Vodun*. More often, however, one sees *Voodoo* used to indicate a folk religion of Haiti, the preferred term for which is *Vodou*." (Anderson 2008, x) As for Haitian Vodou, "authors have made it famous by alleging ties with black magic, human sacrifice, and cannibalism" and this religion's origins "stretch back to the late seventeenth century, when French colonists began importing African slaves. [...] The faith evolved into a complex blend of multiple African religions and Christianity." (33) Whereas hoodoo "in modern parlance, does not refer to a religion. On the contrary, it designates a body of magical beliefs, with little reference to deities and the trappings of religious worship. [...] Hoodoo has long been associated with the Mississippi Valley, as has Voodoo." (xi)

⁴ "The most famous of New Orleans's voodoo queens. Born in 1801, she had become one of the nation's best known African American females by the time of her death in 1881." (Anderson 2008, 134)

⁵ The word *loa* is "[a] term evidently derived from the Yoruba word *l'awo*, meaning 'mystery.' These spirits or lesser deities are themselves divided into nations, based on their African origin." (Anderson 2008, 33)

call ‘the real world’” (52). Spirits and ancestors come back to us through the stories of writers who focus on “*what is* and *what is possible*” (52). This narrative process is a literary form of kin-making, given that it cultivates kinfulness. And ultimately, “cultivating kinfulness is cultivating life” (65). As I mentioned previously, these relationships among the dead and the living strengthen the bond between African Americans and Nature. The living possess vivifying and healing herbal knowledge, while the dead sleep under the earth, among the “seeds, roots and rhizomes,” where there are “not only coffins,” but where alternative forms of kinship can grow and “nourish other life forms and ways of living” (Benjamin 2018, 47). These concepts find their representation in images such as the following, in which the ghost of Richie sleeps under the earth in what appears to be a womb-like environment, breathing and beating: “Home ain’t always about a place,” says Richie. “Home is about the earth. Whether the earth open up to you. Whether it pull you so close the space between you and it melt and y’all one and it beats with your heart” (Ward 2017, 182-83). Richie and the earth appear to live symbiotically. Might it be a new form of life? Considering this concept of Afterlife and the references to the West African “earth mother,” the connection between Black people and earth seems to be memory-preserving and potentially re-birthing.

Previously, I also mentioned the living’s vivifying herbal knowledge. Much like the kin-making concept, it is strongly tied to African diasporic culture. In Jesmyrn Ward’s novel we are able to see African religious and healing traditions in action thanks to characters such as Leonie, who is Jojo and Kayla’s mother. She represents an African American woman who has lost her people’s ways, but ultimately manages to remember and retain some type of traditional knowledge, especially regarding herbs and their healing powers. Through Leonie, Ward seems to suggest that African-spiritual practices give characters protection, relief, and “the key to discovering a sense of identity through their usage” (Mellis 2019, 10). The herb she uses to help soothe Kayla’s sick stomach is, at this point not surprisingly, blackberry. It is a natural method of healing illness that is both natural and supernatural, a traditional overlap in Black culture (Chireau 2003, 96). In the course of the novel, we come to learn various facts about Leonie’s life, and among them we find reminiscences of the lessons her mother gave her, and knowledge about

herbal medicine she passed down to her. We get acquainted with Leonie's thoughts as she remembers: "Mama always told me that if I look carefully enough, I can find what I need in the world. Starting when I was seven, Mama would lead me out in the woods around the house for walks" and then "she'd point out plants before digging them up or stripping their leaves and telling me how they could heal or hurt" (Ward 2017, 102-3). In this way, the text shows how root-working knowledge is still passed among generations, so that contemporary African Americans can still find a connection within themselves with their African slave ancestors.

We have plenty of evidence of this type of knowledge being cherished among slaves,⁶ and Ward demonstrates how it survived the passing of time, being still alive today. As we follow Leonie's thoughts, we are informed of the healing properties of some plants: "You can make a decoction for cold and flu. And if you make them into a poultice, you can ease and heal bruises, arthritis, and boils..." (Ward 2017, 103). We can find almost identical listings of ingredients in real-life testimonies that were eventually put on paper, such as the ones catalogued by the *Federal Writers' Project*. For instance, in one of these documents we can find the words of ex-slaves such as Mrs. Celestia Avery, who explains that "We used everything for medicine that grew on the ground" (Rawick 1941, 26). Whereas Mr. Sam Rawls from Newberry stated: "Some of us had witches. [...] In dem days, was lots o' fevers with de folks. Dey cured 'em and other sickness wid teas from root herbs and barks" (1936, 5). But a full listing can be found in the words of this ex-slave, Mr. Henry Ryan:

When the slaves got sick they had doctors, and used old herbs. 'Jerusalem Ore' was a kind of herb for children, to build them up, and there was field grass roots and herb roots which was boiled and tea drunk for fevers. And 'Primer-rhine' tea which was drunk, too. Sometimes they would hang garlic around small boys and

⁶ See the Collection *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. It "contains more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves. These narratives were collected in the 1930s as part of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) of the Works Progress Administration, later renamed Work Projects Administration (WPA). At the conclusion of the Slave Narrative Project, a set of edited transcripts was assembled and microfilmed in 1941 as the seventeen-volume *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*." Source: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/> (last accessed on 08/01/21)

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girls necks to keep away any kind of sickness. (*Federal Writers' Project* 1936, 27-28)

And an even more specific account on roots, herbs, and healing methods can be found in the words of Mr. Hector Smith:

I gwine tell you just like I know it, all de older peoples use to get de herbs out de old fields for dey remedies. My Massa en my Missus [...] Use to get old field ringdom, what smell like dis here mint, en boil dat en let it steep. Dat what was good to sweat a fever en cold out you. Den dere was life everlastin tea dat was good for a bad cold en cherry bark what would make de blood so bitter no fever never couldn' stand it. Dem what had de rheumatism had to take dat lion's tongue or what some peoples calls wintergreen tea en some of de time, dey take pine top en mix wid de herbs to make a complete cure. [...] Another thing dat been good for de rheumatism was dat red oak bark dat dey use to bathe de limbs wid. Willow tea was somethin good for chill en fever en catnip en sage tea was de thing for babies. (*Federal Writers' Project* 1936, 40)

This kind of knowledge was even more fundamental to a runaway slave's survival (Ruffin 2010, 35), living on the outskirts of plantation life, usually in the woods, depending on wild growing areas for their sustenance. As Ruffin writes, this knowledge was also important for slaves who needed to tend to their families and kin inside the plantations (35). A further example can be found in the testimony of James Bolton, former slave:

[T]hey was allus some garlic for ailments. Garlic was mostly to cure wums (worms). They roasted the garlic in the hot ashes and squeez the juice outen it and made the chilluns take it. Sometimes they made poultices outen garlic for the pneumony ... We saved a heap of bark from wild cheery and poplar and black haw and slippery ellum trees and we dried out mullein leaves. They was all mixed an' brewed to make bitters. Whensomeever a nigger got sick, then bitters was good for, well ma'am, they was good for what ailed 'em! We tuk 'em for rheumatiz, for fever, an' for the misery in the stummick, and for most all sorts of sickness. Red oak bark tea was good for sore throat. (Rawick 1941, 94)

As evidenced from Bolton's words, the herbal knowledge of slaves was incredibly vast and covered multiple types of illness. And, as Ruffin concludes, it was a way of counteracting the ecological burden of the slaves' existence with the "ecological beauty of meeting the needs of their ailing bodies with their own botanical knowledge" (Ruffin 2010, 36). This counteraction is not only liberating, but it also cultivates the concept of

“the body as a bioregion,” the idea that bodies *are* Nature, rather than separate from it (36). All this leads to a pervasive form of freedom that is perfectly explained by Deborah Slicer: “The only bioregion that we can claim strict identity with is the body” and “to be ‘home’ is first to inhabit one’s own body” (Slicer 1998, 113-14). Accordingly, folk medicine gets Black people in touch with Nature, and Nature returns Black people’s vitality through both spiritual power and remembrance. It is an ecological process which refills the hollowness left by racialized violence and past and present abuses. This process is extremely important to African Americans, and the fact that this return to African spiritual traditions has been cyclical, as it has come in “waves” (Anderson 2005, 3-4), is evidence of this need to find relief from social abuse. As a matter of fact, Jeffrey Anderson and other scholars identified three main “upsurges of interest”: in the mid-1880s, the 1920s, and the 1970s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these moments coincide with the Reconstruction, the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Black Power and Black Arts Movements (Mellis 2019, 12). This seems to indicate that, whenever a significant event comes to the surface to challenge socio-political issues affecting African Americans, a cultural return to African spiritual tradition is subconsciously felt as needed (12). It has been argued by a number of scholars that we are currently living in another one of these “waves” of interest in African-based supernaturalism, which roughly coincides with the rise of “Trumpism”. Jesmyn Ward’s novel evidently reflects this new climate of protestation and social turmoil by turning to spirituality and traditions as a means of protection, in an attempt to regain power and identity (13).

It is with this final observation on *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and its contemporary political implications that I would like to conclude this essay. As we have seen, both Jesmyn Ward and Toni Morrison have tackled social and historical issues by adopting an imagery that is tightly connected to West African spirituality and its bond with Nature. With a re-appropriating intent in mind, these two authors managed to overturn the “white” images of domination and subjugation of the land by retrieving ancient and revitalizing knowledge. This knowledge, whether medical or spiritual, revolutionizes the literary tradition that depicts soil, dirt and trees as deadly captors. Instead, a new vision that presents earth as a comforting, life-giving, resourceful entity slowly takes

shape and builds an alternative as well as parallel literature to the Southern narrative that depicts land as a chthonic devourer: an Ecoliterature which embraces Ecotheological thought and focuses on both the spiritual and actual healing qualities of the flora, cherishing traditions.

This literary discourse gives birth to a process of amalgamation that is often adopted by dispossessed people, as it is intuitively embraced by other ethnic groups who experienced persecution, enslavement or incarceration, and who struggled to maintain cultural traditions over colonization. One of them being Native Americans, with whom Black STS feminists have often interlaced approaches to race, epistemology, and Indigenous metaphysics (Benjamin 2018, 51). With these tools and tropes, African American authors such as Toni Morrison and Jesmyn Ward retrace, retell, and reappropriate history both to educate and establish a contact with new generations, which are considered the true seeds of change. It is a “speculative method” which tries to envision afterlives, giving space to meaningful conversations between the living and the dead, but which also manages to revitalize Black people both physically and spiritually, thanks to the knowledge passed from a generation to another. In this way, contemporary young African Americans such as Ward’s characters—Jojo and Kayla—find themselves suspended between past and future, with the hard but not impossible task to find a new “home,” a new “garden” to inhabit and take care of, discovering “ecological beauty” again.

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HAIR AS A POLITICAL INSTRUMENT IN CHIMAMANDA N. ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH* AND IN *HOW TO GET AWAY WITH MURDER*

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ABSTRACT

By reflecting upon the political and cultural significance of hair for black women, this paper aims to highlight the discrepancies within the inherent tendency of assimilating other cultures to the American one by making them cancel, somehow unconsciously, their natural somatic traits. I will examine the 2013 novel *Americanah* by Nigerian author Chimamanda N. Adichie, and the TV Series *How to Get Away With Murder* (ABC), for both of their protagonists struggle to accept their natural hair and go through a strenuous journey, despite the dissimilarities. Eventually they both embrace their natural appearance—they do so while making hair a political tool to claim their right to be American and establishing their independence as women.

Keywords: Hair; Assimilation; Blackness; Chimamanda Adichie; Annalise Keating.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, during an interview for the British network Channel 4 News, Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie discussed her recently published *Americanah* making an unusual yet powerful statement: “Black women’s hair is political.”¹ In the acclaimed novel, the main character Ifemelu starts a blog—*Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*—in which she confronts some of the main race-related issues for black women, always highlighting their political relevance and their role in the empowerment of women. As a Nigerian immigrant in a post-9/11 America, the protagonist struggles enormously to assimilate into US culture, and at the same time she strives to maintain her fluid diasporic identity intact.

¹ Channel 4 News, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'Hair is political',” YouTube Video, 5:34, April 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ck2034DS64>.

At the core of her strenuous journey is the ultimate goal of feeling part of a new culture, the American one, and of assimilating into a diverse social and cultural context. Inevitably, this process entails a renegotiation of her systemic beliefs, which implies her own self-acceptance and self-awareness. Moreover, such compromise includes learning to accept her hair in its natural style, for, as maintained by Black Studies scholar Ingrid Banks: “hair is another important medium by which people define others, and themselves as well. In a sense, hair emerges as a body within the social body and can reflect notions about perceptions, identity, and self-esteem” (Banks 2000, 26). In Adichie’s novel, hair becomes a political device capable of claiming one’s civil and social rights; thus, it can be considered the most visible tool for confronting and questioning the enduring American myth of the melting pot, which in turn can be described as the idea of “fusing into a common nation and a common culture the immense variety of races, nations, cultures, and customs which have their representatives among us” (Jones 1941, 329). Later on, the pretentious assimilationist idea of the melting pot has been debunked or developed into other terms, such as “salad bowl” (Burgess 2005), which reclaims the idea of multiple subjectivities tossed into one big recipient. Furthermore, the most widespread development of this myth is what Gordon (1964) addressed as “cultural pluralism,” which “suggests that the multiple melting pots in American society point to cultural pluralism rather than to homogeneous Americanness” (Paul 2014, 291). Lastly, there is what is commonly called “multiculturalism,”² which according to Taylor (1994, 25) is to be intended as a dialogical process in which individuals demand a political and social recognition that keeps their singularities intact. The assimilationist presumptions that originated alongside the myth of the melting pot have recently been questioned once again since Barack Obama became the first black president of the US,

² “Multiculturalism, the view that cultures, races, and ethnicities, particularly those of minority groups, deserve special acknowledgment of their differences within a dominant political culture” (Britannica, “Multiculturalism” By Jennifer L. Eagan, accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/multiculturalism>). Recently, the debate on multiculturalism has been extended due to the scholarship on its difference with “interculturalism;” see, e.g., Kastoryano 2018. For another interesting account of multiculturalism seen from the critical point of view of Cultural studies, see also Hall 2019, 95-134.

and, more importantly, since he based his presidency on the idealistic “perfect union” of multiple races in America.³

By reflecting upon the political and cultural significance of hair for black women, this paper aims to highlight the discrepancies within the inherent tendency of assimilating other cultures to the American one by making either immigrants or African American people cancel, or cover-up, somehow unconsciously, their natural somatic traits. This long-lasting variation of the melting pot has nowadays become a popular topic of discussion in diasporic literature and even in commercial broadcast television.

As a matter of fact, besides Adichie’s novel, the other case study which will be discussed here is the well-received ABC’s TV Series *How to Get Away With Murder*, aired one year after the publication of *Americanah*, and concluded in 2020. Similar to Ifemelu, the main character of Annalise Keating, a black lawyer who wears a wig to hide her kinky black hair when teaching and when in court, negotiates important questions of identity and belonging via her hair and the process to accept them in their natural shape.⁴

Despite having to get through an analogous journey involving the acceptance of their appearance, the two women differ in one crucial aspect that is worth examining: Ifemelu is an immigrant who, in the words of Selasi (2005) and Mbembe (2005), can be referred to as an “Afropolitan”;⁵ on the contrary, Annalise Keating is an African American woman, born and bred in Memphis, Tennessee. In some ways, Ifemelu’s process of assimilation as a diasporic individual holds a more detached approach as compared to Annalise’s, who has always known the US framework in which black people have always struggled to be accepted and have their rights recognized. The unavoidable

³ These words were mentioned in the speech (titled “A More Perfect Union”) given by Obama during the presidential campaign on March 18, 2008.

⁴ “Nappy; kinky; ‘bad hair’: Hair that is tightly coiled or curled. This type of hair is referred to as ‘natural’ black hair because it is not chemically altered. Defined in relationship to ‘good hair.’ Although nappy and kinky have derogatory roots that still exist, many blacks have appropriated these terms to describe positive characteristics of tightly coiled or curled black hair. Some natural styles such as the Afro are referred to as nappy or kinky hair” (Banks 2000, 172).

⁵ The expression refers to the new generation of people born in the African continent, whose identity is fluid and does not belong just to one nation: “Finally, how we conceive of race will accord with where we locate ourselves in the history that produced ‘blackness’ and the political processes that continue to shape it” (Selasi 2005).

distance from an historical baggage such as that of slavery and emancipation that Annalise's ancestors had to go through is missing in Ifemelu's experience. Nevertheless, despite their dissimilar backgrounds, both women are emancipated in terms of education, for they both attend college and establish themselves in the academic world. At large, to play a virtuous role in US society they are to engage in a conflict in which they have to surrender to the pressure of becoming, and looking, "American." To go back to the eighteenth century, when the idea of the melting pot was first introduced, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur stated that to become a true American, one had to leave "behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners," and be willing to receive "new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds" (Crèvecoeur 1997, 44). In other words, one had to deny one's original ethnic roots to merge in a brand-new ethnicity,⁶ and therefore another identity, since, in the newborn independent union of states,

individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle. (*Ibidem*)

Throughout the decades, this outline has become systemic in the minds of both Americans and immigrants. Thereafter, in the twentieth century, scholars and artists began to question such beliefs by searching for their theoretical source and its rootedness into US culture, and as a determining factor for what is commonly referred to as American Exceptionalism.⁷ The conviction of American greatness perpetuated by

⁶ The terms 'ethnicity' and 'race' are often interchangeable. However, the difference between the two can be identified as follows: "the term *race* is understood today as primarily a sociological designation that identifies a group sharing some outward physical characteristics and some commonalities of culture and history, while *ethnicity* is a word for something you acquire based on where your family is from and the group which you share cultural, traditional, and familial bonds and experiences with" (Merriam-Webster, "The Difference between 'Race' and 'Ethnicity,'" accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/difference-between-race-and-ethnicity>). For further references see, e.g., Spencer (2014, 40-66), and the pivotal contribution of Michael Novak (2017).

⁷ "The core of that belief is the idea that the United States is not just the richest and most powerful of the world's more than two hundred states but is also politically and morally exceptional. Exceptionalists minimize the

the Founding Fathers carried on the idea that whoever was a foreigner had to behave equally to them, and, more perplexingly, had to look likewise, constraining themselves to adjust their ethnic somatic traits accordingly to the dominant ones: “to gain access to the American dream, one of the first things Blacks had to do was to make White people more comfortable with their presence” (Byrd 2001, 26). External appearance seems to be the most obvious, and maybe most underestimated vehicle through which a woman tries with much effort to be accepted. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, during the Black is Beautiful Movement “hair alteration became a contested practice” (Thompson 2009, 835); from that moment on—also thanks to public figures such as activist Angela Davis and the Black Power Movement—wearing one’s natural hair gained an enormous political significance in reshaping Black beauty standards (Tate 2007, 302).

However, despite the numerous progress made to reevaluate black women’s hair, in popular culture, especially on television, the re-appropriation process was not that easy to maintain. If we consider, for instance, talk show host Oprah Winfrey’s career we notice that her hair has changed throughout the years. When she first appeared on national television, she wore her natural unrelaxed hair; then, when *The Oprah Winfrey’s Show* (1989-2011) aired, she started straightening it more frequently, normalizing her style according to the mainstream beauty standards.

A similar argument can be made for Michelle Obama, the first black woman to ever serve as First Lady of the United States, from 2008 to 2016. During Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign, she always appeared alongside her husband with short straight hair, and even after he was elected she maintained that hairstyle. If we look at her best-selling biography *Becoming*, published in 2018, she appears on the front cover with wavy hair, clearly chemically relaxed. There are very few occasions in which the First Lady

contributions of other nations and cultures to the rule of law and to the evolution of political democracy” (Hodgson 2009, 10).

appeared with either kinky or curly hair, and this fact seems to confirm what is argued in one of Ifemelu's blog posts, titled "A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor," in which she provocatively states that if Michelle had worn her natural hair, her husband would have lost all of his independent and democratic votes.

[...] *So is it me or is that the perfect metaphor for race in America right there? Hair.* Ever notice makeover shows on TV, how the black woman has natural hair (coarse, coily, kinky, or curly) in the ugly "before" picture, and in the pretty "after" picture, somebody's taken a hot piece of metal and singed her hair straight? Some black women, AB and NAB, would rather run naked in the street than come out in public with their natural hair. Because, you see, it's not professional, sophisticated, whatever, it's just not damn normal. (Please, commenters, don't tell me it's the same as a white woman who doesn't color her hair.) When you DO have natural Negro hair, people think you "did" something to your hair. Actually, the folk with the Afros and dreads are the ones who haven't "done" anything to their hair. You should be asking Beyoncé what she's done. (We all love Bey but how about she show us, just once, what her hair looks like when it grows from her scalp?) I have natural kinky hair. Worn in cornrows, Afros, braids. *No, it's not political.* No, I am not an artist or poet or singer. Not an earth mother either. I just don't want relaxers in my hair—there are enough sources of cancer in my life as it is. (By the way, can we ban Afro wigs at Halloween? Afro is not costume, for God's sake.) Imagine if Michelle Obama got tired of all the heat and decided to go natural and appeared on TV with lots of woolly hair, or tight spirally curls. (There is no knowing what her texture will be. It is not unusual for a black woman to have three different textures on her head.) She would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose the independent vote, even the undecided Democrat vote. (Adichie 2017, 296-7, emphasis mine)

Interestingly, this is the first post ever written by Ifemelu on her blog. What emerges here is that the young woman's speculations are the outcome of her experiencing first-hand what it means to be a black person in the States, and the result of years living abroad. In the post, she decisively affirms that hair can be viewed as a metaphor for race in America, and most of all, that she deems it a political tool capable of interfering with the presidential elections. Ifemelu's words are pivotal: they address Obama's attitude towards the delicate matter of race which has been often addressed in academic scholarship. These words also engage the president's "post-race" narrative, which seemed—throughout all his eight years in office—to have abundantly "moved beyond"

race and its discontents” (Mendible 2012, 1) building the foundation for the “colour blindness” myth (Smithers 2009; see also Love and Tosolt 2010, and Bertaux 2010).

Both Oprah and Michelle Obama—as well as Beyoncé—are not average female personalities. Due to their reputation and their role in the public scenario, they have ineluctably been appointed as representatives for black women—and not only—who look up to them as the ideal aesthetic model and paradigm for what it means to be a successful black woman in the US who succeeded in fulfilling their American dreams.

RECLAIMING ONE’S IDENTITY THROUGH HAIR: AMERICANAH

Political remarks concerning women and their independence, along with feminism, have always been at the core of Chimamanda ‘Ngozi Adichie’s work.⁸ In the last decade, and thanks to the novel *Americanah*, she managed to confront the subject of identity from within a transcultural perspective, having lived between Lagos and the United States since 1989. Moreover, she became one of the most important voices of a new generation of novelists, for she provides a fresh look at how women can feel empowered and independent. As anticipated, hair plays an essential role in this transition:

Adichie’s creative skills also allow readers to magnify singular narrative details into political statements of manifesto-like proportions, for better or for worse. Much has already been made in interviews and reviews about the novel’s comments on the politics of black hair—weaves, cornrows, Afros, all carry ideological implications, Adichie emphatically suggests. (Tunca and Ledent 2015, 3)

Americanah begins with Ifemelu, the protagonist, on her way to braid her hair in a black salon in Trenton, NJ. The young woman has decided to return permanently to Nigeria and leave the US after having lived thirteen years far from her homeland. She has concluded that Lagos is the place where she can better express her authentic self, “the

⁸ See, among others, the essay “We Should All Be Feminists,” published in 2014 by *Fourth Estate*, but first delivered as a speech for a TEDx event in Euston, London, back in 2012. Part of the speech has also been included in the 2013 song “Flawless,” by the American pop star Beyoncé.

only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil” (Adichie 2017, 6).⁹ Furthermore, she hopes to reconcile with Obinze, who was her first boyfriend, and the reason she had come to America in the first place.

The hair salon emblemizes a space where her diasporic identity is tackled, a place between her native land and her landing ground. There, she encounters other black women, either American Black or Non-AB, with whom she gets into an argument when asked why she does not have any relaxer on her hair since it would make it easier to comb. Ifemelu explains that she likes her hair “the way God made it” (12). Then, the conversation moves on as Aisha, the hairdresser, starts asking all sorts of questions, naively pressuring her about her decision to abandon her respectable life in America and go back to Africa. Ifemelu answers with reluctance, secretly complaining about the other woman’s unashamed behavior. The young woman knows her hair quite well, having “grown up in the shadow of her mother’s hair” (41). She knows what comb best sections her type of hair, and she is well aware of how hard it can be to accept one’s natural hairstyle.

We notice from this segment that Ifemelu is also conscious of how ethnicity bonds with class discourse.¹⁰ Had she not received higher education, or had she not belonged to an upper-middle-class family back in Nigeria, her substantial differences compared to Aisha would probably not have raised such an issue, nor would she have felt so uncomfortable in an environment in which she should, otherwise, feel at ease. Eventually, the distance between the two women increases more and more when the discussion moves on to the Green Card topic, and Aisha soon realizes that “Ifemelu belonged to a group of people whose green cards simply fell from the sky” (363-4).

Then, the novel progresses retrospectively, tackling Ifemelu’s early days back in Lagos, and providing an extensive account of her love story with Obinze. The young

⁹ Here, *authenticity* can be seen as purpose to fulfill to establish one’s independence for, according to Taylor, it “is a facet of modern individualism, and it is a feature of all forms of individualism that they don’t just emphasize the freedom of the individual but also propose models of society.” (Taylor 2003, 46). In Ifemelu’s case, her authentic self will eventually be reached at the end of the novel, when she will go back to Lagos as an independent and free woman.

¹⁰ Further in the novel, Ifemelu will dedicate a blog post to this matter, see Adichie 2017, 166.

man, whom she met in college, was the one to have always nurtured a passion for the US and a longing for a brand-new life far from Nigeria. Unfortunately, he is not allowed to obtain a visa for the US, unlike Ifemelu, who becomes the only one able to cross American borders. When she first arrives, right after 2001, her first encounter with a culture she had only known from books, movies, and other people's stories is rather problematic and displacing. Initially, there is 'appealing America,' the land where dreams come true, where everyone can achieve a career or fulfill a purpose.

When an immigrant arrives in a new nation, a phenomenon called "acculturation" occurs. The term, according to psychologists David Sam and John W. Berry, "refers to the process of cultural and psychological change that results following meeting between cultures" (2010, 472), and "it acknowledges the reciprocity of influences that cultural groups have on each other" (473). Unsurprisingly, this kind of encounter comes with many consequences, one being the inner thrive to find distance from one's ethnic roots: "Assimilation is a strategy used when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek close interaction with other cultures (or in some cases adopt the cultural values, norms, and traditions of the new society)" (476).

This dynamic is exactly what happens to Ifemelu, whose displacement is intensified both by her initial refusal to keep in touch with Obinze and her family, and by coming to terms with her blackness (see Adichie 2017, 220-221). First, Ifemelu feels all the burden that comes with this sort of accomplishment.¹¹ For other immigrants—such as Aisha and the other women from the hair salon—a similar source of acculturation stress is caused by a strenuous effort with the language. In the novel, language plays a critical role indeed: as argued by Leonardo Nolé (2017), one major turning point for the protagonist's growth is when she speaks to a call center and they praise her for her accent: "You sound totally American" (Adichie 2017, 175). However,

¹¹ "[S]erious challenges are experienced and are appraised to be problematic because one is not able to deal with them as easily by simply adjusting to them by changing one's behavior. [...] then acculturation stress results" (Sam and Berry 2010, 474).

for Ifemelu, what is perceived as a feature of anxiety are the continuous external influences trying to assimilate her by the homogenization of her hair and appearance.

This issue is frankly addressed, especially when Adichie discusses the topic of job hunting for black people. One of the first things Ifemelu reflects upon when she first arrives in the US is her Auntie Uju's attitude towards her ethnic identity. Not only does she adjust her accent—which inevitably has a Nigerian inflection—to the American one to increase her chances of assimilation;¹² but she also, the transformation in her hair becomes obvious: “There was something different about her. Ifemelu had noticed it right away at the airport, *her roughly braided hair*, her ears bereft of earrings, her quick casual hug, as if it had been weeks rather than years since they had last seen each other.” (Adichie 2017, 104, emphasis mine).

Auntie Uju's journey radically differs from Ifemelu's. When she arrived in the States many years earlier, with her newborn son and a difficult career as a medical student ahead of her, she did not have anyone to greet her at the airport and give her temporary accommodation. He had to adapt rather quickly to the new environment and the culture just for the sake of her survival. Subconsciously, she modified her attitude, behavior, and, most of all, her appearance, so that she would be able to adapt and be accepted. In the words of Albert Memmi (1991), the oppressor's mentality has been internalized by the oppressed: this behavior has become systemic in Auntie Uju's mind, for not only does she enact it unconsciously, but she also reinforces it when helping her niece adjust to her new life, and then by pitifully justifying her attitude: “You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do in order to succeed” (Adichie 2017, 119). Seen from an external perspective, such as Ifemelu's, if Uju had not left Nigeria, the young woman maintains, she “would never have worn her hair in such a scruffy braids” and comes to the conclusion that “America had subdued her” (110).

¹² This inherent mechanism defines what an “Americanah” is: “a girl [...] who had come back from a short trip to America with odd affectations, pretending she no longer understood Yoruba, adding a slurred *r* to every English word she spoke” (Adichie 2017, 65).

The verb used by Ifemelu is rather interesting: “subdued.” America, or the idea of it, has grown to exert the power of submission for those who seek a new life, especially for immigrants. Auntie Uju is subdued by class mobility, which is one of the main reasons she left Nigeria for, and one of the primary ambitions for those who arrive in the United States. In relation to that, Hallemeier suggests that Adichie’s political survey of middle-class women’s aspiration

hinges upon a comparative approach that examines the centrality of the United States to a Nigerian middle-class imaginary. The aspirational Nigerian middle class that *Americanah* celebrates, however, is by no means an iteration of its American counterpart. Adichie’s novel challenges a narrative in which the US models class mobility for the world in favor of one in which contemporaneous national histories have produced different potentials and limitations for the individual, and especially for the black woman, who aspires to a normative middle-class life. *Americanah* does not so much speak to the US of the present reality of African lives as it speaks of the US in order to better articulate a desirable Nigerian future. (Hallemeier 2015, 235)

Once again, Adichie contrives to openly politicize every aspect of the women’s process of acquaintance with the new culture. It should not be forgotten that these individuals are immigrants, young women who have left their home countries with unresolved questions and without the certainty of a better future. Theirs are diasporic identities, and they have to confront both the expectations of the landing culture and the mental mechanism that originated when they left home. Whenever an individual leaves their native land, they inevitably begin to construct an “Imaginary Homeland,” as novelist Salman Rushdie first called it (1991). This mechanism leads immigrants to build a misrepresented image of their nation of origin, often idealized and distorted. Therefore, their identity, especially the ethnic one, is deeply challenged. In his clever *Black Skin, White Masks* psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon suggested that

[w]hen the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an *actional* person. The goal of his behavior will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth. That is on the ethical level: self-esteem. (Fanon 1986, 154)

It can be argued that because Ifemelu's aunt lacked self-esteem, she acted in such a manner. Similar to Uju's is the case of Ginika, Ifemelu's friend from secondary school who had arrived in America before her and tries to help her friend make acquaintance with the new world. When she first meets Ginika in Philadelphia, Ifemelu is bewildered by her transformation: "There was a metallic, unfamiliar glamour in her gauntness, her olive skin, her short skirt that had risen up, barely covering her crotch, her *straight, straight hair that she kept tucking behind her ears, blonde streaks shiny in the sunlight*" (Adichie 2017, 123, emphasis mine). In addition to this, Ginika's makeover extends to her weight loss. Back in Lagos, she underlines, when someone loses weight, this is considered bad and unhealthy, but in America, when "somebody tells you that you lost weight [...] you say thank you. It's just different here" (124).

Given this fact, Ifemelu's way of acting during her first months in the US comes with no surprise, being endorsed and amplified by the models she looks up to. Albeit initially perplexed, Ifemelu seems to be stirred by her aunt's and friend's new *personas*: "Ifemelu stood there for a long time, her body unsure of itself, overwhelmed by a sense of newness. But she felt, also, a frisson of expectation, an eagerness to discover America" (106). Thereafter, she inevitably falls into the same impasse. In the beginning, she used to braid her hair with long extensions, despite their high maintenance and cost, wearing "each style for three months, even four months, until her scalp itched unbearably and the braids sprouted fuzzily from a bed of new growth" (203). Eventually, though, she comes to the decision to relax her hair with chemicals, persuaded by the idea that she would look more "professional," or whiter as she is preparing for a job interview she is about to attend. Later on, she will write a blog post stressing how "whiteness" is what people not belonging to upper-class Americans of European descent aspire to (205). In other words, at this point of her journey, what is still entrenched in Ifemelu's mind is the idea that the only way to succeed in America is to look as white as possible, even if this endeavor results in giving up on her hair's health. Sure enough, a couple of days later she starts losing hair from her temples, forcing her to cut it all short to prevent further damage.

Ingrid Banks, who in the already mentioned “Hair Matters” conducts a fascinating interview surveying a wide demographic of black women, highlights the importance of hair in black communities, adding to the equation the role of hair for women embracing their femininity:

For black women in this society, what is considered desirable and undesirable hair is based on one’s hair texture. What is deemed desirable is measured against white standards of beauty, which include long and straight hair (usually blonde), that is, hair that is not kinky or nappy. Consequently, black women’s hair, in general, fits outside of what is considered desirable in mainstream society. Within black communities, straighter variety and texture are privileged as well. (Banks 2000, 2)

However, the path toward the full acceptance of one’s natural hairstyle comes with major struggles and doubts. In Ifemelu’s case, for instance, the need to find a job forced herself to sleep with a white manager to raise enough money to pay rent. This episode contributed to her feeling of disempowerment and undermined her self-confidence.

Eventually, Ifemelu overcomes these impediments, and she starts accepting her authentic self, without the fear of rejection by the culture she is now part of—also thanks to her boyfriend who manages to get her the long-desired Green card. The pivotal moment can be identified in Chapter 31 (Adichie 2017, 287). During the presidential election of 2008, she finds herself among a group of friends—including her boyfriend Curt—amid a discussion about Barack Obama. Suddenly, a white man argues that if Obama won, he would end racism in America. Ifemelu feels the impulse to answer back with a clever and raw utterance, stressing the weaknesses of the man’s remark. She claims that race still matters and that it is more convenient to deny its existence rather than confront it. After this key moment she settles to open an anonymous blog, and thanks to that she will finally start to speak up, raise her voice and reclaim her own identity, both from a political and social viewpoint.

Needless to say, in the blog, the woman deals with the expectations of the American Society for black people, especially women. Thanks to this newly found instrument and her freedom regained, she also manages to embrace her authentic self—her hairstyle included. It is around the time she opens the blog that she starts to let her

hair be, not treating it with relaxers or other chemicals. She finally accepts her hair in its natural shape and appearance, firmly rejecting to melt into the idealistic ‘pot’ that is America, and the founding myths that perpetuated it. Through the novel, Adichie succeeds in unmasking the American “idiosyncrasies and hypocrisies” of the widespread belief “that race doesn’t matter,” and she “challenges the conventions of the typical immigrant novel, where no alternative to life in America is entertained, as Ifemelu chooses to return home not under any kind of compulsion, but just because she wants to be in Lagos” (Goyal 2014, XII).

Despite being a rather optimistic novel, for its protagonist seems to have accomplished certain stability, both in work and in her social relationships, *Americanah* maintains that the American Dream is no longer worth being pursued. In its place, two other goals are set by Ifemelu: the so-called “Nigerian dream” (Hallemeier 2015, 237), and, above all, the complete acceptance of herself and her hair in its natural form. The ceaseless search for a righteous identity can be completed, but with new terms, and not in the United States.

Nevertheless, a problem still stands. And it makes us question how and why the United States can no longer assure the completion of the dream for an individual who an upper-class American of European descent is not. As Katherine Hallemeier puts it: “*Americanah* modestly, yet perhaps effectively, envisions a global capitalist system in which ethnicity does not exhaustively and exhaustingly delimit the affective bonds that enable financial success. It neither embraces nor rejects the pursuit of wealth, but certainly casts its goodness into doubt” (243).

HAIR AS A SOCIAL MASK: *HOW TO GET AWAY WITH MURDER*

Up to this point, we have discussed the tendency to treat hair directly from its roots, changing its appearance without covering it up. Instead, the case of Annalise Keating in *How to Get Away With Murder* (from now on *HTGAWM*) differs substantially from Ifemelu’s, for the successful lawyer leans toward wigs, rather than chemical relaxers, to cover her natural hairstyle.

When *HTGAWM* first aired in September 2014, much had already been achieved in terms of race-related discussions on national broadcasting networks. The showrunner, Shonda Rhimes, was at the peak of her career, having created the prominent medical drama *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-), and the first political thriller with a black woman as a leading character, *Scandal* (2012-2018). Here, the former White House Director of Communication Olivia Pope—portrayed by the Emmy winner Kerry Washington—succeeds in controlling and maneuvering US politics under the presidency of fictitious Thomas Fitzgerald Grant. What is peculiar about her, apart from her rhetorical and communication skills, is her hair, always straightened and well-groomed.¹³ Despite other relevant topics being tackled in the series, the procedure of arranging her hair freely is not much accomplished nor debated, except for some rare cases I will later refer to. Rhimes, however, alongside the creator Peter Nowalk, will bring the matter under more profound scrutiny through Annalise Keating, the protagonist of *HTGAWM*.

Annalise is a respectable law professor at Middleton University, in Philadelphia, where she yearly chooses top-five students from her Criminal Law course, and challenges them to solve some laborious murder cases. The series explores the dramatic events following the deaths of a young student—with whom Annalise's late husband had an affair—and that of her husband (interpreted by Tom Verica), whose case is being covered up by the attorney herself.

In the first four episodes, the protagonist appears with short straight hair, expensive suits, and loads of makeup, hence always composed and professional. However, at the end of the fourth episode, "Let's Get To Scooping," she is shown in a memorable scene taking off a wig and removing her makeup (Figure 1). The mask she puts on during the day has now been removed, thus revealing her natural, short hair, and, above all, her private self. The close-up shows her in an intimate and vulnerable moment, as she prepares to confront her husband and expose proof of his infidelity.

¹³ For an interesting reading of Olivia Pope's character see, e.g. Brüning 2019.

Therefore, Annalise does not feel threatened by the vulnerability expressed by her hair, for the situation is very private. Underneath the wig, Annalise's hair appears shaved. This practice, according to Ayana Byrd, goes back to when black people were enslaved, and slave traders would shave off their slave's hair with the intention of erasing their "culture and alter[ing] the relationship between the African and his or her hair" (2001, 10).



Figure 1. Annalise removes her wig (*HTGAWM*, Season 1, Episode 4, 40':36") © Netflix

A similar scenario appears later in the first season. In episode thirteen, "Mama's Here Now," the protagonist is at a very low point in her life; her boyfriend Nate Lahey is in prison, accused of the murder of Annalise's husband. Her mother Ophelia comes to visit, wondering whether her daughter holds any responsibility for Sam Keating's death. The older woman starts calling her with her birth name "Anna Mae," thus infuriating Annalise, who has chosen not to be called by that name, as if she were rejecting her past: "You get rich, you give yourself a rich name—Annalise. Your name is Anna Mae," points out Ophelia.

The only place in which Annalise is willing to show herself in her natural hairstyle is the most intimate one: both with her late husband and her mother she feels comfortable enough not to wear a wig. But the instant she steps outside this protected environment, she puts her habitual mask on. Wearing one's hair straight becomes a synonym for success, and Annalise has well learned the lesson. At the same time, it

seems that Annalise wants to share her slavery heritage of shaving her hair only with the closest people, almost feeling ashamed of it (Byrd 2001, 41). She has by now deeply internalized that, to become a successful lawyer, she has to conform to the beauty standard, the white one: “the way in which ‘white’ is associated with success demonstrates how ideas about hair are linked to ideas that intersect with race, and with economic and romantic success. In turn, these ideas shape black women’s understanding about how they must negotiate their marginal position in a racist and sexist society” (Banks 2000, 63).

Moving forward to the third season, in episode five “It’s About Frank,” Annalise is portrayed going to the hair salon, in a similar circumstance as Ifemelu in *Americanah*. The salon becomes the temple of small talk, where the protagonist can feel at ease around other black women; but at the same time, she feels almost isolated. As a matter of fact, memories from her past come to her mind during the scene, especially from the beginning of her career, when she had first met her husband and she used to wear braided hair. The third season of the series portrays Annalise having a hard time and dealing with personal issues such as alcoholism and the death of one of her students, of which she is accused and for which she is arrested, despite being innocent. The episode titled “Not Everything’s About Annalise” is set in a prison, where the protagonist has to deal with other prisoners who are making her feel miserable by amplifying her sense of guilt until the breaking point.

It goes without saying that in prison she is not allowed to wear wigs, thus, her hair is natural, albeit different from the first season, where she used to wear it short. Here, it is shown much longer than in the past, and seemingly relaxed. Towards the end of the episode Annalise asks her cellmate to give her a blade, and in a dramatic close-up she starts cutting her hair messily until she finally feels relieved from all the pain she is going through.

It can be argued that this moment is pivotal in Annalise’s growth as a self-confident and free woman. However, in terms of her career, she is far from accepting herself and her natural appearance. In relation to that, season four represents an

interesting turning point, thanks to the presence of two strong and independent female characters who will have a major impact on Annalise.

First, there is Tegan Price (interpreted by Amirah Vann), a lesbian black woman who works as an attorney for a large firm. She first stars in the third episode of the fourth season “It’s for the Greater Good,” and what immediately catches the viewer’s attention is her hairstyle, besides her self-confidence and asserting attitude. Her hair is perfectly combed in a hairstyle that enhances its natural state. From her very first appearance, Tegan Price sets an example of a strong and empowered black woman who neither assimilates nor follows the beauty standards imparted by a society where women struggle enormously to fit into. She does not fear to go against them, but she proudly shows her hair in different shapes and styles, such as Bantu knots and Cornrows. Furthermore, Tegan will set a fundamental example for Annalise in terms of accepting her sexuality, for Keating herself is bisexual and struggles enormously to come to terms with this aspect of her identity.

Secondly, the other significant female presence for Annalise is *Scandal*’s protagonist Olivia Pope. The thirteenth episode of the fourth Season—“Lahey v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania”—is a crossover episode aired right after the *Scandal* episode “Allow Me to Reintroduce Myself” (Season 7, Episode 12) combining the two Shondaland TV Series. In the crossover, Annalise needs the help of Pope to bring a class-action suit to the Supreme Court, which aims at obtaining better funding for public defenders so that black people, who in the majority of cases are not able to afford a lawyer, can finally see their right to be defended respected. Thanks to her connections with Pennsylvania Avenue, Olivia Pope is probably the only one capable of providing such help. However, both of them are at a point in their career where their reputation is at stake, therefore, the class-action lawsuit becomes a pretext to regain popularity.

One interesting scene of the crossover episode portrays the women at a hair salon, which becomes a place where the two can bond while getting their hair done. It is important to point out that this is the only moment in both episodes where Olivia and Annalise are shown wearing their hair naturally, compared with the rest of the episode, where both of them have straight and relaxed hair. Therefore, it is no

coincidence that the salon becomes a place to lower their defenses and have their real intention revealed. Especially when Annalise finds out that Olivia is no longer on good terms with the White House.

Annalise: Is it true?

Olivia: I didn't lie. My resignation was complicated.

A: Sounds like more spin to me.

O: You came to me asking for my help –

A: Because I thought you had a bite behind that bark. But instead I found a siddy phony who judged me from the minute she laid eyes on me.

O: I never judged you.

A: Oh, you judged me immediately. Just like a white man in a boardroom looking down on me because my hips are too wide and my hue too dark.

O: Oh, so we're going there. Wow.

A: You think we soul sisters just 'cause you rented out a hair salon for a few hours on the black side of town? Please. I've dealt with plenty of bougie-ass black women just like you. Spent most of your life in boarding school, Ivy League Universities, with a horse between your legs and a silver spoon in your mouth. You're not the only one who knows how to Google. You called me a hot mess, remember? But it sounds to me that despite all of your failed attempts to stand above me on your little pedestal, we're the same. So keep it real, Olivia Pope. Why'd you leave the White House?

O: You know, your skin tone and measurements aren't the reason people don't like you. It's you, Annalise Keating. You are a bully who insults people and then wonders why they won't help you. But hey, you're just trying to keep it real? Right? How's that working out for you? Can't be that great if you had to haul your broke ass on the Megabus to beg for my help. You may think you know who I am and what I'm about, but don't get it twisted. We are not the same. So allow me to reintroduce myself. My name is Olivia Pope. And I don't have to explain myself to anyone. Especially you. [...]

Don't worry about your wash and press. I'll be sure to put that on my siddy-ass, no limit, platinum card.

A: I'll pay for my own damn hair. (*Scandal* Season 7, Episode 12, 22':00"-24':14")



Figure 2. Annalise and Olivia Pope at the black salon (*Scandal*, Season 7, Episode 12, 25':26") © Prime Video

Despite this quarrel, the two will eventually collaborate, and Annalise will succeed in presenting her lawsuit to the Supreme Court, reaching the most outstanding milestone in her career. From this transcript, two interesting points emerge, the first one being the deep-rooted awareness of how black women are perceived by a predominantly white-male-dominated society and workplace, as maintained by Marlene Salzberg: “The problem, however, lies within the prestige that is associated with white people’s hair and the fact that their hair is seen as the hegemonic standard” (64). Further, Annalise stresses how, as black women, they are constantly being judged for the shape of their body rather than for their intellectual skills, thus proving how the dominant culture of American exceptionalism still has a great deal of power over matters such as racism and the gender gap. Up to that point, she always felt prevented from embracing her authentic self because of this bias, thus learning to adapt and adhere to that culture for the sake of her well-being. Eventually, the salon can be seen as a physical “third space” (Bhabha 1994) where the ethnic identities of the two women meet with the reality of American culture. Ifemelu’s experience at the salon in Trenton is in tune with Bhabha’s theorization of the “third space”: because hair is cast at the center of interest and attention, the salon is eventually restaged as the a space where not only the two

dimensions of their ethnicity coexists with their Americanness, but also where women's identity is debated and cast into doubt.

The real turning point and accomplishment in her life occurs in the last season of *HTGAWM*. Specifically, in the last episode of the series, "Stay" (Season 6, Episode 15), Annalise appears in court in a short-cropped natural hairstyle. When her turn to speak finally arrives, she delivers a tremendously powerful speech, finally claiming her independence and her freedom regained:

What I am is a survivor—I survived getting taunted with the n-word in grade school, I survived sexual abuse by my uncle when I was 11, survived losing my first love Eve 'cause I was scared to be gay, the death of my son in a car accident, the murder of my husband, then alcoholism, depression, grief, and every horrible death leading up to this trial. But today, it's just you who get to decide if I survive the hateful conspiracy launched against me by people way more powerful than me. So you decide. Am I a bad person? The mask is off so I'm gonna say yes. But am I a mastermind criminal who's pulled off a series of violent murders? Hell no. who I am is a 53-years-old woman from Memphis Tennessee named Anna Mae Harkness. I'm ambitious, black, bisexual, angry, sad, strong, sensitive, scared, fierce, talented, exhausted—and I am at your mercy. (*HTGAWM* Season 6, Episode 15)

Finally free from all socio-cultural impediments, Annalise Keating can now embrace her own achievements, and embrace her identity as an African American woman who had previously denied her origins.



Figure 3. Annalise stands in court with her natural hair. (*HTGAWM*, Season 6, Episode 15, 27':21") © Netflix

CONCLUSIONS

Despite their inherent differences, both *Americanah* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, debunk the myth of American economic mobility and its reachability through an aesthetic, and not just linguistic, assimilation. Much has happened since Crèvecoeur first wrote about the melting pot in 1782, and about outdated, unrealistic ideas of what makes an American. Nowadays, the multicultural essence of America does not allow the kind of melting as it has been perceived up to this point. Ifemelu and Annalise refuse to surrender to the forces of assimilation; they manage to understand that their identity can be shaped with a beneficial welcoming of what the Other has to offer without having to deny their own identities (Albertazzi 2017, 82). However, the only way to prevent any kind of submission to the hegemonic standards imposed by the American culture is by becoming aware, and, in return, help to raise awareness so that women can free themselves from social beauty standards twentieth-century society continues to impose. With this in mind, choosing one's hairstyle becomes an instrument for political claim embedded within a prominent revolutionary act.

Ultimately, both contribute greatly to raising awareness by politicizing and critically confronting the question of hair for black women. Moreover, they do so by

reaching a strikingly wide audience not only in the US but around the world at large. When Annalise and Ifemelu become conscious of their ethnic identity through their hair, they encourage viewers and readers not only to reconsider the notion of assimilation, but also, and most significantly, to succeed in making them question their own identity.

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THE AMERICAN BUTTERFLY: REFLECTIONS ON THE OTHER AND SELF IN FILM ADAPTATIONS OF “MADAME BUTTERFLY”

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ABSTRACT

The “Madame Butterfly” narrative has been adapted repeatedly across media, including several early Hollywood adaptations: *Madame Butterfly* (1915), *Toll of the Sea* (1922), and *Madame Butterfly* (1932). Through a cross analysis of the Orientalist discourse in these films, contextualized by historical U.S.-Asia Pacific relations, this project examines how the Butterfly narrative evolves, and how it in turn reflects the evolution of U.S. culture. It pays particular attention to the evolving technology of these films, which spans the industry’s evolution from monochrome to color, silent to sound. How did such altered technology affect the reception of the “Madame Butterfly” narrative? Contemporary newspapers, journals, and magazines shed light on this query, revealing audiences’ pre-occupation with notions of “authenticity.” Each technological advancement (whether color, sound, etc.) heightened the audience’s belief in the films’ representations of a racialized Asia. Importantly, these adaptations presented an increasingly sympathetic portrait of the U.S., and in conflating myth and reality, they camouflaged U.S. intentions in the Pacific. The noble images put forth on screen justified imperialist tendencies, reinforced the “benevolent” in benevolent assimilation, and reinscribed American moral dominion and authority.

Keywords: Hollywood; Orientalism; Film.

INTRODUCTION

A young woman stands in an open field, arms outstretched, cheeks damp with tears, beckoning for her lover’s return. In her floor-length petticoat, tapered jacket, fur stole, and matching cap, she is a model of Victorian fashion. But with Asian features, she is a peculiar, discomfiting sight—a clash of cultural images.

The young woman is Chinese American actress Anna May Wong, and the image hails from *Toll of the Sea*, a 1922 cinematic adaptation of the “Madame Butterfly” narrative. Wong portrays Lotus Blossom, a young Chinese woman in love with an American naval officer. In this particular scene, the officer informs her that he will be returning to America, and in her naïveté, she believes he is inviting her along. She quickly and proudly dons an American outfit, but one nearly 50 years out of fashion.

Crushed upon learning that he will be traveling alone, Lotus Blossom raises her arms upward in supplication, entreating his return.

The image of Lotus Blossom in Victorian-era garb simultaneously evokes conflicting sentiments. It is sweet, evidence of Lotus Blossom's love for her "husband." It is humorous, evidence of her ignorance of American cultural objects. It is tragic, evidence of her unassimilability and subsequent death. Filmmakers position Lotus Blossom as a site of sympathy and condescension; audiences lament her position, but support her estrangement. This juxtaposition portrays the binary opposition of Orient and Occident, as first proposed by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. The "Madame Butterfly" narrative influenced orientalist discourse from its very origin. This image is but one instance of Hollywood's use of the Butterfly tradition to construct Asian people as *other*.

This paper engages several early Hollywood adaptations of the Butterfly tradition: *Madame Butterfly* (1915), *Toll of the Sea* (1922), and *Madame Butterfly* (1932). The 1915 and 1932 adaptations are set in Japan, while the 1922 adaptation takes place in China. Despite this discrepancy, the orientalist discourse remains uniform, thus this geographic specificity plays an important role in signaling US ignorance of Asia and its nations. Through a cross analysis of the orientalist discourse in these films, contextualized by historical US-Asia Pacific relations, I examine how the Butterfly narrative evolved, and how it, in turn, reflected the evolution of US culture. The intention is not simply to examine US projections of the Orient, but how these projections reflect the American self.

To accomplish this task, I examine the ways in which these three films construct and project the Orient. I do so by historic and narrative contextualization as well as a close-analysis of the films' visuals, specifically their *mise-en-scene*. I also pay particular attention to the narrative evolution of the American husband, ultimately suggesting that his sympathetic progression reflects US perception of its own innocence on the global stage. Next, I complicate the discourse of authenticity surrounding these films, specifically with regard to their evolving technology. By "discourse of authenticity," I refer to the various ways in which the popular press framed the portrayal of Asia in these films as natural. To support these arguments, the press emphasized cinema's advancing

technology, suggesting that technological progression (e.g. color film) authenticated the Butterfly's settings. Film's constructed nature impedes any such notion of the real, but that did not stymie popular belief. Ultimately, I posit that the representation of a sympathetic, surviving American figure, coupled with a discourse of authenticity, confirms American audience's perception of their intellectual and moral dominance over East Asian nations.

This research is informed by the work of American Studies scholars Amy Kaplan and David Brody, specifically in the way that US cultural production and consumption reflect popular values. Amy Kaplan addresses the ways in which the US's imperialist projects abroad have, in turn, influenced cultural creation on the home front. "Madame Butterfly" showcases US geographic mobility and suggests a cultural, if not military, domination. David Brody similarly suggests that circulated imagery of Asia not only supported the purportedly just cause of colonial expansion, but also created a space for American citizens to discuss globalization in a context previously unavailable to them (Brody 2014, 3). The visual, therefore, generated American perceptions of entire foreign nations and, through juxtaposition, forced audiences to consider their own place in relation, a place of perceived moral and intellectual superiority. US perception of oriental spaces, facilitated through the dissemination of films such as *Madame Butterfly*, reinforced assumptions of their own cultural dominance.

ORIGIN OF THE BUTTERFLY

Despite its global popularity across a range of media including literature, theater, and film, the narrative of "Madame Butterfly" originated in the United States. Popularized in the age of American imperialism, the narrative highlighted the perceived insurmountable cultural divide between "East" and "West," the "Orient" and the "Occident." Philadelphia lawyer John Luther published his short story "Madame Butterfly" in 1898, at the crest of expansionist rhetoric. Inspired by missionary experiences in Japan, the fictional story describes the relationship between an American naval officer, Colonel B.F. Pinkerton, and a Japanese maiden named Cho-Cho-San. Pinkerton "marries" Cho-Cho-San with the understanding that such arrangements are

temporary, but the young woman believes it to be real. He returns to America, and during his time away she gives birth to a son. Pinkerton eventually returns, with an American wife, and they suggest adopting the child. At the thought of losing her beloved husband and child, Cho-Cho-San attempts suicide with her father's ceremonial sword but survives, eventually fleeing her home with her child and maidservant.

Long's narrative is the foundation of the Butterfly tradition. Most adaptations follow this plot closely, even directly borrowing the names of the characters. Long therefore introduced America to the Butterfly archetype—an Asian woman who is faithful, docile, and ultimately tragic. It persists in modern media. This is remarkable in that popular culture's repeated use of the Butterfly—among other Asian stereotypes, including its inverse the Dragon Lady—established an identity for Asian Americans, one against which they now must fight. Asian American scholars, including Lisa Lowe and Renee Tajima-Peña, focus on identifying these stereotypes, as they have become normalized even within the Asian American community. Still, despite Long's problematic portrayal of Cho-Cho-San, there is something uniquely heroic, even anti-imperialist, about his heroine; it is something absent in future adaptations. Ultimately, she rewrites her story, choosing her country, her child, and her life. Long's Butterfly reclaims her narrative, which had previously been constructed by Pinkerton. Subsequent adaptations have the heroine committing suicide, stripping away this agency.

Long eventually granted adaptation rights to stage producer David Belasco who by the turn of the century had earned a positive reputation for penning and producing successful plays. With Long's input, Belasco wrote a one-act play titled *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan*, which premiered in New York in 1900. The narrative mostly adheres to Long's short story, with one significant alteration. In Belasco's telling, Cho-Cho-San kills herself with her father's blade. With this production, the Butterfly's death became a narrative tradition, which then continued with Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904). Inspired by Belasco's staging, Puccini premiered the now-famous iteration of the opera in May of 1904. The narrative mirrors its predecessors,

although the opera presents a more sympathetic Pinkerton through his care for Cho-Cho-San,¹ Still, at the opera's close, the Butterfly dies.

The successes of the short story, stage play, and opera drew the interest of the fledgling film industry. As of this date, "Madame Butterfly" inspired at least ten films. However, I will examine Hollywood's three earliest film adaptations: *Madame Butterfly* (1915), *Toll of the Sea* (1922), and *Madame Butterfly* (1932). These films premiered in a pivotal and rapidly evolving period of US-Asia Pacific relations, thus their evolutions trace similar international political progressions. Additionally, they showcase the industry's technological evolution from monochrome to technicolor, silence to sound. Through a close analysis of the films, as well as viewer responses, I argue these three films reified oriental "otherness," influencing Americans' perception of Asia, and troubling Asian Americans' path to assimilation and citizenship.

US-ASIA PACIFIC RELATIONS

Before examining the films, however, let us place them in historical context. When *Madame Butterfly*, the earliest film adaptation of the Butterfly tradition, premiered in 1915, the US had a fraught relationship with many Asian nations. This paper examines US relations with China and Japan, as these are the two nations referenced in the three selected "Madame Butterfly" film adaptations. Despite its superficial national specificity, however, the films ultimately portray an imaginary Orient, an amalgam of Asian appearances, customs, and mannerisms.

While Asian immigrants did not arrive in substantial numbers until the nineteenth century, images and descriptions of the Orient preceded them, and museums and cultural displays presented them as curiosities. Exhibitions of living Asian specimens, such as Afong Moy and the Bunkers, also known as Barnum's famed Siamese Twins, traveled the country in the mid-nineteenth century (Moon 2006, 60). Boston

¹ Although himself Italian, Puccini did not alter the nationality of Long's characters. Pinkerton remains a US naval officer, and the narrative thus remains firmly aligned with US tradition.

even opened a dedicated “Chinese museum” to satisfy the curiosity of American visitors (Peters 1845). Traveling naval officers visited distant shores,² and returned with oddities to share with eager US audiences. It is in an environment of such sentiments that the first major wave of Asian immigrants arrived in California. Americans perceived the stark differences between Chinese culture—in dress, customs, and the overall ignorance of Victorian codes of conduct—and their own. Cultural displays, including popular songs, minstrelsy performances, and political cartoons, presented Chinese immigrants as pollutants of both US culture and its environment. Relatedly, the American Medical Association began exploring germ theory in relation to Chinese immigrants, believing they “carried distinct germs to which they were immune, but from which whites would die if exposed” (Luibhéid 2002, 37). Additionally, upon completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad, these laborers (mostly Chinese) had trouble finding job opportunities, resulting in a large population of laborers vying for limited employment, particularly in the West. Immigrants, specifically Asian immigrants, received the blame for this downturn in the economy. Popular discourse then coded the earliest Asian immigrants as coolies,³ laborers who undercut wages and therefore stalled the American dream.

By the 1870s, public sentiment vilified Chinese immigrants as harbingers of vice and dereliction. Organized anti-Chinese movements gained traction, as groups such as the Anti-Chinese Union and the Supreme Order of the Caucasians formed with the sole purpose to push Asian immigrants out of the United States. As more immigrants moved to the US, violence broke out in larger cities including Seattle and Los Angeles. As a result, Congress began formulating a federal response, resulting in the Naturalization Act of 1870 that barred naturalized citizenship to members of Asian descent. Eventually, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 banned entry to all Chinese immigrants. It was not fully repealed until December of 1943.

² The “Great White Fleet” made several stops in Asia on its global tour. This tour was a cornerstone of Roosevelt’s imperialist policies, which emphasized naval strength.

³ *Coolie* is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as a person who works for hire, typically for menial labor. This image of Asian immigrants blossomed in the 1870s, specifically during the building of the Transcontinental Railroad.

The history of Japanese immigration to the US, which likewise began in the mid-nineteenth century, varies only slightly. They faced similar discriminatory social and economic practices. However, in 1905, Japan's success in the Russo-Japanese War earned the respect of the US government, but it also prompted fear and suspicion. Jack London's prejudiced war coverage of the Russo-Japanese War perhaps best expresses this anxiety:

The menace to the Western world lies, not in the little brown man, but in the four hundred millions of yellow men should the little brown man undertake their management...four hundred million indefatigable workers (deft, intelligent, and unafraid to die), aroused and rejuvenescent, managed and guided by forty-five million additional human beings who are splendid fighting animals, scientific and modern, constitute that menace to the Western world which has been well named the "Yellow Peril." (Tchen and Yeats 2014, 177)

Ultimately, in response to yellow peril anxiety, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924, which banned immigration from all Asian countries, including Japan. International tensions steadily escalated up to the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.

Early Hollywood reflected popular sentiment towards Asia. Akin to the ways in which legislature physically excluded Asian bodies from American soil, Hollywood forcefully excluded Asian presence on screen. Hollywood films often hired white actors in yellowface to portray Asian characters. Typical features of yellowface include "slanted" eyes, an overbite, and "mustard-yellow" skin (ibid., 2). The Motion Picture Production Code, constructed by studio heads to satisfy contemporary outcry for film censorship, necessitated the use of yellowface.

The Code's anti-miscegenation clause banned "Miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races)" (MPPDA 1927). This often translated into a ban of all interracial relationships involving a white partner. While this clause limited the writing of interracial romances into scripts, it also prohibited the hiring of interracial romantic leads regardless of the race presented on screen. For example, Anna May Wong desired the role of the Chinese wife in *The Good Earth* (1937), but since white actor Paul Muni had already been hired to play the Chinese husband, the censorship board nixed the hiring of an Asian actress for his love interest. Additionally, the

Production Code also incorporated a clause concerning “National Feelings.” This clause prohibited “willful offense to any nation, race, or creed,” which facilitated the rejection of any material that would be perceived as offensive to foreign nations (ibid.). The three films examined here are “pre-Code” films, meaning that they were produced prior to the Code’s strict enforcement in 1934, and therefore escaped the scrutiny of both the anti-miscegenation and the “National Feelings” clauses. The Butterfly narrative incorporates both an interracial romance, as well as a generally unflattering portrayal of Asian countries and people. For this reason, Butterfly adaptations cease throughout the enforcement of the Code.

THE ADAPTATIONS

Adolph Zukor and his Famous Players Film Company (later to be christened Paramount Pictures) took advantage of the hype surrounding *Madama Butterfly*, and produced, in their own words, “An exquisite picturization of John Luther Long’s Beloved Classic ‘Madame Butterfly’” (Olcott 1915, 00:01). Directed by Sydney Olcott and starring Hollywood sweetheart Mary Pickford, the silent film adaptation *Madame Butterfly* (1915) found an eager and accepting audience. Olcott’s *Butterfly* closely mirrors the opera that preceded it. The only alteration is the way in which the Butterfly commits suicide; rather than stabbing herself with her father’s sword, her own rendition of an “honor killing,” Cho-Cho-San drowns herself.

As previously mentioned, the narrative of the film—and subsequent Butterfly adaptations—discursively positions Japan in the inferior position. Similarly, the rendering of Cho-Cho-San, whose name is a transliteration of the Japanese word for butterfly, embodies the orientalist trope of the Asian woman as “Butterfly” or “Lotus Blossom”—a woman who is docile, compliant, and eager for the attention of the white male that sexually exploits her. This trope has been thoroughly explored by scholars such as Eugene Franklin Wong, Gina Marchetti, and Robert G. Lee. Marchetti perhaps best summarizes the position: “The Butterfly serves not only as a rationalization of American attitudes toward Japan; in her various guises, she also represents the

necessary sacrifice of all people of color to assure Western domination” (Marchetti 1993, 79).

With regard to orientalist positioning, Mary Pickford’s use of yellowface is a literal performance of the Orient, not simply through a Western lens, but through a Western body. Pickford took great pains to portray an “authentic” Japanese woman. According to producer Adolph Zukor, Pickford:

[was] made up (she applied her own make-up in those days) to seem more like a Japanese than the director desired . . . she fastened the skin of the outer corners of each eye back and achieved the long and slant eyes of the Oriental. The director finally got her to agree to a make-up somewhere nearer the Caucasian. (Ibid., 191)

Why did Olcott insist that Pickford tone down her oriental look? In the film, Pickford wears little makeup and relies on her clothing, wig, and mannerisms to portray the minute geisha. Critics noticed this choice, with the *New York Times* even commenting “she looked more Occidental than Oriental” (Mantell 1915). *Madame Butterfly* relied on the audience’s infatuation with the Orient, but Zukor’s comment hints at the negotiated balance between the exotic and the non-threatening. The audience perceives Japanese culture, but simultaneously views American attitudes and bodies. Rather than repeating arguments of representation, however, this paper examines how the film visually constructs the Orient through other methods, such as its use of *mise-en-scene*.

In *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier*, Homa King takes a similar approach to her examination of Orientalism in Hollywood film. Rather than exploring the stereotyped portrayals of Asian characters, King centers on the foreign landscapes and objects, which she suggests have the “potential to reveal some of the most haunting projections that have structured Western fantasies about East Asia” (King 2010, 2). She examines these landscapes through the theory of the “enigmatic signifier” as theorized by Jean Laplanche (ibid., 11). The enigmatic signifier is a gesture, symbol, word, etc., that resists decoding, and King suggests that oriental objects are positioned as the enigmatic signifier, withholding meaning from audiences. This inscrutable contact further suggests “that our interior lives are set in motion by an

encounter with the unknown and unintelligible” (ibid., 3). King’s strategy proves useful for rethinking the importance of the setting in film. Additionally, like Kaplan and Brody, King suggests a reflexivity in the orientalist construction of films. Oriental objects signal as much about US interiority as they do about perceptions of East Asia.

A close analysis of one of the film’s most agonizing scenes, Cho-Cho-San’s sleepless night, proves a useful case study for exploring King’s use of enigmatic signifiers. After years of hoping for her husband’s return, Cho-Cho-San finally spots Pinkerton’s ship in the harbor, at which point the intertitle informs the audience that “Cho Cho San’s heart made glad” (Olcott 1915, 46:48). Cut to Cho-Cho-San staring out of her window with her faithful maid, Suzuki (played by Olive West in yellowface), standing behind her, carrying Cho-Cho-San’s son. The women are wearing kimonos and black wigs, and they are accompanied by an Asian child. Cho-Cho-San holds up binoculars and the scene cuts to a point-of-view shot, through which the audience sees a ship on the horizon. Here, the audience’s gaze aligns with the Butterfly; in her night of agony, the viewer waits alongside her.

To signify oriental landscape, the film emphasizes foreign objects. The following intertitle reads, “Hurry Suzuki, get out all the lanterns. Pick plenty flowers. Make place nice for the honorable Pinkerton.” Olcott litters his film with blossoms and lanterns, both within the Butterfly’s house and throughout the Japanese countryside. In the subsequent shot, Cho-Cho-San shuffles through the house with a massive armful of flowers; as she stands before the window, arms flush with blossoms, the wallpaper behind her bears its own blossom pattern (Fig. 1). It is through these objects, particularly the flowers, where Olcott demarcates Japan. Blossoms have a storied presence in the visual culture of Japan, and with Japanese artwork predating the arrival of Japanese people in the US, due to merchant travel, Americans would be familiar with this visual association. By saturating the setting with blossoms, Olcott draws on this association to present “Japan” to American audiences.

This particular intertitle, written in pidgin English, further demarcates the Butterfly’s foreignness. Language (in this case, written) is wielded as the tool of civilization; the Butterfly’s broken English simultaneously signifies her unassimilability

and supports US colonization efforts. The pidgin English expressed through Cho-Cho-San's intertitles are yet another important example of orientalist projection. Cho-Cho-San never fully succeeds in her assimilation to American culture, despite her best efforts. Her use of broken English codes her childlike, in need of protection.

The subsequent sequence of images succinctly expresses her anxiety, punctuated by intertitles to temporally ground the viewer. The first marker reads "Sundown: Waiting for her husband." What follows is a lingering shot of the Butterfly staring out the window, nearly engulfed by the flowers framing the shot. Then "night falls" and the Butterfly remains near the window; "midnight" and the Butterfly sits dejected, sighing. The camera cuts to the sleeping baby. Nearby, Suzuki wakes and crawls close to her mistress. Finally, "morning's cold dawn" and Cho-Cho-San battles sleep. She glances at the window and starts, aiming her binoculars at the harbor. As before, the viewer is placed in the subjective position of the Butterfly, but this time the horizon is empty; the ship departed overnight. Frantic, she screams for Suzuki, and dejectedly approaches the blossoms, which have wilted.

This scene is unique for the position in which it places the viewers. Olcott litters the scene with signifiers of the Orient, exoticizing the setting and Cho-Cho-San. Simultaneously, this scene cross-cuts with one of Pinkerton in conversation with the American Consul in Japan, wherein he rejects responsibility for the child and returns to his ship. The viewer watches this play out, concurrently with the Butterfly's desperate hope for his arrival. We subsequently identify with the protagonist as we share her point of view. In this one scene, viewers both distance themselves from the orientalized Cho-Cho-San, while aligning with her in sympathy.

Directed by Chester M. Franklin, *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) hews closely to the plot of Olcott's *Madame Butterfly*, including its eventual drowning of the Butterfly. There are several notable exceptions, however, that complicate its analysis. First of all, this Butterfly lives in China; in fact, she is not a Butterfly at all. Her name is Lotus

Blossom.⁴ Secondly, the film stars Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong, indisputably the most popular Asian American film actress of the silent era. Thirdly, Frances Marion, one of the most renowned female screenwriters of the twentieth century, and the *first* screenwriter to win two Academy Awards, wrote the screenplay. Additionally, *Toll of the Sea* was filmed in Technicolor, the second in film history and the first of real consequence.⁵ Based on these differences, one might question the film's status as a true adaptation of Long's "Madame Butterfly," but Frances Marion herself stated that the film is "practically the step-daughter of Madame Butterfly" in both its inspiration and narrative (Hodges 2012, 32).

Wong was only 17 when *Toll of the Sea* premiered; it was her first leading role, and unfortunately, would also be one of her last. For the majority of her career, Hollywood typecast Wong in various caricatures of Asian females, specifically the "Dragon Lady" and the "Lotus Blossom," both stereotypes that she herself helped popularize. Wong bemoaned these limited opportunities, even leaving the United States in the late 1920s for Europe where she starred in several successful films including *Pavement Butterfly* (1929) and *Piccadilly* (1929). Although fashioned a star, Wong still found herself limited to roles deemed "exotic," and European censors similarly banned on-screen romances with Caucasian costars. She soon returned to Hollywood.

While Wong's portrayal of Lotus Blossom is significant, it inevitably succumbed to orientalist tropes, and Chinese American activists criticized her performance as harmful to the community (ibid., 34). Scholar Graham Russell Hodges, however, rebuffs such criticisms, arguing that she subverts the orientalist narrative through her use of "emotions, hairstyles, choice of costumes, gestures, and words" to represent "Asian cultural currents"—things that the director and screenwriter would not understand (ibid.). In other words, her insider knowledge of the Chinese American community allowed her to transcend stereotypes and access an authenticity that would have been

⁴ Colloquially, the trope of the "Butterfly" is also referred to as the "Lotus Blossom" (see: Tajima-Pena's "Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed").

⁵ The first film produced in Technicolor was *The Gulf Between* (1917), but it received only a limited release. *Toll of the Sea* was the first Technicolor film to receive general release.

oblivious to film producers. Regardless of Wong's presence, however, the film participated heavily in orientalist discourse.

The "waiting" scene for Lotus Blossom is far less agonizing than its sister scene in *Madame Butterfly*, but it incorporates similar oriental signifiers. Lotus Blossom sits out in the garden with her son. She wears a muted *qipao*, and while her costuming is foreign, its neutral coloring does not overly exoticize. A white actor plays her son whose features, arguably, mark her (a young actress plays the boy) easier for assimilation, and perhaps less threatening to viewers. Anna May Wong's Chinese heritage heightens the miscegenation narrative, as opposed to the artificial interraciality produced through yellowface. The white features of the child remind audiences that the romance is artificial, thus neutralizing the threat that interracial relationships pose to white supremacists.

A messenger arrives and informs Lotus Blossom that her husband is on his way. Ecstatic, she runs into her lavishly adorned home (Fig. 2). The oriental markers in this space include flowers, beaded curtains, a silk screen, and curious geometric patterns on the walls and furniture. One prominent pattern resembles the dragon, who is closely tied to oriental imagining. The set designer doubtless used this opportunity to promote Technicolor: the room is awash in various gradations of red. This color itself is an oriental signifier; it overwhelms the senses. Lotus Blossom calls for her maids and requests her "bridal robe" (Franklin 1922, 33:13). This is the item that best signifies Lotus Blossom's oriental aura. The gown is bright, ornamented, richly multicolored. Even in a space marked by tropes, it stands vivid. One cannot help but juxtapose this gown with the American outfit worn earlier, from the scene presented in the introduction. In Western clothes, she appeared uncomfortable, overwhelmed. In her Chinese bridal gown, she is radiant, although decidedly marked as "other." Lotus Blossom's wait is short lived; by the time she finishes preparations, her husband arrives—with his American wife in tow.

Similar to the 1915 adaptation, this scene of Lotus Blossom's preparation is juxtaposed with the arrival of her husband (Allen Carver) and his American wife (Elsie). Allen anxiously anticipates his reunion with Lotus Blossom, and when he gets cold feet,

Elsie forces him to honor the meeting. The audience is aware of Lotus Blossom's hopes, and watches from afar as her disappointment unfolds. Unlike the 1915 version, however, the audience's gaze never aligns with the Butterfly. The viewer is kept distant, the receiver of the exotic images.

The final case study, *Madame Butterfly* (1932), returns to Japan. Marion Gering directs the film, which stars Sylvia Sydney in yellowface as tragic Cho-Cho-San and Cary Grant as the dashing Pinkerton. The narrative closely mirrors its predecessors. Uniquely, this film incorporates sound, a technology popularized in 1927 with the first sound film, *The Jazz Singer*. This technological advancement allows the audience to not only hear the Butterfly's dialogue, but also a truncated adaptation of Puccini's score.⁶

Little can be said of Sylvia Sydney's performance that has not already been explored through discussions of Pickford's yellowface performance—with two notable exceptions. First, she uses heavier makeup to style her oriental appearance. Whereas Olcott pressed Pickford to tone down her yellowface, Sydney configures her eyes into almond shapes, lightens her complexion, and arches her eyebrows. Additionally, Sydney employs dialogue to fashion her character. While the previous adaptations expressed pidgin English through intertitles, Sydney directly stumbles through her "broken" English, uttering comments such as "you the most, best nice man in whole world," and replacing her R's with L's (e.g. "vely") (Gering 1932, 36:55). Notably, the film fails to incorporate any actual Japanese language. Overall, critics generally celebrated Sydney for her performance, with one fan even noting that her "Japanesey" attitude elicited "an aura of mystery...not unlike an oriental" (Screenland 1993). This reinforces King's notion of the enigmatic signifier as demarcation of the oriental. The mystery of the Orient is something that cannot be decoded, but it is nonetheless attractive.

This version's waiting scene also codes several oriental markers. Its pacing hews closely to that in the 1915 version, although its conclusion is more agonizing. Cho-Cho-San runs into the home (through a garden of blossoms), and informs Suzuki that

⁶ For those interested in a study with greater emphasis on the soundscape of such films, please see W. Anthony Sheppard's article "Cinematic realism, reflexivity, and the American 'Madame Butterfly' narratives."

Pinkerton's ship has arrived. She commands Suzuki to "buy many lanterns, much flowers, much everything." Once again, specific objects mark the oriental aura of both the space and the Butterfly. The subsequent scene opens with a close-up of a lantern. The camera pans right and lands on Cho-Cho-San's face. She readies Pinkerton's chair before sitting near the window to wait. As expected, this shot is delicately framed with lanterns, flowers, and a moonlit horizon (Fig. 3). Without the use of intertitles, the filmmaker signals temporality through editing. Dissolves and fades insinuate the passage of time. The camera lingers on the deflating joy of Cho-Cho-San. Finally, come morning, Suzuki informs Cho-Cho-San (and the viewers) that "the night has passed" but Cho-Cho-San will "wait for always."

The scene is punctuated by Pinkerton's arrival, as in previous adaptations, so that the audience is privy to information withheld from Cho-Cho-San. Again, this places viewers in a position of dominance to the unknowing Butterfly. The scene is also punctuated by moments of comic relief, brought about by Cho-Cho-San's unconscious race-based humor. For example, Cho-Cho-San tells her son (played by an Asian American child) that he has the "exact resemblance" to his father; Suzuki knowingly balks at this comparison. When informed that they are running out of money, Cho-Cho-San comments, "We be vely American. Spend everything." Here, American audiences can laugh at themselves, but only because an American actress delivers the joke. Additionally, this joke is built upon the ignorance of Cho-Cho-San; even in a moment superficially mocking America, the audiences laugh at her naïveté, reassured of their intellectual dominance. Ultimately, this humor, which is present throughout the film, serves to minimize the tragedy.

All three adaptations include some version of the "waiting" scene, providing an opportunity to track the evolution of the Butterfly tradition. Despite the rising Asia-phobia in the US, the films' oriental discourse remains static. All three scenes rely on similar tropes to signify the Orient (e.g. blossoms, silk screens, lanterns, costuming). All three actresses perform Cho-Cho-San with similar gestures. All three films construct Cho-Cho-San as foreign, particularly through her employment of pidgin English in both the intertitles and spoken dialogue. Perhaps *Toll of the Sea's* casting of an Asian

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American actress presented an opportunity for a less orientalist discourse, but it falls short. The three adaptations may vary, but not in their portrayal of the Butterfly.

In contradiction, perhaps, Japan produced its own adaptation of “Madame Butterfly.” This short animated film titled *Ocho Fujin No Gensou (Fantasy of Madame Butterfly)* premiered in 1940, at the height of US-Japan tensions. The film only portrays the “waiting” scene and the Butterfly’s subsequent suicide. Unsurprisingly, this film emphasizes the desperation of the Butterfly and the cruelty of the Western naval officer. In selecting just this one scene for adaptation, without providing the greater context of her relationship with her “husband,” filmmakers emphasize the barbarity of the American’s treatment of the innocent Japanese woman. This contradicts Hollywood’s move towards rescuing the character of the husband.

“THAT HONORABLE PINKERTON”

One major evolution in these films is not the depiction of the Butterfly, but rather the depiction of the American “husband.” The 1915 *Madame Butterfly* portrays the least sympathetic husband. He receives the least amount of screen time. His untoward intentions toward the Butterfly are the most articulated, and he remains cold and uncaring in his interactions with his wife. In one particularly tragic scene, the Butterfly proffers to her husband a slip of paper with a shaky “I love you” scribbled on it (Olcott 1915, 26:25). She has taught herself English. Pinkerton glances at it quickly and then throws it on the ground; the Butterfly collapses in tears. Pinkerton refuses responsibility for his child. He never returns to Cho-Cho-San. She dies waiting for his return.

Allen Carter in *Toll of the Sea* presents a slightly more sympathetic portrayal. He is tender to Lotus Blossom; the film suggests that he might even love her, although his American colleagues scoff at the suggestion, convincing him to abandon her because “she is different” (Franklin 1922, 10:15). Carter, too, marries an American woman, but upon returning to Asia he visits Lotus Blossom; he even apologizes to her. Inevitably, Lotus Blossom gives her son to the American wife before drowning in the sea. Carter remains the villain in the narrative, but his tenderness and penitence are redemptive.

Cary Grant as Pinkerton, however, most persuasively portrays the relatable and sympathetic husband. As the ultimate matinee idol, Grant's charisma and attraction play a significant role in eliciting this sympathy. The narrative lingers on his perspective and repeatedly justifies his actions. Unlike the other adaptations, the initial meeting between Cho-Cho-San and Pinkerton is extensive; he shows true attraction for her and defends their relationship. He helps her avoid the undesirable life of a geisha. Upon their marriage, the broker carefully explains that the union is dissolvable, thus justifying his abandonment. Their relationship remains tender. In one touching scene, Pinkerton lovingly serenades his wife with a rendition of "Flower of Japan."⁷

Additionally, when Pinkerton returns to Japan and discovers that Cho-Cho-San has waited for him, he is distraught. He immediately explains the situation to his American wife, and she absolves him of wrongdoing, "Don't feel so badly about it dear; it isn't your fault" (Gering 1932, 1:09:12). Here, the American wife, the distant observer, stands in for the viewers. Her quick forgiveness allows the audiences to also forgive. She dehumanizes Cho-Cho-San by dismissing her pain and reinforcing her disposability. Pinkerton's tender regard for his American wife portrays him as a family man, an upstanding soldier who miscalculated in a foreign land, having succumbed to the exotic spell of the Orient. Pinkerton apologizes to the Butterfly, explaining "Oh I never dreamed you'd wait. They told me you'd forget and go back to your own people" (Gering 1932, 1:13:50). Through dialogue, the film grants him excuses, justifying his actions. Additionally, Pinkerton never discovers the existence of his son; the Butterfly kills herself without informing him. Consequently, he is not vilified for abandoning his family; his only perceived mistake is poor communication with his foreign mistress.

⁷ In the lyrics, Pinkerton refers to Cho-Cho-San as his "Flower of Japan," his "picture off a fan," and his "dream world." This dehumanization reinforces the contemporary tendency to use objects as a means of signifying the *other*.

So while the orientalist performance of the Butterfly varies little, the American presence varies greatly. It is not the projection of Asia that alters, but rather the way that the United States reacts to it. Just as audiences can forgive Pinkerton's actions, so too can they forgive their own actions with regard to Asian Americans and Asian foreign relations. Pinkerton evolves into the ideal imperialist soldier. The Butterfly remains distant, unassimilable, other. As previously argued by Brody, Kaplan, and King, these films reflect US culture and US attitudes. As historical relations worsened with East Asians, American audiences absolved themselves of their sins.

TECHNOLOGICAL EVOLUTION

Film's technological evolution coincided with the progression of the Butterfly adaptations. Although produced within the same 20 year span, the three films present a unique technological period in cinema. *Madame Butterfly* (1915) represents cinema's monochrome, silent era. *Toll of the Sea* is Hollywood's second film produced in color, and the first with widespread release. And while *Madame Butterfly* (1932) returns to monochrome, it exemplifies the early sound era. Therefore, these films showcase the Butterfly tradition through varied technology. As previously explored, I do not argue that the technology significantly altered the projection of the Orient on screen, but it did affect the reception of these oriental markers. Evidence of this is the press' responses to the films, as appearing in contemporary newspapers, journals, and magazines. While press responses alone cannot fully stand in for audience reception, they signal the popular discourse around these films.

Coverage of *Madame Butterfly* (1915) over emphasized the film's perceived attention to Japanese customs and appearances. While there were a few criticisms, such as the *New York Times* comment on Pickford's appearance as "too occidental," most critics celebrated the film's ability to present an "authentic" Japan. For instance, the *San Francisco Chronicle* celebrates cinema's advantage over staged adaptations because "details of the plot, only suggested in the dramatic presentation, are brought out with picturesque beauty and effectiveness" (San Francisco Chronicle 1915). Here, we have the first technological shift in the Butterfly tradition—the move from stage to screen.

The Santa Ana Register noted that in the 1915 version, “Every detail of the staging is correct and artistic in the extreme. It breathes the very spirit, life and atmosphere of Japan” (Santa Ana Register 1915). The *San Francisco Chronicle* also celebrated Pickford’s portrayal as a “thorough Oriental” (San Francisco Chronicle 1915). Notably, theater owners participated in the staging of “authentic” Japan. In Los Angeles, “Tally’s Broadway” theater transformed into a “Nipponese bower of beauty,” complete with “Japanese lanterns, “Japanese costumes,” and “pretty girls in Jap dresses who will take you to your seats” (Los Angeles Times 1915). Similarly, the Santa Ana “West End Theatre” decorated its lobby with cherry blossoms and Japanese lanterns, while the “Imperial Theatre” in San Francisco accompanied the film with a massive orchestra and Japanese dancers to “add to the atmospheric presentation” (Santa Ana Register 1915). These descriptions reveal ways in which the theaters participated in oriental space making, in attempts to bolster the authentic experience viewers received in viewing.

In a similar way, critics of *Toll of the Sea* commented on the perceived natural display of the Orient, but they simultaneously emphasized Technicolor’s ability to heighten the authentic. For instance, *The Evening News* in Harrisburg, PA marveled at Technicolor’s “depiction on the screen of persons and scenes just as they look to the eye,” and its achievement in “natural color” (Evening News 1923). *The Minneapolis Star* noted that Technicolor gives “the verisimilitude of life to a photoplay” and not only “enhances the beauty of a picture immeasurably, but it adds to the illusion of reality” (The Minneapolis Star 1923). Other reviews emphasized the authentic cast, celebrating the “Chinese girl” Ana May Wong “from whom great things may be expected” (Harrisburg Telegraph 1923). Chinese journalist Chungshu Kwei even wrote in *The Chinese Students’ Monthly* that the film was “easily the best that ever purports to portray on the screen the daily life of the Chinese” (Hodges 2012, 35). *Toll of the Sea*, therefore, heightened the discourse of natural photography; the addition of Technicolor provided an organic experience unlike previous adaptations.

Madame Butterfly (1932) also received praise for managing to “assume the beauty and loveliness of old Japan.” Reviewers commented on the ability for sound to present “Japanese accents” and incorporate Puccini’s score. The real emphasis on authenticity,

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however, centered on Sylvia Sydney's portrayal of Cho-Cho-San, "with her naturally slanting eyes and piquant Oriental features" (Weir 1933). *Picture Play Magazine* exclaimed that Sydney appeared "genuinely Japanese" and "more Japanese than her Japanese hairdresser;" and *The New Movie Magazine* concurred that Sydney looked naturally Japanese (ibid.; *Picture Play Magazine* 1933). Unlike previous Butterflies (even Anna May Wong), critics celebrated Sydney's natural performance, for her ability to literally embody the foreign.

CONCLUSION

In the 1933 issue of *Motion Picture Reviews*, one reviewer presciently commented on the danger of Butterfly adaptations. Specifically referring to *Madame Butterfly* (1932), the reviewer wrote:

It is charming, but ordinary. Sylvia Sydney is wistfully appealing and Cary Grant well cast, but one never forgets, in spite of authentic settings, that the cast are Occidentals masquerading as Orientals, and in view of the present situations on the Pacific it seems a questionable moment to have filmed this story of the trusting Japanese maiden betrayed by the American naval officer. (*Motion Picture Review* 1933)

The "present situations" cited by this reviewer likely refer to Japan's seizure of Manchuria over the objections of the League of Nations. US-Japan tensions quickly escalated in the subsequent years; Japan continued to seize China's land, and the US responded with harsh economic sanctions. Within ten years of this film's premiere, Japan would attack Pearl Harbor, and the United States would incarcerate over 100,000 of its Japanese American citizens. The reviewer implies the danger of offending Japan, but perhaps the real danger of such adaptations was their ability to convince US citizens of their inherent dominance over East Asians—and their inculpability in the government's discriminatory practices.

The Butterfly tradition exploited East Asia from its very conception, but film nurtured a space of the authentic; through advancing technology, the orientalist discourse appeared real. As tensions increased in the Pacific, cinematic representations of "Madame Butterfly" pared down the critical portrayal of the American to protect

America's image on the global stage. This altered relationship justified imperialist tendencies, reinforced the "benevolent" in benevolent assimilation, and reinscribed American moral dominion and authority. American audiences looked at the Butterfly and saw the Other; but they also saw themselves.

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APPENDIX A



Figure 1. Oriental signifiers: blossoms and blossom wallpapering. (*Madame Butterfly*, 1915).



Figure 2. Oriental signifiers: blossoms, lanterns, and red décor. (*Toll of the Sea*, 1922).



Figure 3. Oriental signifiers: blossoms and lanterns. (*Madame Butterfly*, 1932).

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PROMISES OF DEMOCRATIC CONSENT AND PRACTICES OF CITIZENSHIP: REENACTING JAPANESE INTERNMENT CAMPS MEMORIES IN COMICS FORM

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ABSTRACT

Throughout US history, the reaction to political crises, particularly foreign-based ones, has been the repression of individual rights; a cyclical resolution that seems to validate the old claim that ‘history does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes.’ Indeed, post-9/11 anxiety over immigrants as potential threats to national security, and the debates about the Patriot Act and Muslim Ban involuntarily revived the discussion about the legacy of Japanese Internment: was Executive Order 9066 a mistake not to be repeated or a legal antecedent to contemporary resolutions? Clearly, the subject of Japanese American Internment taps into an obscure and unreconciled (hi)story in American memory. Hence, it is no surprise to find contemporary comics (a liminal medium) revisiting the Internment experience to comment on the present, questioning America’s promises of democratic consent and practices of citizenship. To discuss contemporary comics about Japanese Internment, the paper debates how (1) the Muslim Ban revived the *Korematsu* case in public discourses and memory, (2) literature engaged with this historical event and where comics position themselves within that tradition, (3) contemporary graphic narratives use the past to address current issues, and (4) the choice of the medium is somehow problematic. Finally, the paper argues that contemporary neo-internment comics are a visual and textual rhetorical device demanding the expansion of the circle of ‘we’ to promote interethnic forms of solidarity.

Keywords: Comics; Internment Camps; Trauma; Allyship; Muslim Ban.

IT’S *KOREMATSU* ALL OVER AGAIN! PROMISES OF DEMOCRATIC CONSENT AND PRACTICES OF CITIZENSHIP

On December 7, 2015, six months before obtaining the nomination at the Republican Presidential Primaries, Donald J. Trump published a “Statement on Preventing Muslim Immigration” on his campaign website. In this statement, he suggested, “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what is going on” (Trump 2015). He argued that “until we are able to determine and understand this problem and the dangerous threat it poses, our country cannot be the victims [sic] of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in Jihad.” When he became President, this anti-Muslim animus soon translated into a series of executive orders that suspended the insurance of immigrant

and non-immigrant visas to applicants from Muslim-majority countries. However, being aware “that the ban on Muslims likely violated the Constitution, Trump later attempted to re-characterize his ban as one on nationals from certain countries or territories” (Ramahi 2020, 561). Indeed, while judges on the US Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit were reviewing a district-court ruling declaring the ban unconstitutional, Trump’s campaign statement disappeared from the net¹ (Barbash 2017).

This quest to make this decision look constitutional and secular might explain why the ban was enforced through two consecutive executive orders and a related presidential proclamation. It is possible to speculate that the government feared the first two Orders (No. 13769 and No. 13780) to be declared unconstitutional as they likely violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment by targeting members of a particular religion. Even though Trump justified both Executive Orders by recurring to national security, explicitly referring to 9/11, none of the nineteen hijackers came from the countries included in the ban.

On September 24, 2017, Trump issued the final version of the Muslim Ban, Presidential Proclamation 9645. This Executive Order banned nationals from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Chad, North Korea, and Venezuela. Some critics saw the inclusion of North Korea and Venezuela as a form of ‘window dressing’ to demonstrate that the ban was not targeting solely Muslim-majority countries (Anderson 2019). Yet, one could still observe the administration’s malicious intention as Trump and his staff explicitly acknowledged the resolution as a ‘Muslim Ban’ during the Presidential campaign (Ramahi 2020).

This resolution had the effect of reopening the wounds left by the post-9/11 era, as the Ban signaled another state-sanctioned attack on the Muslim community and their faith. The Patriot Act expanded the government’s right to surveil its citizens because of public security, but it also made clear that the civil rights of certain ethnic communities

¹ Because nothing truly disappears from the web, it is still possible to find a reproduction of the statement on The American Presidency Project webpage of the UC Santa Barbara, as well as on the internet archive the “Way Back Machine”.

could be sacrificed to protect Americans' freedom at large. However, it is important to remark a substantial difference between Trump and his predecessors. Trump's rhetoric did not distinguish Islam from terrorism and it failed to recognize the multiethnic and multiracial dimension of Islam, reducing the Muslim identity into a homogeneous (inassimilable) 'race.'

The Muslim Ban was not an isolated episode at odds with US history. In contrast, it resurrected an old practice of determining one's right of entry into the country based on a collective criterion (e.g., nationality) rather than on individual grounds. The US history of migration/discrimination laws features the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), the Gentlemen Agreement (1908) which barred Japanese immigration, the Immigrant Act (1917) which restricted the immigration of 'undesirables' from other countries, and the Executive Order 9066 authorizing Japanese Internment (1942-1945).² Therefore, the Ban somehow reiterated and revived the old historical "tension between America's universalist promise of democratic consent and its race-, gender-, and culture-specific practice of citizenship" (Li 1998, 5-6) as specific groups were barred from immigration (and naturalization as they kept on being marginalized). Hence, one may observe the convergence of old "Orientalist" (Said 1979 [1978]) prejudices with new forms of populism that feed on fear, bigotry, and hysteria.

Hawaii and several other States challenged the Presidential Proclamation (and the two predecessor Executive Orders) on statutory and constitutional grounds, arguing that the Proclamation and the Executive Orders were driven by anti-Muslim animus. The enactment of the Muslim Ban and the *Trump vs. Hawaii* case had the involuntary effect of revitalizing the (public) memory of an old court case, the well-known *Korematsu v. United States*, and the haunting ghost of the Japanese internment camps.³

² On February 19, 1942, Roosevelt signed the Executive Order 9066, which authorized the forced relocation and incarceration in internment camps of people of Japanese descent. Consequently, 110,000 ethnic Japanese were displaced from the western United States into hastily erected centers, located in deserted areas of Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming (Girst 2015). Many Americans, including Roosevelt himself, feared that the utmost menace to national security would come from "alien" sleeper agents who supposedly waited to attack on orders from the Axis powers (Branca-Santos 2001).

³ In 1942, Fred Korematsu was arrested for going into hiding in Northern California and failing to report to a relocation center. While under arrest, Korematsu appealed his conviction through the legal system challenging the

The correspondences between these two experiences were first (shamelessly) evoked by a pro-Trump Great American PAC spokesperson, who cited Japanese internment camps as ‘precedents’ for Muslim registry (Hartmann 2016). Whereas all post-WWII presidents condemned the Internment, with five offering public apologies, Donald Trump and his administration did not only fail to condemn the incarceration, but they also attempted to use this event as a legal precedent to justify current (racist) government policies (Pistol 2021). During an interview on ‘Good Morning America,’ Trump stated that he was simply following Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s footsteps, as the ban was not different from his predecessor’s “solution for Germans, Italians, and Japanese” (William & Yaffe 2017). In contrast, the opposition evoked *Korematsu* as a notably bad antecedent, as one might question the constitutionality of means to separate neatly the ‘bad actors’ from the larger group.⁴ In both situations, the Court “abandoned judicial review over alleged infringement of constitutional rights asserted by American citizens arising from screening procedures” (Dean 2018, 176).

During Trump’s campaign for office and throughout his presidency, (Japanese) American (contested) history was misused, showing how America has not learnt yet how to deal with both ethnic minorities and its controversial history of discrimination. This misguided public, and legal use of history makes evident the endurance of America’s racism and scapegoating. The presence of this debate around the meaning and legacy of Japanese Internment shows two important points. First, it testifies the presence/possibilities of a cross-cultural, cross-identification, and intergenerational

constitutionality of the Government Executive Order. The Supreme Court agreed to hear his case in late 1944. The Court had already debated a similar case the year before, *Hirabayashi v. United States* (1943). Here, the Supreme Court judged Gordon Hirabayashi, a college student, guilty of violating a curfew order. The *Korematsu vs. United States* decision referenced the *Hirabayashi* case, but it also went a step further ruling on the ability of the military, in times of war, to exclude and intern minority groups.

⁴ Sadly, the lack of understanding of the Japanese American experience is not limited to Republicans. In 2015, David A. Bowers, the Democratic Mayor of Roanoke (Virginia) stated he did not want Syrian refugees resettling in his city, citing security concerns and Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 as an antecedent (Zurcher 2015). This statement raised numerous criticisms because of Bower’s lack of legal authority, his use of a fear-based rhetoric, and his unfortunate comparison of Syrian refugees to these same terrorists they were fleeing. One of the most vocal critics was the actor and activist George Takei, who on a November 18, 2015 Facebook post replied, “There never was any proven incident of espionage or sabotage from the suspected ‘enemies’ then, just as there has been no act of terrorism from any of the 1,854 Syrian refugees the US already has accepted. We were judged based on who we looked like, and that is about as un-American as it gets.” (Takei 2015)

coalition around traumatic experiences. Second, there is still a group of Americans contending that “the imprisonment of Japanese American citizens and legal residents without due process has some legal, rational or moral standing” (Maki 2019). Indeed, as Michelle Malkin’s book *In Defense of Internment: The Case for ‘Racial Profiling’ in World War II* (2004) testifies, there is still a minority that rationalizes/justifies the removal of Japanese Americans from the West Coast. Yet, it is worth reminding that this sentiment of a vocal minority has no juridical basis, especially after the redress movement, Ronald Reagan’s signing of the Civil Liberty Act in 1988, and the payment of 20,000 USD to every surviving detainee that began under George H.W. Bush in 1990.

The comic strip artist Tak Toyoshima sardonically addressed this lack of empathy towards Japanese (Americans) suffering in a 2003 strip titled “Why It’s Hard for Asian Americans to Get any Sympathy.” The comic strip shows different ethnic groups complaining about the injustices and mistreatments they historically had to endure and indicts white supremacy. Yet, the Asian character provocatively states, “**My people** were taken from their homes and places in **internment camps** where they had **no choice** but to organize **dances** and **play football** to pass their time” (Toyoshima 2003, original emphasis). The strip reflects on how Asian American issues and history do not get the traction that other minority race issues get, but also how America overlooks the traumatic (and long-lasting) effects of the internment on the Japanese American community.

Toyoshima’s observation proved somehow prophetic considering Trump’s use and understanding of the internment history. In his vision, threats (never historically proved) to national security justify deviations from core constitutional protections, thus posing the basis for what Giorgio Agamben (2017 [2003]) described as a prolonged “state of exception.” Indeed, the suspension of Japanese Americans’ rights was justified by a critical condition (war) calling for the direct action of the sovereign, beyond the limits of the rule of law (i.e., the Fifth Amendment), in the name of public security. However, this resolution was not simply an exception to the rule of law dictated by war contingencies, as it has been evoked in time as a legal antecedent to justify restrictive policies. In this regard, it is worth remarking that the Supreme Court overturned

Korematsu only during its decision in *Trump vs. Hawaii*, which is well after the end of World War II and the closing of the camps.

FROM WWII TESTIMONY TO “NEO-INTERMENT NARRATIVES”

Given this context, it is no surprise to see the reenactment of Japanese internment camps in contemporary narratives. This haunting presence of the past is mainly due to the divisive narratives that this experience generated. Indeed, as hitherto discussed, the political debate about the Ban showed how opposing American parties attributed different meaning to the Internment experience. So, as Rigney (2010) discussed, “one of the paradoxes of collective remembrance may be that consensus (‘we all recollect the same way’) is ultimately the road to amnesia and that it is ironically a lack of unanimity that keeps some memory sites alive” (346). Yet, this continuous revision of the past is an instrument to redefine the present, especially in moments of crisis, since “memory is valorized where identity is problematized” (Kansteiner 2002, 184). The Japanese Internment is a particularly interesting case study as it shows “how history and memory are negotiated when the need to remember an event challenges the ideals of democratic nationalism and the narrative unity of nation that historical discourses ostensibly provide” (Simpson 2001, 4). Indeed, this event tested limits of America’s democracy as people of Japanese ancestry (two-thirds of whom were American citizens by birth) were forcibly removed and imprisoned under nothing more than a ‘disloyalty’ suspicion by the US government.

It is worth remarking that the contemporary debate surrounding the Japanese American Internment is just the latest phase of the long and contested afterlife of the camp legacy. After World War II, its memory has been kept alive by public debates, commemorations, and political movements. The complex and lively legacy of the internment experience is made evident by the abundance of creative literature about this event, which Gayle K. Sato (2009) and Greg Robinson (2015) divide into four periods. The first phase coincides with the wartime years, when Japanese American wrote within the camps themselves describing their experience. Nisei artist Miné

Okubo's *Citizen 13660* (2014 [1946]) is arguably the most famous example of the literary production of this time.⁵

The second phase goes roughly from 1945 to the 1960s, a period characterized by what the scholar Carolyn Chung Simpson (2001) defines as the “absent presence” in national consciousness. Right after the war, many Nisei attempted to leave their experience in the past and “It was only after the redress campaign began in the early 1970s that former internees broke their silence to start talking about their experience” (Takezawa 1991, 40). This willingness to forget is well captured by the editorial history of *No-No Boy*, “a forgotten, neglected, and rejected novel about Japanese America that every Japanese American knew about but never read during Okada's lifetime” (Chan *et al.* 1991, 478).⁶

In the 1970s, inspired by the Civil Right movement and African Americans' examination of the effect of slavery, Japanese Americans promoted campaigns aimed at obtaining formal reparations. This new consciousness led to a formal redress. Understandably, this historical period coincides with a new literary phase that capitalized on the “movement ethos of breaking the silence that surrounded the camps” (Robinson 2015, 46). Finally, the fourth phase comprises the literary production that emerged after 9/11. According to Sato (2009), “all of these post-redress narratives are marked by efforts to explore the inherent but previously under-examined transnational and multicultural dimensions of internment history” (455). Pei-Chen Liao (2020) proposes the term “neo-internment narratives” in order to highlight the elements of continuity and discontinuity with the representation of earlier periods, rejecting to overemphasize 9/11 as the moment when everything changed. Yet, the scholar observes how this revival and rewriting often implicitly or explicitly comments on the

⁵ In this regard, it is worth mentioning how graphic narratives managed to comment on the subject well before conventional forms of literature.

⁶ Okada's case is somehow emblematic as *No-No Boy* entered the (Asian) American literary canon only after Jeffrey Paul Chan rediscovered it in 1970, and republished it in 1976. Other important works produced in this period are Hisaye Yamamoto's classic story “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara” (1950) and Monica Sone's autobiography *Nisei Daughter* (1953).

discrimination suffered by Muslims in America, highlighting the presence of a cross-cultural alliance.

Despite their different historical context of publication and agendas, all these narratives about the internment can be seen as “counter-memories” (Lipsitz 1990), as they promote a progressive renegotiation of national history and identity. Indeed, these alternative narratives of nation and history question the “use of the past” in a way that does not only address past injustices, but it also “speaks to present day intellectual concerns with time, history, subjectivity, and fragmentation” (215). Interestingly enough, some of the contemporary comics seem willing to push these political claims further by trying to ‘get out in the world,’ encouraging militancy and activism. They no longer merely describe a state of crisis, but they attempt to offer solutions (providing in some cases positive role models to follow).

For these reasons, this article strives to overcome the literate/literary canons discussing how graphic narratives (an often-neglected literary medium⁷) have presented the internment camp experience to a larger public. In order to provide a more complete account of the evolution of comics literature on the internment, I also discuss the contribution of (white) non-Japanese American artists to demonstrate the presence of different treatments and understandings of the event. As previously discussed, literary scholars divided the internment narratives into four periods. Similarly, one can observe a chronological progression also in the way that comics have approached this theme.⁸

⁷ Whereas in some historical moments (including the contemporary) some comics creators (have) experienced fame, riches, and even literary recognition; there have also been periods when the medium was met with hysterical responses (Gardner 2012). This lack of recognition allowed the medium to develop its own language and relationship with the readers without necessarily complying with the taste of an educated audience. It is worth noticing that the contemporary literary turn may obfuscate the fact that comics is not a genre, but a medium capable of conveying different messages. The urge to prove the academic respectability of the medium has also prompted scholars to focus on a narrow selection of works/genres. The newly acquired respectability, often limited to certain genres and not the medium *per se*, did not erase comic artists’ perception of inhabiting a liminal space. As Gilbert Hernandez remarked, comic artists want their work to be taken as “seriously as any novel”, however they are also aware that comic books must inhabit “their own neat, kitschy, junky world” in order to be subversive (Gardner 2012, ix). Indeed, a complete institutionalization of the medium may kill off their subversive nature. To give a more complete depiction of the medium potentiality, I also included works that may not qualify as ‘highbrow’.

⁸ This parallel, even though asynchronous, progression should not be taken for granted especially if we consider the history of the medium (Barbieri 2009; Baetens and Frey 2015) and the medium’s relationship with historical representations (Witek 1989).

Whereas early depiction of the event in graphic form aimed to make the public aware of present injustices (Okubo 2014 [1946]), denounce America's long history of Asians' exclusion policy (Yang et al. 2012) and counter the invisibility of Asians' sufferings (Toyoshima 2003), the more recent comics do not just aim to address these old questions, but to also bring these debates within a "global civil sphere" (Alexander 2012). Indeed, the transnational and multicultural dimension that characterize post-9/11 internment narratives is also present in many contemporary comics around the subject, as this experience is connected and compared to the discriminations suffered by the Muslim community in post-9/11 America. Hence, whereas the attack on the Twin Towers revived WWII rhetoric, it also activated new types of cross-ethnic solidarity.

REMEMBERING AND REENACTING THE CAMPS IN POST-9/11 GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

While dealing with these pop cultural representations of historical events, it is important to take their forms into consideration . Indeed, new forms and formats open up new ways of representations, knowledge, and investigation (in terms of construction and deconstruction) of the past. This is particularly true for a hybrid medium like comics, as a competent comic reader must develop what Marianne Hirsch (2010) defines as "biocular literacy," since "visual images both create narrative and impede it, both compete with the words and illustrate them" (217). Comics invites reflections on the existing differences between visual and textual literacy, but also about the new possibilities created by their combinations. Whereas words can narrate, describe and represent through plot progression, images work on a deeper/subliminal level "through a process of affect contagion" (Bennet 2005, 36)

The hybrid nature of comics forces the reader to assume an active interpretative role, which can be used to produce new knowledge and/or critical/political consciousness. Being a "cool medium" (McLuhan 2017 [1964]), comics forces the reader to make "inferences" (Cohn 2019) about the syntagmatic relationships that links the panels, recomposing the fractures created by the "gutter" through the use of "closures"

(McCloud 1993), and thus creating a cognitive engagement through the stimulation of the senses.⁹

Hence, by taking advantage of the potentiality offered by the visual, comics can function as a form of “visual activism” (Mirzoeff 2015) as they allow the transmission across society of empathy for the traumatic experience of others. Hence, the public reconstruction of past memories (the Japanese Internment) aims to promote the understanding of historical (and present) injustices, in turn generating solidarity, and encouraging the alliances among different (marginalized) groups. This process can be clearly observed in George Takei’s autobiographical graphic testimony *They Called Us Enemy* (2020), Kiku Hughes’s “postmemorial” (Hirsch 2012) graphic novel *Displacement* (2020), Anupam Chander’s and Madhavi Sunder’s graphic biography *Fred Korematsu. All American Hero* (2011), and Frank Abe’s and Tamiko Nimura’s graphic biography *We Hereby Refuse. Japanese American Resistance to Wartime Incarceration* (2021).¹⁰ In these works, the recollection of the internment experience is used as a catalyst for a redefinition of the notion of (US) citizenship and (international) human rights.¹¹

The importance of preserving and transmitting the memory of past traumatic events is well captured by the ending of Kiku Hughes’s graphic novel, as the author reflects on the symbolic power of (post)memory. Hughes is well aware of memory’s ability to generate innovative political thought, occasions for political resistance, and new forms of solidarity among historically oppressed groups:

⁹ Will Eisner (2005 [1985]), one of the masters of the art of comics, noticed how “[t]he relationship or the identification evoked by the acting out or dramatization in a sequence of pictures is in itself instructional. People learn by imitation and the reader in this instance can easily supply the intermediate or connecting action from his or her own experience” (154-55). Even though Eisner’s primary examples were his ‘attitudinal’ comics, aimed at promoting vocational schools, this approach can be expanded to different genres and texts. Similarly, George Takei (2020) is conscious about the educational function of comics as he states in the afterward of his graphic novel, “ I frequently meet people — even people who seem well-educated and informed — who are shocked when I tell them about my childhood [...] So I became convinced that we needed to tell this story in a new way, to make it accessible to audiences of all ages using the format that readers are irresistibly drawn to: comics” (207).

¹⁰ The artwork for *We Hereby Refuse. Japanese American Resistance to Wartime Incarceration* (2021) was created by Ross Ishikawa and Matt Sasaki. *Fred Korematsu. All American Hero* was illustrated by Angela Loi.

¹¹ Even though these works are very different in terms of creativity, originality, structure, writing, characterization, plot, complexity, quality, target audience (kids, young adults, adults), and aims (didactic vs. artistic), they nonetheless all share similar rhetorics, connecting past experiences of discrimination to present ones.

Our connection to the past is not lost, even if we don't have all the documents, even if we never learn the details. The memories of community experiences stay with us and continue to affect our lives. The persecution of a marginalized group of people is never just one act of violence—it's a condemnation of generations to come who lived with the ongoing consequences. We may suffer from these traumas, but we can also use them to help others and fight for justice in our own time. Memories are powerful things. (Hughes 2020, 276-277)

In *Displacement*, the interconnectedness of past and present is visible in the juxtaposition of images evoking the debate surrounding the Muslim Ban and the portraits of Japanese Americans activists who opposed their incarceration and stood up against bigotry (like Miné Okubo, Gordon Hirabayashi, Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga, Ina Sugihara, Fred Korematsu, Yuri Kochiyama, Mitsuye Endo, Norman Mineta, and Aki Kurose).

This interconnectedness is also evident in the plot progression, a coming of age story where the protagonist has to recuperate the history of her family (her grandma was an internee) in order to become an aware and engaged citizen. While searching for the traces of her late grandmother (Ernestina Teranishi) in San Francisco, the protagonist (Kiku's fictional persona) finds herself displaced to the 1940s in the same camps (Tanforan and Topaz) where a young Ernestina was relocated.¹² Interestingly, at the end of the comics the reader finds out that Kiku's mother also experienced a similar displacement in the 1970s, as she confesses to her daughter,

I don't think we are travelling through time or space, really. I think we're travelling through memory. I think sometimes communities experience is so traumatic that it stays rooted in us even generations later. And the later generations continue to rediscover that experience, since it's still shaping us in ways we might not realize. (Kiku 2020, 234)

In both cases, the 'displacement' is triggered by public debates about the camps' legacy, as political leaders use Order 9066 as a precedent to justify restrictions to civil liberties.

¹² This narrative solution is clearly an intertextual reference to Octavia Butlers' *Kindred* (1979), adapted into a graphic novel in 2017 by Damian Duffy (adapter) and John Jennings (illustrator).

In the 1970s “there was talk of reopening the camp for political dissidents, communists, black panthers” (Kiku 2020, 232), and in the present the comics portrays Trumps’ and Carl Higbie’s rhetorical use of the camps experience to justify the Ban.

Even though the displacement only occurs in memory, this experience is powerful enough to leave physical marks (bruises) on Kiku’s body. This travel is nonetheless unavoidable and necessary as it allows her to fill in the gaps of the history of a branch of her family.¹³ Despite being only “half” and living in the present she must become aware of the legacy of the camps, as the consequences of this traumatic experience are passed on to different generations affecting their relationships. The camp experience convinced many Nisei to stop transmitting their parents’ language (and many Japanese traditions) to their children to prove their loyalty to America.¹⁴ Yet in the camps, Kiku also observes how Japanese Americans managed to create a community and resist oppression despite being denied their civil liberties. There, she also learns that, in contrast to a commonly held belief, not all Nikei collaborated quietly; many expressed their disagreement with their unjust and unlawful detention. Dissent manifested itself in different forms: a person speaking up for the community, but also a family putting its name in front of its stall (the government substituted surnames with numbers); a member of the community sketching what was happening (cameras were forbidden); protecting one’s privacy (where there was none). The comic also addresses the contradictions and hypocrisies of the camps’ school system, which demanded young pupils to learn America’s promises of democracy, freedom, and free speech when they were denied those same rights. The government also tore the community apart using questionnaires aimed at establishing the internees’ loyalty to America. Yet the community managed to reunite during celebrations and the funeral for James Hatsuaki Wakasa, arbitrarily killed by Topaz’ guards, after the community succeeded in having a public obsequy, despite the camp administration’s initial resistance.

¹³ The comics reminds the reader that anyone with one-sixteenth Japanese ancestry or more was incarcerated.

¹⁴ One of the cultural traditions that seem to survive is food. In the comics, tempura, sukiyaki, gyoza, mochi, and other Japanese foods have the capacity to bring together a community whose unity was tested by the camp experience.

Whereas the narrative revolves around Kiku's learning about the Internment camp experience and her grandmother's history, she never has the occasion to speak to her late relative. This narrative choice signals a void that symbolizes the readers' and Kiku's inability to fully recover that experience. The comic shows a tension between the encounter with the testimony of former internees and the awareness of the illusion of knowing perfectly what it was like. However, this impossibility to retrieve all the memories does not trigger a passive stance toward history, but a renewed commitment not to let those ever events occur again.

Indeed, the comic ends with Japanese Americans demonstrating against Trump's racist policies that specifically targets Latinx and Muslims. The depiction of a dialectical interrelation between Japanese and Muslim experiences does not aim to claim that these experiences operate under the same assumptions, but rather it brings out the historical specificity of each historical moment. It reveals a dialectic between the universal and the particular aspects of each traumatic event. These two events differ in dimension, scope, and historical context, yet one can see some parallelisms. In both cases, claims to national security were used to justify and mask ethnic, racial (and religious) animus. Indeed, the lack of respect for individuals' access to justice, in spite of their citizenship, the racist undertones present in both misinformed propaganda rhetoric, and the malicious detention of individuals are clear assonances between these two cases (Wietelman 2019). So, the comic do not only recognize the existence of human suffering, but it asks the readers to take responsibility for it. It does so by expanding the circle of 'we', recognizing how the Muslim Ban and the Internment are/were motivated by fear, and how in both cases the majority deprived an unpopular minority of its rights. Neo-internment comics do not impose new master narratives, but personal and subjective counter histories that address the relationship between the individual and his community/ies of reference. They make the individual accountable for his/her actions, and thus they dare to be moralistic. These comics give voice to neglected personal (hi)stories in order to juxtapose them in contrast or alongside national mythos. For example, George Takei (2020) compares and contrasts his *Star Trek* role to America's (broken) promises of citizenship and justice,

I am a veteran of the starship enterprise. I soared through the galaxy with ... a crew made up of people from all over the world. Our mission was to explore strange new worlds... to seek out new life and civilizations...to boldly go where no one has gone before. I am the grandson of immigrants from Japan to America. Boldly going to a strange new world, seeking new opportunities. (11)

They Called Us Enemy reminds the nation that many American citizens descend from immigrants who sought to find better opportunities. However, race cast him and his family as unassimilable and enemy aliens. So, the comic resists the co-optation of Takei's success as an actor into the "Model Minority Myth" (Lee 1999) as the reader observes how war hysteria and racism conditioned his life, and that of many Japanese Americans living on the West Coast. In contrast, his success makes evident the irony of history: as a well-established actor, he would be called to give a speech at the FDR museum. Like Hughes's post-memorial narrative, Takei's memoir indulges in trivial moments that have the function of humanizing the internees and are offered as a form of resistance. They both show the resilience of Japanese (Americans), as they try to build a sense of normalcy. Yet, in Takei's first-person narrative bitter experiences alternate with sweet childhood memories and even comedic moments. For example, a humorous moment involves George learning a swearing from older kids and asking for his parents' explanation about its meaning. The comic reminds that even though there was no mass torture or starvation, Japanese Americans suffered pain and hardship as the federal government violated their civil rights: the camps were dirty and inhospitable spaces that tested the unity of a community, which started to fall apart when the WRA distributed mandatory questionnaires to all adults to determine their loyalty. The comic also shows how Japanese Americans answered in various ways, and it homages them all. Each answer was as heroic as the other. There were Nissei who answered "yes-yes." They found those questions outrageous, but swallowed their pride and served the military, fighting in Europe. Others refused and became principled objectors. They did not want to wear the uniforms of their captors. There were those that had no other option than to answer "no-no" because of their family ties: the first generation did not want to become stateless, and some second-generation Japanese Americans did not want to leave their parents behind in the camps. Ironically, a few internees even radicalized

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because of how they were treated. The comics also resists the portrayal of Japanese internees as passive and compliant as it shows instances when they protested and exercised their right to assemble. It would be through organized people engaged with the democratic system that Japanese Americans would gradually reacquire their civil rights. This experience triggers Takei's awareness about the functioning and limits of America's democracy, which need to be monitored through active participation so that history does not repeat itself. Indeed, in the final pages, the memoir remarks how "In a cruel irony, the court struck down *Korematsu* as a mere side note in *Trump v Hawaii*" (Takei 2020, 200) noticing that the Supreme Court merely replaced one bad decision with another.

Similarly, *Fred Korematsu. All American Hero* (2011) draws parallelisms between Korematsu's experience and the discriminations suffered by a young Muslim girl in post-9/11 America. This short educational comics shows a young Muslim being bullied and discriminated at school because of her ethnicity/religion. She later meets a Japanese woman who comforts and introduces her to the story/judiciary case of *Korematsu*. Of course, this parallelism is at times simplistic and sentimental, but it is rhetorically capable of delivering important anti-racist messages and offering models of resistance that aim to stimulate mutual form of understanding, paving the way to new forms of justice, able to answer the challenges of a globalizing world.

By exploring the biographies of Jim Akutsu, Hiroshi Kashiwagi, and Mitsuye Endo, *We Hereby Refuse. Japanese American Resistance to Wartime Incarceration* (2021) demonstrates how individual court cases can overthrow unjust laws. In particular, Mitsuye Endo's story is quite revealing, as her case became a cause. Indeed, her landmark lawsuit ultimately led to the closing of the internment camps and granted Japanese Americans the right to return to their West Coast home in 1945. Interestingly, the comic also addresses the role played by attorney James C. Purcell, showing how Japanese Americans needed help and guidance in solving their problems. The comic does not seek to reiterate a white savior trope, but it endorses the notion of (interethnic)

allyship.¹⁵ Despite Purcell not being the protagonist, the reader sees the character's determination and pivotal role in bringing a *habeas corpus* lawsuit to demand the release of the imprisoned Japanese Americans. To achieve this aim he needed to find a sympathetic plaintiff, and Mitsuye Endo matched all the criteria he was seeking. She was a Nisei who had worked for the California Department of Motor Vehicles, she neither spoke nor read Japanese, and had never been to Japan. She was raised a Methodist, and had a brother in the US Army. The government could not discredit or cast doubt on her figure, and it had to recognize her unlawful detention. The comic stresses the moral integrity and strength of Mitsuye Endo, as she rejected the War Relocation Authority's offer to leave the camps, "Mr. Glick, I'm sorry, but I must refuse. This is about more than me and my freedom. This has a bearing on all Japanese Americans who are eager to go back to their homes. I am willing to go as far as I can on this case" (Abe & Nimura 2021, 75). Like the previous comics, *We Hereby Refuse. Japanese American Resistance to Wartime Incarceration* links the past to the present by stating, "[i]t happened to us. We refuse to let it happen again" (147).

The exemplar models provided by *Fred Korematsu. All American Hero* (2011), and *We Hereby Refuse. Japanese American Resistance to Wartime Incarceration* (2021) invites the reader to take on the torch of justice from those who came before. Hence, the recognition of civil rights is seen as part of an ongoing long march for a more just, equal, and caring America. These comics attempt to provide the reader three different types of learning experience: cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral. They ask the reader to know, recognize, and critically judge past experiences of oppression. They request the reader to develop empathy and solidarity feelings, and finally take action in order to prevent history from repeating. Indeed, personal stories are more compelling than factual accounts because they facilitate the development of identification and

¹⁵ Similarly, George Takei's *They Called Us Enemy* discusses the role that San Francisco lawyer Wayne Collins and his Japanese American associate Theodor 'Ted' Tamba had in soliciting a mitigation hearing for the internees who refused to pledge their lives for America. Their renunciation was not an act of free will, but it was forced upon them by their detention condition. How could they serve a country that upended their families and put them behind the barbed wire?

empathy. This affective response is important because people are more likely to take action when they feel a personal stake.

The past is here used to illuminate both the present and the future; court cases are portrayed as democracy-perfecting practices. Indeed, in these comics, democracy is not presented as a given, but rather as an ideal to pursue. Therefore, in ‘neo-internment’ comics, the role played by Japanese Americans activists somehow echoes the figure of the ‘errand into the wilderness’, as they guide the American juridical system into the ‘sunlit path’ inscribed by ‘destiny’ in the national narrative. By recurring to national lore, these comics rehabilitate the figures of the dissenters, as they simply performed their civic duty, opposing unjust laws and abiding to their consciousness. The loyalty to one’s country is no longer restricted to the service in the military, but it also includes the courage to oppose unjust laws and speak up for the powerless, as democracy needs to be protected and perfected.¹⁶ This reading seems confirmed by the fact that in ‘neo-internment’ graphic narratives, the protagonists’ dissent and antagonistic opposition never turn into violence. They do not seek a divisive confrontation, but a reconciliation, capable of putting America back on the democracy track. These comics reflect on how America’s participatory democracy requires each citizen to be active and involved in the shaping of the country, guiding it to match its ideals and moral aspirations. They invite citizens/readers to ‘speak up,’ breaking the silence caused by fear, indifference, and shame, and act against injustices.

Invoking one’s ability to speak is noticeably an attempt to counter the pernicious “model minority” myth that casts Japanese (and Asian Americans in general) as passive and compliant. This reading seemed to be fostered by the fact that in the camps many Japanese Americans adhered “to the situation forced upon them in the spirit of *shikatanai* (‘it cannot be helped’) and *gaman* (‘enduring the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity’)” (Girst 2011, 33). Yet, these sayings, used to describe experience in the camps, do not necessarily imply complicit resignation. In contrast, as

¹⁶ During World War II, many Nisei felt compelled to serve in the Army to prove their loyalty to the country that was unrightfully detaining them and their families (Robinson 2009).

Miné Okubo memoir illustrates, they testified the internees' resolve to convert inhospitable spaces into habitable homes. Though noble, in contemporary comics, these principles are discarded in favor of examples of more vocal forms of dissent. These comics argue that something can always be done to address and prevent injustice.

Finally, I want to remark how white American authors have also created neo-internment narratives in graphic form. As an example, one can name Kevin C. Pyle's *Take What You Can Carry* (2012) and Matt Faulkner's *Gaijin: American Prisoner of War* (2014). However, these reenactments often lack any political commentary on the present, and have a tendency to adopt a kitsch aesthetic by recurring to a maudlin sentimentalizing notion of suffering, or limit their analysis of the reasons behind the internment to the most evident forms of bigotry, thus failing to see the sociocultural and juridical implications. Pyle's comic draws a problematic parallelism between a Japanese American boy being relocated to an Internment camp in the 1940s and a white boy living in contemporary America being landed in jail for stealing. Whereas the comics attempts to elicit sympathy towards both experiences, creating unlikely ties across generations, one cannot ignore how racism shaped the Japanese American experience in the camps and the fact that Japanese people did not commit any crime. Similarly, Matt Faulkner's graphic novel captures the hybrid identity of the fictional character of Koji Miyamoto. Being the offspring of a Japanese father and a white mother, Koji is bullied by his white classmates who accuse him of being a spy. Similarly, when he is relocated in a camp because of his Japanese ancestry, young Japanese internees torment him for being half-white, foreign ('Gaijin') to the community. Whereas the comics successfully portrays how racism relies on predefined borders and gatekeepers crushing any liminal identity that challenges the status quo, it fails to see how racism is not just the result of bigotry, but also law enforcements and is ingrained within American society and institutions.

“WHY COMICS?”: THE MEDIUM’S HISTORICAL COMPLICITY & RESISTANCE TO THE INTERNMENT

I want to conclude the reflections about comics’ representation of the internment camps by looking at the history of the medium. Narrating Japanese incarceration in comic form is not a neutral choice, as it might even be seen as an homage to one of the earliest vivid testimonies of the Japanese incarceration, Miné Okubo’s *Citizen 13660* (1946). Indeed, despite the hardships of camp life, the creation of art was possible, often by using materials readily available. Miné Okubo (2014 [1946]) combined words and pictures to record her experience in Tanforan and Topaz internment camps, since “Cameras and photographs were not permitted in the camps” (xxvi).

These drawings were originally conceived to be gifts to friends living behind the barbed wire, a way to recognize their kindness in that time of hardship. However, these drawings would be noticed by *Fortune* magazine, becoming an instrument of denunciation. *Fortune* denounced that the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were severely stretched if not breached when US citizens (with enemy faces) were put in prison. Then, a counter-narrative of World War II started to appear, as the morality of US actions started to be questioned. *Fortune* confronted injustice while it happened, and Okubo’s drawings of camp life helped to visualize such events. A selection of her drawings would later be recollected in a book titled *Citizen 13660*, first published in 1946, a time when anything Japanese was still unpopular.

This graphic narrative has an important civil and didactic function: it questions America’s past policies, and it asks the readers how to prevent these events from repeating themselves. As Okubo (2008) stated in an interview, “Textbooks and history studies on this subject should be taught to children when young in grade and high schools. Many generations do not know that this ever happened in the United States” (47-48). Hence, this quote confirms points of continuity between Okubo’s work and the new neo-internment narratives in graphic form. *Citizen 13660* may not be considered a comic book or a graphic novel (the drawings were originally conceived to be part of an art exhibition); each page has a single panel, and the text is captioned at the bottom of the page (there is no speech balloon). Yet this graphic narrative can be rightfully considered an important precursor to some contemporary documentary comics.

Moreover, it dared to mock the guardians, submitting them to the gaze of an internee, and thus symbolically subverting the power dynamics of the camps.

However, it is important to remark that in the 1940s the medium was also involved in the dissemination of anti-Japanese and anti-Asian sentiments, as comics functioned as propaganda tools. They depicted the Japanese as brute hordes and sinister villains with small and slanted eyes, and effeminate traits (Murray 2011). Moreover, on June 28, 1943, a *Superman* comic strip even justified the interments. During a conversation, Major Munsey states to Clark Kent and Lois Lane that “Our main difficulty is that loyal Americans of Jap ancestry are indiscriminately mingled with enemy sympathizers who would be glad to sabotage our national welfare at the first opportunity [...] Our government has done all but lean over backwards in its desire to be humane and fair.” To which Lois Lane comments, “You’ve done a marvelous piece of work here. The Jap government should have absolutely no excuse for not showing their prisoners of war as much consideration.” This depiction is of course problematic, as it presents Japanese Americans internees as prisoners, while, in fact, they were simply American citizens whose only crime was being of Japanese descent. Hence, it is not surprising that a July 1, 1943 article appeared on *The Daily Tulean Dispatch* (the newspaper of the Tule Lake camp) vehemently criticized such depiction,

The creators, Siegel and Shuster, swerving from their mad scientists and queer monsters, are using real live people to victimize for their incredibly fantastic plots. Anyone who has been inside a [relocation] center would know that evacuees are too busy with their personal and family problems to even dream about ‘escaping’ with ‘concealed guns.’ Guns? We are not even allowed to own a camera. (2)

Thus, the use of comics might be a way to make the medium accountable for its representation of minorities. This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that recent mainstream comics seem aware and willing to address the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. For example, in *Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man #9* (Taylor and Cabal 2019) the mutant Marnie confesses that she immigrated to the US from Japan in the late 1930s, and that she was interned along with other citizens and immigrants of Japanese descent from 1943–1945. Marnie recalls that in 1939 she was

among the test subjects of a Japanese project that aimed to create a counterpart to Captain America. She was one of the very few on whom the experiment was successful, granting her super strength and X-ray vision. However, she soon escapes Japan and turns against her nation, joining the US and fighting the Axis. In 1943, despite serving as an ally of Captain America, she was deported. This episode is reminiscent of how many Japanese American soldiers who were already in the military by the time of Pearl Harbor were required to surrender their weapons (Robinson 2009).¹⁷ Even though her power granted her the ability to escape, Marnie preferred to be interned to help other internees the best she could. In a brief verbal exchange with Captain America, she notices how the camps are against America's ideals of freedom. Yet, even though Captain America agrees with her observations, he assumes the role of the bystander, symbolizing the indifferent compliance of many Americans.

This portrayal seem to rework the main ideas of two stories ("9066" and "Heroes without a Country") featured in *Shattered: The Asian American Comics Anthology: a Secret Identities Book* (Yang et al. 2012) as the values embodied by the superhero are inevitably complicated by the historical context and race.¹⁸ Jonathan Tsuei's and Jerry Ma's (2012) "9066" captures how the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 changed the perception of Japanese Americans. Even though, prior to the "date which will live in infamy" (Roosevelt 1941), the protagonist performed heroic actions, executive order 9066 (which gives the title to the story) ruled that he must have been imprisoned because of his ethnic origins. Despite superhero stories arguing that the hero's mantle can be passed on to different people by their adherence to universal values of truth and justice, the comic reflects on how these 'universal' notions are ethnically connoted in US society. When imprisoned, "9066"'s nameless protagonist comments, "I thought that it didn't matter who we were when our masks were off [...]. The truth is it's not what

¹⁷ In the summer of 1942, General DeWitt opposed the formation of a Japanese American unit because of the universal distrust in which they were held. However, some month later, Elmer Davis of the Office of War Information wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt asking for a Nisei fighting unit as a propaganda weapon to counter Japanese claims of American racism. In February of 1943, Army recruiters toured the camps to create a (segregated) all-Nisei unit.

¹⁸ This anthology aimed at giving visibility to Asian American artists and stories. The inclusion of Internment narratives testifies the centrality of this event in the shaping of the Asian American identity.

you do that matters, but what you look like. I was a hero once. Now I'm just another Jap" (Tsuei and Ma 2012, 27-28). Lee's and Sunico's (2012) "Heroes without a Country" dramatizes this contradiction by having its Japanese American protagonist saving a Jew from the tortures of Nazi generals. This short comic does not attempt to establish an easy parallelism between the Holocaust and Japanese internment; in contrast, it questions the myth of racial unity during World War II and the good war narrative. Therefore, these comics show how the medium can function as both an instrument of propaganda and/or counter history. So, one can appreciate how comics have gradually moved away from being enforcers of hegemonic discourses to become promoters of human rights. The use of the superhero frame reminds the reader that civil rights are both a source of power, but also responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS

By connecting apparently different (interethnic and intergenerational) experiences, neo-internment comics do not draw their politics from static and essentialist notions of identity, but rather dynamically mold new identities through politics. They demonstrate that interethnic and (antiracist) struggles for social justice can unveil previously unknown aspects of social relations. Indeed, the comparison of these events show how the constitutionalization of fear has made possible the reduction of civil rights in the name of national security. A close attention to historical and personal stories demonstrates how there never was a justification to support these repressive measures other than racial prejudice. These comics do not just point out how different historical moments tend to 'rhyme,' but they also offer examples of civic engagement and protest. Here, the notion of citizenship (that was once denied to Japanese people) is not understood as a mere possession of (passive) rights, conceded by the majority, but as a responsibility. They ask US citizens to act as a democracy-perfecting and counterhegemonic force able to intervene on the behalf of the powerless whenever the latter feel threatened by the majority.

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