CORPOREAL ACTIVISM IN ELIZABETH ACEVEDO'S *THE POET X:* TOWARDS A SELF-APPROPRIATION OF US AFRO-LATINAS' BODIES[1]

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ABSTRACT
Scholars have typically studied Chicanas/Latinas in the US and African American women separately. However, this paper explores both the cultural appropriation of Afro-Latinas' bodies in the US and the strategies they employed to reclaim their bodies and agencies through Elizabeth Acevedo's novel, *The Poet X*. The protagonist's body is simultaneously and paradoxically hyper-sexualized by racist discourses, and called to chastity by the patriarchal Catholic doctrine presiding over her Dominican community. Nevertheless, I argue that the protagonist makes her body a site of activism as she re-appropriates the agency over her body by moving from a self-imposed invisibility and silence in order to try to avoid the hyper-sexualization of her incipient curves, to a non-objectified visible position through her sexual desire, self-representative embodied narrative, and performance of her slam poetry.

RESUMEN
La crítica académica ha estudiado a las mujeres chicanas/latinas y afroamericanas de manera separada. Sin embargo, este artículo explora tanto la apropiación cultural de los cuerpos de las

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[1] An abridged version of this paper was presented in "V Congreso Internacional de Jóvenes Investigadorxs con Perspectiva de Género" (3rd, 4th and 5th June 2020).

afrolatinas como sus estrategias para reclamarlos a través de la novela de Elizabeth Acevedo, *The Poet X*. El cuerpo de la protagonista es simultánea y paradójicamente hipersexualizado por los discursos racistas y llamado a la castidad por las doctrinas católicas patriarcales presentes en su comunidad dominicana. No obstante, argumento que la protagonista hace de su cuerpo un sitio para el activismo ya que consigue moverse de una posición auto impuesta de invisibilidad y silencio para evitar la sexualización de sus incipientes curvas a una posición de visibilidad no cosificada gracias a su deseo sexual y a la recitación de la poesía que proviene de su cuerpo y la representa.

I.   INTRODUCTION

This paper explores both the cultural appropriation of US Afro-Latinas' bodies and the strategies employed by them to reclaim their bodies and agencies. For this purpose, Elizabeth Acevedo's verse novel, *The Poet X*, is analyzed since the protagonist's body is dominated by racial and patriarchal discourses, especially, in the form of the Catholicism imposed both by her Afro-Dominican community and her mother. Nevertheless, the protagonist manages to re-appropriate her body and her subjectivity by means of her own sexual desire and self-representative embodied slam poetry.

Although since the 80s, works such as Joseph Harris' and Paul Giroy's have marked a turn to African diaspora within Black studies, the literature has mainly focused on Black anglophone communities and men. Among others, Ledent and Cuder-Domínguez (2012), Durán-Almarza and Álvarez-López (2014), or Melissa Schindler (2014) have criticized this biased view that misrepresents diasporic women and the large African-descended population in the Caribbean and Latin-American (Gallego 58-61). This critical neglect has been sometimes attributed to the ideas of mestizaje that have circulated in Latin America and the Caribbean, and which have made blackness invisible. However, intellectuals such as the Brazilian scholar Lélia Gonzalez have been long claiming the existence of *Latinegros* and establishing the bases of Afro-Latin feminism. Journals such as *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* means a contemporary significant contribution to this field.

Despite the growing literature on Afro-Latinx in Latin America and the Caribbean, not much attention has been paid to US Black Latinos, their double diaspora, identity negotiations and racial

fluctuations. It is also important to focus on this context since true diasporic and transnational studies do not only address the global, but the specific in order to "work through difference" and escape essentialism (Lorde "Women Redefining Difference" 284-5). As Brent Hayes Edwards claims, "diaspora is a linkage only through and across difference" (65). In the US, Chicanos/Latinos and African Americans have been typically studied separately (Mills 112). Latinx Studies do not usually include US Latinos of African descent. On the other hand, US Black studies usually focus on the experiences of African Americans, disregarding the experiences of other Black people in the US who also live a racialized identity. Nevertheless, the pioneer volumes by Jiménez-Román and Flores —*Afro-latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the US* (2010)— and Rivera-Rideau, Jones and Paschel —*Afro-Latin@s in Movement: Critical Approaches to Blackness and Transnationalism in the Americas* (2016)— have established the bases of Black Latinidad in the US that subsequent articles and thesis have followed.

Nevertheless, there is still much to do regarding Afro-Latinx literature, especially female authors. US Latino anthologies, like Norton or Oxford one, do not normally address Afro-Latin writers specifically, and when they do, they mainly focus on "Nuyorican Poetry."[2] Both Richardson's *The Afro-Latin@ Experience in Contemporary American Literature* (2016) and the later special of "Label me Latino/a" issue, also edited by Jill Toliver Richardson, on Afro-Latinx Literature and Performance (2017) have implied a turn away from the previous focus on "Nuyorican Poetry," considering other genres and nationalities, and featuring more recent authors. However, these compilations do not specifically analyze female authors. In that sense, *Women Warriors of the Afro-Latina Diaspora* (Vega, Modestin and Alba, 2012) means a very helpful source for gender issues, although it does not address US Afro-Latinas' literature. Thus, taking into account that US Afro-Latina feminist and literary studies are still a developing field, this paper also considers other literary and feminist bodies of work, such as Black, Latina/Chicana, Afro-Latina and Afro-Carribean theory in order to explore all the intersections that US Afro-Latinas' fluid, transnational and diasporic identities have. As the US Afro-Dominican feminist

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[2] *The Norton anthology of Latino Literature*, edited by Ilan Stavans and Edna Acosta-Belén, Norton (2010). *Herencia: the anthology of Hispanic literature of the United States*, edited by Nicolás Kanellos, Oxford University Press (2003).

and literary scholar Omaris Zamora claims, "we are not a fragmented body, even if we embody multiple understandings of feminism" (*(Trance)formations of an AfroLatina* 175).

As a relatively neglected field of study, much could be said about US Afro-Latinas' experiences and literary representation. In this context, this paper focuses on the cultural appropriation of Afro-Latinas' bodies and their corporeal strategies to reclaim them. To do so, Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X* is analyzed. She belongs to a new generation of Afro-Latin authors, who the latest critical reviews and anthologies, such as Richardson's (2017), have not yet featured. Acevedo's work won the 2018 National Book Award for Young People's Literature and the 2019 Pure Belpré Author Award for celebrating, affirming, and portraying Latinx culture and experience in the US.[3] In this semi-autobiographical novel made of narrative poems, the Afro-Dominican and New Yorker national slam poetry winner, Elizabeth Acevedo, tells the story of Xiomara, an Afro-Latin teenager, whose incipient body curves are problematizing her adolescence in Harlem.

This "portrait of the artist as a young woman" deals with Xiomara's evolutionary process of self-representation as a poet. Through this metanarrative, the reader accompanies a fifteen-year-old Xiomara on her journey from echoing dominant images and stereotypes against Afro-Latinas in her poetry to developing her own voice. In this journey, she also has to make the difficult decision of discontinuing confirmation class, for which her mother signs her up, to go to the poetry club run by her Afro-Latina English teacher, Ms. Galiano, as they are scheduled at the same time. Thus, she evolves from having her body appropriated by racist and sexist discourses, especially in the form of Catholicism, to reclaim both her body and subjectivity through slam poetry and the desire she experiences when falling in love with Aman, one of her high-school classmates. In this way, during her adolescence, Xiomara does not only develop her pubertal body, but also her agency over it.

This paper is organized in two sections. The first one, "The Appropriated Body," analyzes how Afro-Latinas' bodies are on one hand hyper-sexualized by colonially rooted discourses and on the other, called to chastity by Catholic doctrines. The second section, "The Reclaimed Body and Subjectivity," studies the corporeal practices (desire and slam poetry) that Xiomara uses to finally link

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[3] www.acevedowrites.com/about

her agency/subjectivity and body after centuries of disassociation, and which, therefore, reclaim the latter from oppressive narratives.

II. THE APPROPIATED BODY

Xiomara's incipient curves are intersectionally sexualized due to her racial and cultural origin by dominant racist and sexist discourses and forces which can be traced back to the bodily practices of colonization and slavery and continue operating through current systems such as capitalism, and at the same time are called to chastity by the patriarchal Catholic ideology that prevails in Latino communities, as *The Poet X* shows.

Colonialism conquered female bodies just as it did territories. Indigenous and enslaved African women were not only physically exploited —women were commodified both as workers and bearers of new slaves—, but also culturally abused by the imperialist narratives that classified them as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild (Lugones 743). Part of this racist imagery is the "Jezebel" stereotype which objectified Black women's physical attributes, such as the buttocks, by considering them "excessive" and therefore signs of their animal hypersexuality (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 119-148). This narrative of dehumanization and sexualization was made to justify rape and sexual abuse. However, the exploitation, objectification, and fragmentation of colored female bodies did not end after slavery and colonization. In its different formulations like neocolonialism and capitalism, the dynamics of oppression in race/class/gender/sexual relations continue working to create bodily hierarchies and structures of power in order to make profit. What bell hooks calls "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy," that is, the intersection of all these current forces, is one of the most effective forms of Foucault's "biopower" (hooks 2004, IX; Foucault 2003, 277). Foucault defines biopower as the modern systems of restriction, which no longer imply physical punishment, but exercise control through social constructions.[4] Capitalism and neocolonialism do not use slavery, military force and other clear ways of physical violence as imperialism did, since the idea of control is less tolerated. However, these systems use cultural coercion by making narratives

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[4] While old political systems, like monarchies, had power to take life through violence, current systems of biopower control the population while they are living beings through different methods such as social constructions (Foucault 247).

such as the Jezebel stereotype prevail in the social consciousness.[5] This symbolic violence over Black female bodies culturally appropriates them.

In the poem "How I Feel about Attention" (Acevedo 48), Xiomara comments on how her body is constantly under surveillance. She contends she feels like "a myth, a story distorted, waiting for others to stop and stare" (Acevedo 48). Xiomara is referring to the male gaze that objectifies her and makes her a passive subject who can only wait for others to look at her. By using the words "myth" and "distorted story," Xiomara shows awareness of the constructed component of racist and sexist discourses. Xiomara knows that myths, race and gender are social constructions that have been created to justify structures of power. However, she also warns that the discomfort she experiences when being looked at, as a result of these discourses, is real. If situations are socially defined to be real, they are real in their consequences. By feeling scrutinized through the lens of racist and patriarchal discourses, she considers that this male gaze makes her body "something to be slayed, conquered" (Acevedo 48). In this way, she fantasizes about being a "Dominican Medusa" to transform into stone those who look at her (Acevedo 48).

The conquering effect that these distorted narratives continue to have over racialized women's bodies in nowadays society can be seen in other poems such as "It's Only the First Week of Tenth Grade" (Acevedo 46-7), in which Xiomara narrates an abusive scene during the first week of classes:

> Today, I already had to curse a guy out
> For pulling on my bra strap,
> Then shoved a senior into a locker
> For trying to whisper into my ear.
> "Big body joint," they say,
> "we know what girls like you want." (Acevedo 46)

By introducing the boys' words —"' big body joint' they say 'we know what girls like you want'"— just after their actions —pulling on her

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[5] Nevertheless, it is necessary to say that violence persists as a means to circumscribe Black lives. The actions denounced by Black Lives Matter and Me Too in the United States context, the assassination of Marielle Franco in Latin America, and female genital mutilation in Africa are examples of the atrocities that are still committed towards Black female bodies around the world.

bra and whispering into her ear—, Acevedo shows that boys feel entitled to act this way because her "prominent body" is read as a sign of invitation and consent. This scene confirms that that the jezebel stereotype of "excessive and consequently hypersexual Black female bodies" is still used to justify abuses against them. In "Unhide-able" (Acevedo 5), Xiomara also speaks about the hypervisibility of her body, its connection to hypersexuality and of the aggressions she suffers as a consequence of it. Her body, being described as "too much for a young girl," is impossible to hide, and its "excessiveness" is again linked to notions of sexuality (Acevedo 5). In this poem, not only does the male gaze slay her, but also girls and their rumors echo the racist dominant stereotypes that connect her body with hypersexuality by calling her "Ho. Thot. Fast" (Acevedo 5).

Xiomara dates all these instances of harassment and offensive names from when she grows breasts and gets her period. The fact that she does so shows that at the beginning of the novel she blames her body for being the cause of others' behaviors: "And I knew then what I'd known since my period came: my body was trouble" (Acevedo 151). Xiomara has internalized from patriarchy "the provocateur myth," which blames the victim, rather than the perpetrators of harassment. As Nadia Celis Salgado claims, for Afro-Caribbean girls adolescence is an incarcerating process in which their bodies become both origin and victim of male gaze and abuses, so teenagers do not only face physical transformations, but also the loss of their own subjectivity at the expense of the objectification that these corporeal changes bring along (22). In this way, after the bra scene, Xiomara wishes to fold her body into the tiniest corner so she could hide in it. The fact that she says "for me to hide in" clearly points to the dissociation of her body and her subjectivity that patriarchy achieves through objectification (Acevedo 47). Xiomara does not say that she wishes to hide, but rather that she wants to hide herself in her body, thus implying that her body, being appropriated by society and its cultural constructions, is neither an integral part of herself, nor a bearer of her subjectivity. While her excessive body takes space, her agency and subjectivity being removed from it do not have any room left. As she herself recognizes, her body takes more room than her voice (Acevedo 5).

In "Games" (Acevedo 50), another boy, who again alludes to Xiomara's big and hypersexualized body —"that's a lot of body for someone as small as you to handle"—, calls her "*mami*." The term "*mami*" is used in Latin cultures, especially in music genres such as

reggaeton, to express that a woman is "hot." The fact that he uses such an ideologically loaded Spanish word to address Xiomara does not only sexualize her, but also makes clear that he can perceive her Afro-Latin identity. It is worth noticing how Black Latinidad is recognized for sexual purposes, while rendered silent and invisible for many others. Whereas US Afro-Latinx are normally taken as African American for their phenotype and poor scholarly attention has been given to their literary production, the titles of porn videosuse the term "Afro-Latinas" or "Black Latinas" quite often.[6]

It is precisely necessary to consider how Latinidad intersects with race and gender in the appropriation of Afro-Latinas' bodies. In this way, Catholicism has to be understood as part of the cultural appropriation of Afro-Latinas' bodies. Religion is one of the divergent points between African American and Afro-Latin experiences that warns of the dangers of an essential Black feminism. Although there are some Black feminist critiques of patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia in Black churches, in general terms African American authors depict religion in a more positive way than Latin Americans. While the Protestant church has often been instrumental in channeling the social and political struggles of the community (Manigault-Bryant 175), many Latin American feminists consider Catholicism, being linked with Spanish colonialism as a strategy to subdue societies, to play a negative role in reading Afro-Latinas' bodies and sexuality in more positive and emancipatory ways.[7]

Xiomara lines up with these Afro-Latinas who take a critical view of Catholic patriarchal discourse. Several poems in the novel convey Xiomara's rejection towards this patriarchal discourse of Catholicism. In "God" (Acevedo 14), she complains about how the holy trinity doesn't "include the mother;" in "During Communion" (Acevedo 56-7) about God giving her life, but not allowing her to live it the way she wanted to; and in "Church Mass" (Acevedo 58-9) about how girls should be passive and submissive as she is told to wait and obey. In an attempt to show her disagreement with the Catholic

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[6] "PornHub", "Xvideos", "Let me jerk", "SpankBang" or "Thumbzilla" are examples of pornographic webpages where videos using the tag "AfroLatina" or "Black Latina" can be found.
[7] The Afro-Latina hip-hop artists Krudas Cubensi denounce in "Mi Cuerpo es Mío" the Catholic control over their bodies and sexuality: "Saquen sus rosarios de nuestros ovarios, saquen sus doctrinas de nuestras vaginas" (take your rosaries out of our ovaries, take your doctrines out of our vaginas).

doctrines she entitles one of her poems "Talking Church," as an irreverent allusion to the expression "talking shit" (Acevedo 132). In "Church Mass" (Acevedo 58-9) Xiomara is also very critical with the racist discourse of Catholicism, and especially with the intersection of racism and sexism within the Church:

> When I'm told
> To wait. To stop. To obey.
> When I'm told not to be to like
> Delilah. Lot's Wife. Eve.
> When the only girl I'm supposed to be
> was an impregnated virgin
> who was probably scared shitless.
> When I'm told fear and fire
> are all this life will hold for me.
> When I look around the church
> And none of the depictions of angels
> or Jesus or Mary, not one of the disciples
> look like me: morenita and big and angry (Acevedo 58-9)

Xiomara holds that there is no room for girls in Catholicism, especially for girls like her, who are "*morenita*, big and angry" (Acevedo 59).[8] She complains about the fact none of the religious figures look "*morenita*" like her (Acevedo 59). Indeed, the only biblical character related to Black folks, Ham, the putative father of Africans, was cursed with heritable servitude, which is interpreted to be a justification for slavery (Keaton 165). Beside this, Xiomara wonders what her position within the Church is if Catholicism's only role

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[8] Although "morenita" literally means "little tanned or brown girl," Xiomara is phenotypically Black. The reason to call herself "morenita," rather than "Black," as a person like her would be catalogued in the US's "one-drop" racial system, can be found in her roots. In the Dominican Republic, the terms "*morena*" and "*prieto*" are used for dark-skinned Blacks (Cruz-Janzen 171). Not using the term "negro" responds to the discourse of mestizaje that prevails in Latin America and the Caribbean. The black subject is a direct threat to the project of whitening the population through the idea of mestizaje. Mestizaje is central to the "racial democracy thesis," which asserts that Latinos are so racially mixed that they transcend racial discourse. However, this delusional myth of racial mixture and racial sameness do not exempt Black and indigenous Latinos from racial discrimination. Furthermore, mestizaje dismisses centuries of African legacy and black political mobilization against racial injustices and inequalities in Latin America and the Caribbean. For further information, please read "Ni de aquí, ni de allá": Garífuna Subjectivities and the Politics of Diasporic Belonging (Paul Joseph López Oro).

available for women is to be an "impregnated virgin" (Acevedo 59). Since she is Black, she cannot perform the virginal role because blackness is associated with hypersexuality, and consequently, with "fear and fire", that is, with hellish sin and blame (Acevedo 59). As Zamora holds, because of blackness there no such thing as innocence granted for Black Dominican girls, who are always thought as "willful" ("Black Latina Girlhood Poetics of the Body" 2). By using the word "impregnated" rather than "pregnant" Xiomara points again to the role of passive recipients that women are assigned within the Catholic faith.

However, Xiomara cannot renounce the Catholic appropriation of her body so easily. Catholicism, being part of the Dominican identity, is closely linked to her community. As Alma Itzé Flores claims, for Latinx in the US the ties to religion are cultural (196). This same poem we are referring to, "Church Mass" (Acevedo 58-9), starts by portraying the Latino atmosphere of the Mass: "the church ladies singing hymns to merengue rhythms" and "Father Sean's mangled Spanish sermons." In this way, leaving Church also implies losing a space of community and fellowship. Furthermore, this decision is not understood as a personal option, but as a betrayal and confrontational act to community standards of living. Thus, Xiomara is in a space of negotiation between the connection to her roots and community and the distance she wants to take from specific aspects of it which are oppressive, such as the racist and patriarchal discourse of the Catholic Church.

Xiomara's refusal of religion will not only defy her community, but her devoted mother in particular. Although Xiomara is surrounded by a Catholic community, it is her mother's duty to bring her up in the light of religion. Under patriarchy, it is women's role to raise children according to established values since motherhood does not only reproduce individuals, but also dominant systems (Spillers 465-76). It is especially when migrating that women have the role of culture bearers. Migrating women feel the responsibility of introducing her roots to her daughters; consequently, women become a synonym of tradition (Giró Miranda I). In fact, Altagracia is the impersonation of traditional Dominican Catholicism as her name points out. She is named after the Virgin of Altagracia, the Patron of the Dominican Republic. The symbolism of her name ties Altagracia to Dominican tradition and to Catholic models of femininity. On the other hand, Xiomara's name which means "who is ready for war," highlights her identity as someone who challenges the status quo.

Although Xiomara disagrees with Catholic practices and discourses, it is very difficult to expel Catholicism from her life considering that it is very much linked to her community, and especially to her mother. It is indeed through Altagracia's teachings that Catholicism often appropriates Xiomara's body in a symbolic way. The poem entitled "the most impactful day of your life" about Xiomara's first period is a good example of it (Acevedo 39-40):

> Threw away the box of tampons, saying they were for cueros.
> That she would buy me pads. Said eleven was too young.
> That she would pray on my behalf.
> I didn't understand what she was saying.
> But I stopped crying. I licked at my split lip.
> I prayed for the bleeding to stop. (Acevedo 40)

In this poem, Altagracia relates tampons with "cueros" (Dominican word for "bitches") since she connects them with deflowering, and according to the Catholic doctrine, a woman must be a virgin until marriage (Acevedo 39). After Altagracia's reprimand, Xiomara feels the Catholic blame and wishes "for the bleeding to stop" (Acevedo 40). Again, the body seems to be the one to blame, rather than the social constructions that negatively affect it. This is just an example of how difficult Xiomara's puberty has been since her body starts showing what her Catholic mother considers to be sources of temptation and sin, and consequently of guilt. Indeed, Altagracia tells Xiomara that she would have to pray "extra," so her body did not get her into trouble (Acevedo 151). All Catholics have to pray, but Xiomara having a racialized gendered body has to pray "extra," so her curves do not cause her problems. By saying "so my body didn't get me into trouble" it can be seen how her mother reinforces the patriarchal disassociation of subjectivity and body, since in that sentence that Xiomara reports from her mother, her body and herself are two separate identities: "my body" and ""me" (Acevedo 151).

Altagracia's dissociative goals go further when she tries to disembody desire from her daughter's developing body by forbidding her to date anyone. In this way, Xiomara has to keep her relationship with Aman, her classmate, from her mother. However, when Altagracia finds out, Xiomara is punished physically —standing on her knees in front of their home altar while the floor is covered in rice (Acevedo 198-9)— and psychologically —no phone, no leisure time, etc. By dragging Xiomara to her altar of the Virgin, Altagracia

establishes the Virgin as the pure female model that Xiomara must look at. By punishing her in this way, Xiomara claims that her mother and Church turn into "dirty" what it "feels so good" (Acevedo 131). Indeed, in this poem, "Fingers" (Acevedo 131), Xiomara confesses the shame and guilt that she feels for the pleasure she can find in her own body, as a consequence of the negative associations that female desire has within Catholicism and patriarchy. Desire and sexuality are always a matter of others, for other's consumption through the male gaze or the Catholic sacrament of marriage, and for others to judge her, like her mother or other girls' rumors.

Nevertheless, Altagracia's rigid attitude might not only be read as a vehicle for dominant and oppressive discourses. Altagracia's concerns about Xiomara's body and relationships could also respond to high hopes and overprotection. Elaine Kaplan claims that Black mothers felt cheated when, after many self-sacrifices, their daughters do not experience social uplift (52). Altagracia wants to see her highest self-sacrifice, abandoning her country, turned into a better future for her daughter. In the poem "Diplomas" Altagracia tells Xiomara that she has not come to the US for her to be a teenage mother, but for her to have a degree: "You think I came to this country for this? So you can carry a diploma in your belly but never a degree?" (Acevedo 204). Altagracia envisions higher education as a way to make her daughter's life better and knows that teenage pregnancy could stop Xiomara from reaching that goal. On the other hand, some Black mothers are overprotective to ensure the survival of their kids (Collins "Black Women and Motherhood"183-184). Being aware of the patriarchal and racist narratives against Black female bodies, Altagracia might just want to protect her daughter. Thus, she might not be necessarily blaming Xiomara's body as the cause of possible abuses, but warning Xiomara of the cultural implications of it.

III. BODY AND SUBJECTIVY RECLAIMED

Agency is often conceptualized as a "capacity" or "property" of agents, a formulation that locates agency within individual entities as an immanent potential. However, drawing from Paul Kockelman's study on agency, this paper understands agency as a social and interactional phenomenon, that is, a work in progress (375-401). As a bildungsroman of a diasporic and transnational person, Xiomara's story is not about the subject being, but about the making of the subject. Xiomara's agency and subjectivity are indeed a work in

progress that she needs to negotiate since being a racialized and gendered person they are not taken for granted. However, she finally overcomes objectification through corporeal practices such as embodied discourse, performance, and sexual desire. In this way and taking into account that activism is defined as the engagement in a particular sphere of activity to bring about political or social change, this paper holds that these embodied practices are forms of corporeal activism as they achieve the goal of reclaiming both her subjectivity and body from dominant racist and sexist discourses. Thus, conceptions around the body are reversed. The body is neither the one to blame, nor something to be protected from. It is precisely through the body that an integrative self is accomplished.

In "The Last Fifteen-Year-Old" (Acevedo 151) and "Wants" (Acevedo 146), Xiomara narrates her self-evolution regarding desire. In the past, her body was hyper-sexualized and she was considered "willful," but she did not show any sign of sexual libido. Lines like "boys have wanted to kiss me, and back then I didn't want to kiss them" again show this dissociation between her sexualized body and her non-sexual agency (Acevedo 151). However, once she meets Aman, who does not like her for her body as she was afraid all men would do, Xiomara wants Aman's "fingerprints all over," and "some of these things [men want to do to her body] done" (Acevedo 151, 146). Quotations like these ones and other instances of agency, such as being the one to decide when to have intercourse with Aman, point to Xiomara's recently acquired position as subject rather than as an object of desire. By claiming her own desire, she manages to disassociate her body from external lust. In this way, her embodied desire is not something that she has to be ashamed of, but grateful for, as it enables Xiomara to reclaim both her body and subjectivity. With this narrative, Acevedo lines up with scholar and writer Audre Lorde, also American with Afro-Caribbean ascendence, who in "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" already talked about the political dimensions of the erotic, and consequently how it must be embraced as a site for activism and social change.

Desire becomes especially political when it is represented. By writing about her desire, Xiomara challenges the existing dominant narratives of hypersexuality. One might think that talking about desire reinforces these hyper-sexual narratives and stereotypes. Indeed, the cult of secrecy —dissemblance strategies to dismantle the dominant negative discourses around Black women— was believed by some Black women to be the only way to achieve

respectability (Hine 915). Altagracia's own version of the cult of secrecy, what happens "in house stays in house," dissuades Xiomara from being personal in her poems (Acevedo 344). However, although the "politics of respectability" have maximized Black women's opportunities in a racist and misogynist society, this rhetoric of survival also functions as a tactic of surveillance and control that restricts agency, impedes self-representation, and reinscribes systems of power (White and Dobris 171-86, Durham et al 721-737). Therefore, scholars, such as Audre Lorde with essays such as "Transforming Silence into Language and Action" or books like *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, have moved away from respectability and have claimed that only through self-representation can dominant discourses be combated.

　　　Acevedo also lines up with this turn to representation as *The Poet X* clearly shows that this ideology of dissemblance is not effective. In "The Last Fifteen-Year-Old" (Acevedo 151), Xiomara narrates how her initial strategy of self-imposed invisibility by "hiding in big sweaters and in hard silence" did not work as her body kept being "unhide-able" and sexualized. Instead, *The Poet X* proves that representation techniques are a source of corporal and agency reclamation. As opposed to her mother and the female roles she introduces to Xiomara, such as the Virgin and saints, Xiomara finds other women that encourage her to practice self-representation. One of them is her English teacher, Ms. Galiano, who urges her to join the poetry club and write about herself, disregarding dissemblance:

> How can I say things like that in front of strangers?
> In house stays in house, right?
> "Wrong" Ms. Galiano tells me.
> She tells me words give people permission
> To be their fullest self. (Acevedo 344).

As Rachel Quinn holds, Xiomara uses the internet "as a bridge for transnational relations," since on the net she discovers slam poets and singers that, as well as Ms. Galiano, serve her as inspiration to combat the cult of secrecy, such as the also Afro-Caribbean artist Nicki Minaj. Xiomara dedicates these artists a poem entitled "Asylum" (Acevedo 82-83) to show that they are indeed her own sanctuary as she can relate better to them than to the White Virgin and angels, but especially, she writes a poem to Nicki Minaj and the celebration she does in her songs of her curves and sexuality.

Although Xiomara claims that Minaj has been criticized for being "overly sexual," Xiomara recognizes this to be a "persona" to rewrite Black women's sexuality and bodily representations, and draws from their example by representing her recently reclaimed sexuality and celebration of her body in her poems (Acevedo 180).[9] Indeed, the first poems in which Xiomara celebrates her "bubble butt" is named after Nicky Minaj and Beyoncé's song "Feeling Myself" (Acevedo 92).

Thanks to these alternative female models that Xiomara includes in her Black female genealogy, she realizes that she needs to create alternative self-images in order to challenge the dominant assumptions that appropriate her body. Remaining in silence does not make bodies "acultural" objects. Narratives must be contested by other narratives. In this way, self-representation can redefine patriarchal and racist cultural constructions, or at least, expel them from Afro-Latinas' own cultural representations. As Lorde says, "If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive" ("Learning From the 60s" 657). Indeed, in this second part of the novel —which is being dealt with in this section of the paper, and in which Xiomara is not only older, but also more empowered— her voice silences the stereotypes of Afro-Latinas that she previously echoed in her poems. It is her own voice the one that emerges now in her writing, rather than reporting other people's sentences as she did in the first half of the novel. Thus, Xiomara inscribes herself in the long tradition of Black women that, according to Bennett and Dickerson, have restored their bodies and subject positions through language (9).

Xiomara does not only "write the body," that is, writes about her body and its sexuality in order to challenge dominant discourses and move from an objectified position to a position of full subjectivity; but she also writes through the body to make a full reclamation of it by showing that a corporeal epistemology and art

[9] Nicki Minaj's performances have been indeed very polemic. Scholars such as Dines claims that "the image of Nicki Minaj, caged, in chains [in the "Anaconda" music video], displaying, and singing about her prominent buttocks in no way differs from the 19th-century display of Sarah Baartman, the South African woman known as Hottentot Venus, who, due to her large buttocks, was exhibited as a freak in show attractions in 19th-century Europe. On the other hand, scholars like Janelle Hobson and Nash seek to get over the "Hottentot Venus reading strategy" of Black women's bodies by considering the agency of these women regarding their identity, image, and sexuality in mass media and pop culture (141-78, 53).

are possible.[10] In Western epistemological traditions, sensuality and bodies have often been considered distractions to be overcome in order to attain true knowledge. However, several decolonial and feminist scholars have denounced this expulsion of bodies from epistemology. The Chicanas authors Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga (1987) have coined the term "theory of the flesh," and Afro-Latin scholars such as Frantz Fanon (1967), Jacqui Alexander (2006), Lorgia García Peña (2007), and Omaris Zamora (2013 have also defended corporal knowledge politics in which the body is interpreted as an embodied archive.[11] It would not make sense to write about racism and patriarchy, oppressions that these women feel due to and though their bodies, and not doing it through them.

In "Holding a Poem in the Body" (Acevedo 79) Xiomara proves wrong this Western separation of mind and body that links the mind and reason with higher faculties and the body with wild instincts by claiming that her poem comes from and is memorized by her body. Indeed, it could be said that Xiomara's body (re)members since by becoming a site for knowledge, discourse and memory, her body ceases to be mere set of objectified members to be transformed into an instrument of subjectivity. Xiomara uses the metaphor of a puzzle to explain her journey from objectification to self-affirmation and integrity. Her body used to be fragmented (butt, boobs, mouth), as the pieces of a puzzle. However, by making the body a site of artistic production, as the creation of a puzzle is, she can put all her pieces together and build an integral body and self that is able to have an embodied discourse.

> Tonight after my shower
> Instead of staring at the parts of myself
> I want to puzzle-piece into something else,
> I watch my mouth memorize one of my poems (Acevedo 79)

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[10] "Write the body" is a concept that the post-structuralist French feminists (Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva) coined to express that writing about one's own body is a tool for women to return to the bodies which have been confiscated from them in patriarchal societies (Judith Still "French Feminist Criticism and Writing the Body").

[11] For further information on corporal epistemology, please read *Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality* (Ramón Grosfoguel) and *(Trance)formations of an AfroLatina: Embodied Archives of Blackness and Womanhood in Transnational Dominican Women's Narratives* (Omaris Zamora).

Thanks to poetry, the body is reclaimed from dominant discourses. It is no longer about the textuality of Xiomara's body, that is, her body as a tabula rasa or passive bearer, a recipient of meaning for dominant racial and gender discursive regimes, but rather about the embodied discourse of her texts as Xiomara produces meaning and knowledge from the experiences she obtains through her body. In this way, the biblical passage that entitles the second section in which *The Poet X* is divided —"the word was made flesh"— is reversed. Through embodied discourse, the word was not made flesh, but the flesh was made word.

This is just one of the examples in which writing is presented in opposition to religion. Not only do the poetry club run by Ms. Galiano and the confirmation class take place at the same time, but while Catholicism means listening to commands, writing involves articulating her own voice. Besides this, writing gives Xiomara what religion was supposed to. It does not only provide her a way to spirituality and reflection, but also a community, which is formed by the poetry club and the Nuyorican café where she recites her slam poetry. In fact, Xiomara claims that words "connect people" and "build community" (Acevedo 287). Xiomara chooses her own way to spirituality and community, rather than accepting what religion and family impose upon her. Furthermore, writing grants Xiomara a place to be beyond the church —the Nuyorican café and the club. Finding a place is a key aspect of slam poetry for Xiomara, as Afro-Latinx communities in the US have been linked to displacement due to their double diasporic heritage and the current gentrification they are experiencing in cities, as Acevedo shows in one of her poems: "the neighborhood had changed, that there were no more Latino families and the *bodegas* and *sastrería* were all closed down" (Acevedo 127).

Xiomara does not only write her poems, but recites them in the Nuyorican café. Slam poetry links Xiomara to her African roots as orality occupies a central position in African tradition. However, it is the performative component of slam poetry, in the sense that the body is in use, what takes Xiomara's embodied discourse to the next level adding extra value to slam poetry as a tool for reclaiming her body. Performing just feels the right approach to embodied poetry. As writing through the body seems logical because it is the site from where the world is experienced, it makes even more sense to perform what is written through the body. As Moraga says, "my writings have

always had bodies and as such are best rendered through the physical space of staging" (36).

Apart from being the best way to render embodied discourse, performance allows the re-appropriation of bodies for different reasons. In the first place, performance stresses presence. Both Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Gail Lewis believe that performativity reminds us of hereness, fleshy and rooted presence (96, 4). This is important to stand up again for embodied discourse and knowledge, as Xiomara does in "Holding a Poem in the Body" (Acevedo 79). Versus a dominant detached epistemology which claims that universality is precisely achieved through an incorporeal and delocalized subject, decolonial and feminist critics embrace the geopolitics of knowledge and discourse and claim that the stand-points (such as an ethnic, racialized and gendered identities and bodies) from which knowledge and discourse are produced should not be erased in favor of a hypothetical universality that does not include a diverse range of perspectives. The clearly present dimension of performativity stands up for a corporeal and rooted knowledge and discourse, that implies a reappropriation of the body and of subaltern subjectivities.

The power of performance is such that the scholar Melissa Blanco Borelli coined the word "hip(g)nosis" to refer to the feminist corporeal tactic of performing that Afro-Latins can engage with in order to challenge the objectification of Black women bodies by demonstrating that Black women's bodies are a primary site of knowledge production (gnosis), and I would add, of art (6). It is precisely the power of performance to dismantle bodies' objectification what constitutes the second use of slam poetry. According to Latinx and Black scholars, performing is the transgressive act through which the same bodies that were supposed to be possessed, fragmented and objectified by others in different forms (physically, culturally) are reclaimed for self-affirmation (Moïse 146, Brown 32, Brooks 41-70, Escoda-Agustí 291, Jacobs 49). Xiomara's body is no longer a sexual object, but a tool for her empowering and embodied art. Indeed, Xiomara confesses that she "could get addicted to" this new type of attention on the stage, as there her body is not an object, but a discursive and performative instrument that finally "feel[s] important" in a non-sexual way (Acevedo 259).

As has been said, Xiomara overcomes dislocation by finding the Nuyorican café and the poetry club to go. However, beyond the

physical space of the stage, Xiomara also overcomes another type of displacement that *The Poet X* focuses on, the corporal one. Xiomara's agency and subjectivity were removed from their body as it was constantly objectified and made a bearer of racist and patriarchal dominant discourses of hyper-sexualization. However, through her slam poetry, Xiomara achieves the goal of inhabiting her own body. Her inner self and a body are no longer disassociated. When her body and subjectivity were two separate entities, she wanted to make her body disappear. There are several poems in which she refers to it. For example, in "The Last Fifteen-Year-Old" Xiomara says that she wanted to forget about "this body at all" (151), and in "The Shit and the Fan" Xiomara confesses to have tried "to make all the big of [her] small", refereeing to her big and hyper-visible body (193). However, now that her subjectivity and poetry are embodied and are part of her whole self (body and subjectivity), she embraces her body and let it takes the space it wants, instead of folding it or making it small, as is told in "Holding a Poem in the Body" (Acevedo 79):

> I let my body finally take up all the space it wants.
> I toss my head, and screw up my face,
> And grit my teeth, and smile, and make a fist,
> And every one of my limbs
> Is an actor trying to take the center stage. (Acevedo 79)

IV. CONCLUSION

Racial and patriarchal discourses have dominated the Afro Latina body for centuries as a result of slavery, colonial and neocolonial regimes, capitalism, and oppressive Catholic doctrine. Nevertheless, the body can also be a site of activism, resistance and subversion for Afro-Latinas in the US. What better scenario to reclaim the body from these dominant discourses that the body itself? Xiomara in *The Poet X* shows that embodied practices such as sexual desire and its self-representation through performative and embodied poetry are mechanisms to combat the cultural constructions against Black female bodies that objectify them. Thus, by becoming a desiring and artistic site, the body can be transformed into an instrument of agency and subjectivity for Afro-Latinas.

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BLOWING UP THE NUCLEAR FAMILY: SHIRLEY JACKSON'S QUEER GIRLS IN POSTWAR US CULTURE[1]

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ABSTRACT
This paper intends to analyze the representation of girlhood as a liminal space in three novels by Shirley Jackson: *The Bird's Nest* (1954), *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962). Bearing in mind how nuclear fears and national identity are configured around the ideal of a safe domestic space in US postwar culture, the paper explores cultural anxieties about teenage girls who refuse to conform to normative femininity, following Teresa de Lauretis's conception of women's coming-of-age as "consenting to femininity" (1984). I will argue that Jackson criticizes the rigid possibilities for women at this time, and I will show how her representations of deviant femininity refuse and subvert the discourse of the nuclear family and, therefore, of the nation.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo pretende analizar la representación de la adolescencia femenina como un espacio liminal en tres novelas de Shirley Jackson: *The Bird's Nest* (1954), *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) y *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962). Teniendo en cuenta cómo los temores nucleares y la identidad nacional se configuran en torno al ideal de un espacio doméstico seguro en la cultura estadounidense de la posguerra, el artículo explora las preocupaciones culturales acerca de las adolescentes que se niegan a ajustarse a la feminidad normativa, siguiendo la concepción de Teresa de Lauretis de la madurez femenina como la "aceptación la feminidad" (1984). Se argumentará que Jackson critica las rígidas posibilidades que existían para las mujeres en ese momento, y se demostrará cómo sus representaciones de una feminidad desviada rechazan y subvierten el discurso de la familia nuclear y, por lo tanto, de la nación.

INTRODUCTION

Girls did not always exist. Or, at least, they were not and should not be seen. As Catherine Driscoll contends, the discourse of modern girlhood does not arise until late-nineteenth-century debates about suffrage and industrial society (14). However, at the turn of the twentieth century female adolescence became charged with discourses of crisis and moral panic about cultural anxieties, particularly issues such as sexuality or mass consumption (Driscoll 14).[2] Similarly, during the postwar period, "the adolescent girl also became at this time a standard reference point" of the changing discourse of modernity and the emerging social order as well as an important consumer (Driscoll 18).[3] However, the discourse of the modern girl is traversed by clashing ideals of new, post-industrial nations, as well as by different axes of modernity and tradition, and as such embodies "an index of the problem of the present" (Driscoll 15) in the twentieth-century Western world. Bearing in mind the rapid change in women's roles in society in such a short span of time—from the late Victorian period until after WWII—the teenage

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[2] See for instance Andreas Huyssen's "Mass Culture as Woman" (1987), where he relates mass culture with the "new woman" of the early twentieth-century who began to appear in public urban spaces, in particular department stores and high streets.
[3] See Scrum (2004) and Nash (2006) on the rise of teenage girls' culture.

girl appears as a site of reification, contestation and transformation of cultural practices, sometimes all at once.

As Elizabeth Lunbeck argues, adolescent girlhood posed a threat just by existing since its inception, with the rise of the rights to education and literacy granted to girls, new pink-collar jobs and mass urbanization (188–189). If for a man these "were years of experimenting and searching for an identity, in the case of girls were years in which she was to submerge, rather than free, her yearnings for independence, years in which she was to reconcile herself to her dependence on men and the inevitability of marriage. They were years best avoided altogether" (Lunbeck 189). Thus, if for a man adolescence means a transition period between childhood and adulthood, where he is to gain the skills and independence that will allow him to make a living for himself and his family, in a woman adolescence would mean accepting that she will never become fully independent—and will go instead from being a daughter to being a mother and a wife. The girl becomes at once a marker of modernity and its dangers, which, according to the socio-scientific imagination included sexual depravity and an excess of worldliness (DeLuzio 139–140), putting at risk the ideal of the family.

Shirley Jackson's characters are often single young women, like eighteen-year-old Merricat in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962); or not quite grown women: twenty-three-year-old Elizabeth in *The Bird's Nest* (1954) and thirty-two-year-old Eleanor Vance in *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). These characters could be considered girls within the definition of girlhood as a liminal period: they have not yet achieved female maturity, that is, the protagonists of these novels have not followed through with the heterosexual love plot and have not yet become mothers. As such, they are presented as "social misfits" (Carpenter "Domestic Comedy" 145), whom society will try to force to perform normative femininity. These characters metaphorically "blow up" the nuclear family by disentangling its complex power dynamics and unveiling abuse from parents and supposedly care figures—including medical authorities—putting at danger the unity of the community. The girls' refusal to "consent to femininity," following Teresa de Lauretis (133), sets in motion a series of mechanism of control, punishment and ultimate alienation from society. In other words, girls are asked to subject themselves to the performance of normative femininity, following Judith Butler's idea of gender as a regulatory practice of identity (1990), that is, undergoing

the heterosexual love plot, reproducing the family and thus, the nation, in order to belong to society.

Further, Jackson's "queer girls" are pathologized and put under medical treatment in order to be "cured," as in the case of Elizabeth and Eleanor. This goes hand in hand with medical theories of the period, which were strongly influenced by psychoanalysis (Scull 2014) as well as by essentializing biologist theories wary of female independence. Thus, it was believed that deviation from a normative performance of gender might lead to sexual autonomy— even in adult women (DeLuzio 138).[4] The fear that the female adolescent could disrupt the social fabric through a dismemberment of the nuclear family is portrayed as the main motive for the girls' enduring infantilization. Jackson's novels hence evince the familial abuse that leads the characters to search for an identity and a community of care outside the nuclear family, and the punishment they receive for doing so: removing their identity (Elizabeth); being propelled to suicide (Eleanor); or complete isolation, like radioactive waste that may otherwise pollute the community (Merricat).

In a similar vein, the fact that Jackson's fiction was never considered to be "serious" literature because it was often published in women's journals in the 1950s, and that she presented herself as a "housewife writer" (Carpenter, "Domestic Comedy" 143), reinforce the potential of speaking from the margins, if only to rupture them. In fact, Jackson's Gothic undertones have sparked great intrigue. Authors have linked her use of the Gothic mode to the representation of trauma (Nadal 2011), as well as to the exploration of the unconscious (Hattenhauer 2003) or the portrayal of lesbian identity (Lootens 2005). While Jackson's own problematic mother/daughter relationship has heavily impacted academic criticism and scholarship on Jackson's work,[5] I wish to look at how Jackson bestows the most powerless members of US postwar society and its future heirs—daughters—with the power to undermine the core of its foundations.

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[4] Authors such as De Luzio (2007) claim that G. Stanley Hall's foundational study, *Adolescence* (1904), with a Lamarckian background, has deeply influenced the way that contemporary society understands adolescence.
[5] See for instance Rubenstein (1996), Hattenhauer on Jackson's "phallic mothers" (10–11) or the first published biography about Shirley Jackson, Oppenheimer's *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson* (1988).

In this article I will explore how three of Jackson's novels—*The Bird's Nest* (1954), *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962)—portray girlhood as a period that is pathologized when the novels' female protagonists refuse to "consent to femininity" and therefore pose a threat to the national ideal of the nuclear family. In order to carry out my analysis, I will first establish how the metaphor of the nuclear family as nuclear power can be used to understand discourses about national stability, global dominance and gender roles, as well as the dangers that lead to a community's self-destruction. I will then examine how deviant performances of femininity in Jackson's female protagonists are stigmatized, medicalized, and ultimately forced to conform to normative gender roles or otherwise rejected from society. However, I will also argue that the liminality of this age period—between adolescence and maturity—allows the protagonists to subvert the status quo and the discourse of the family and nation, even if little agency is afforded to them. Girls are not only future women—and as such gatekeepers of the symbolic and material reproduction of the nation—, they are not adults yet. This invests girls with a powerful transformative potential to challenge hegemonic discourses about gender, sexuality and the necessary conditions for belonging.

NUCLEAR FEARS: SHELTERING THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

One thing that defined domestic politics in postwar US was the identification between family and the nation, if only a specific type of family. According to Elaine Tyler May, "[a]lthough the nation remained divided along lines of race and class, and only members of the prosperous white middle and working classes had access to the suburban domesticity that represented 'the good life,' family fever swept the nation and affected all Americans" (3). This family is no other than the so-called "nuclear family." Indeed, the use of this term was popularized in 1941, when family units became smaller due to postwar socioeconomic and urban policies promoting life in the suburbs.[6] The term "nuclear family" stems from atomic fission, as "nuclear energy" does: it is the energy provided by the elements of a core unit. In this sense, each of the members in a nuclear family also fulfills a fundamental action: the father is the breadwinner, the

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[6] On the relation between suburbia and the "good life" in postwar US culture, see Jackson (1985).

mother is the consumer and carer of the future individuals of society, children, who are invested, as Lee Edelman argues, with the paramount value of the nation's futurity (6).

Even if this "good life" was not attainable for everyone, this ideal was promoted both inside and outside the nation as if it were so. In the "Kitchen Debate" between the then US Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev at the American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959, they did not actually discuss political ideologies, nuclear weapons, or the economy. Rather,

> Nixon insisted that American superiority in the cold war rested not on weapons, but on the secure, abundant family life of modern suburban homes. In these structures, adorned and worshipped by their inhabitants, women would achieve their glory and men would display their success. Consumerism was not an end in itself; it was the means for achieving individuality, leisure, and upward mobility. (May 21)

Thus, capitalism and national ideals were intrinsically tied to the domestic and private sphere, and "marriage itself symbolized a refuge against danger" (May 103). Further, marriage and the family act as a shelter to provide security in times of uncertainty. The family also protects individuals against the threat of Communism: if men worked enough, America would thrive; if women cared for these men and reproduced and reared the labor force, technological and economic progress was assured.

Although modernity propelled the economy to the point of situating the US at the top of worldwide economic and political powers, there were fears that this advantaged situation would also threaten the domestic realm. As May suggests, "[f]ears of sexual chaos tend to surface during times of crisis and rapid social change" (90). Hence family stability was endorsed to counteract other related dangers, such as the outbreak of a nuclear war. In fact, some scholars connect the dangers of atomic warfare to the destruction of the family. For instance, in 1951 Charles Walter Clarke, a Harvard physician, published an article in the *Journal of Social Hygiene* claiming that "[f]ollowing an atom bomb explosion […] families would become separated and lost from each other in confusion. Supports of normal family and community life would be broken down. […] There would develop among many people, especially youths […] the

reckless psychological state often seen following great disasters"
(Clarke qtd. in May 90). Instead of focusing on the death and
destruction that an atomic bomb could cause, Clarke focused on the
moral and sexual chaos that would ensue the attack—venereal
disease, prostitution, and immorality—which would then cause the
disintegration of society. While Clarke had studied venereal disease
for years and his idea "did not represent mainstream medical
opinion" (May 90), most applauded his ideas when he sent a draft of
the article to medical authorities. The nuclear family, living in idyllic,
consumer-oriented suburbia, encapsulated the new possibilities of
postwar American life, but it also contained the seed of its own
destruction: if any of the members became dysfunctional, the
nucleus would be split and, following the logic of atomic fission, a
chain reaction would start, dismembering society.

In order to avoid this, domesticity became ideologically linked
to the political and economic advancement of the US as a nation in
the global context:

> The modern family would, presumably, tame fears of atomic
> holocaust, and tame women as well. With their new jobs and
> recently acknowledged sexuality, emancipated women outside the
> home might unleash the very forces that would result in a collapse of
> the one institution that seemed to offer protection: the home. For
> women, the rewards offered by marriage, compared to the limited
> opportunities in the public world, made the homemaker role an
> appealing choice. (May 108)

This is why, during the postwar period, ideals of femininity
related to domesticity, care, reproduction and "being-for-others"
become a sort of "being-for the nation" (Ahmed 124), similar to the
way in which the Victorian "Angel-in-the-House" supported the
British empire through her embodiment of purity and the
reproduction of national values in the home. Thus, compulsory
heterosexuality (Rich 1989), marriage and reproduction are closely
linked with the reproduction of the nation, both in a material and in
a symbolic way, through unpaid housework, the breeding of future
citizens and workers, and their upbringing within the socially
established discourses (Fraser 28–30). However, this, in turn, confers
great power upon women within the domestic realm—so much so
that the abandonment of their duties could provoke the downfall of
the institution that most effectively protects and manages citizens:

the family. As Cuordileone argues, the defense against Communism is also linked to a crisis in masculinity and anxieties about women's sexuality and entry into the workforce during WWII (526). Domesticity was then entrusted with the overwhelming task of "containing" deviant femininity as well as Communism.

MULTIPLE PERSONALITY DISORDER, TRAUMA AND ABUSE IN *THE BIRD'S NEST*

The Bird's Nest[7] introduces Elizabeth Richmond, a shy, twenty-three-year-old orphan who lives with her aunt and works at a museum that "allowed of no concealment" (*Nest* 3), like her personality—apparently. When the museum's foundations begin to "sag" (*Nest* 3), Elizabeth's four split personalities will come to the fore, laying bare how her allegedly ideal nuclear family has failed her. In this way, external destruction undoes the structural workings of society, like the nuclear bomb threated to do. However, it is Elizabeth, and not her surroundings, the one who is scrutinized: after her first split takes place, she undergoes psychological treatment with Dr. Wright, where, under hypnosis, three other personalities are revealed. The split is signaled by the shifts in the narrative voice between the four personalities, Dr. Wright, Aunt Morgen and the final "healed" Elizabeth, whose chapter is told by a third person limited omniscient narrator.

Elizabeth Richmond, the outward and plain personality, splits into three more who battle for the control of Elizabeth's body. The second personality that arises is Beth, a sweeter, more compliant version of awake Elizabeth, or Elizabeth's façade of normative femininity and the one that Dr. Wright initially considers worth saving. The two remaining personalities gather Elizabeth's dark secrets and unfeminine misbehavior: Elizabeth's child-like personality, Betsy, is rude, angry and traumatized at the (hinted) sexual abuse she has suffered at the hands of her mother's boyfriend and her mother's enabling of it.[8] Finally, Bess is the ruthless personality, aware of her wealthy inheritance that Aunt Morgen has taken over, and the one who believes to have committed matricide in

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[7] Hereafter *Nest*.
[8] Multiple personality disorder—or dissociative identity disorder, as it currently appears in the *DSM V* (2013)—is a form of PTSD that has been linked to sexual abuse in childhood in current diagnosis (Leys 79).

a fit of rage against her mother. Bess is stuck at two weeks' time after her mother's death, while Betsy seems to have never overcome childhood: though traumatic events are never openly discussed, these blocked memories hinder growth in those personalities, creating instead new, more submissive ones to survive. This and other parallels in the novel prove that Jackson had read Morton Prince's *The Dissociation of Personality: The Hunt For the Real Miss Beauchamp* (1905) before writing *Nest*,[9] since Dr. Wright even quotes Prince at key points of the narrative (*Nest* 58). Dr. Wright is, of course, a parody of Dr. Prince who will try to find "the real Miss Elizabeth Richmond," pathologizing Elizabeth's reaction to her traumatic experience, and will end up fabricating a suitable personality for Elizabeth in postwar America.

Interestingly enough, the narrative never suggests that there was a "whole" Elizabeth who was split in a particular moment and which must be "put together again," unlike Prince and even current theories seem to affirm about people who suffer from multiple personality disorder: "[l]ike Prince, present-day theorists of multiple personality tend to assume the existence of an already-constituted female subject comprised of a functional plurality or hierarchy of component parts to which violence comes entirely from the outside to shatter it into dysfunctional multiplicity" (Leys 79). Ruth Leys explains that this idea may be due to a "normalization of gender roles that represents the female subject as a completely passive victim" (Leys 79). Rather, the multiple splits seem to have happened at different times after traumatic events take place, allowing Elizabeth to dissociate, as each personality is associated with a different memory, and enables a different kind of survival behavior to be performed at the time. However, neither Prince nor Dr. Wright are so much interested in *who* is the original self or *what* caused the split, but rather on who is the most viable one in postwar society.

At first, Dr. Wright considers Beth, Elizabeth's most feminine personality, to be the most adaptive one to postwar women's roles; so much so that the doctor even thinks of himself "as setting free a captive princess" from the other Elizabeths (*Nest* 53), and imagines himself "much in the manner of a knight [...] who, in the course of bringing this true princess home, has no longer any fear, but only a great weariness, when confronted in sight of the castle towers by a

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[9] There is archival evidence in Jackson's letters for this assertion (Caminero-Santangelo 57).

great dragon to slay" (*Nest* 56). In fact, Dr. Wright makes romantic advances to Beth, presumably based on his knowledge of her rich inheritance (*Nest* 46), in order to "restore" Elizabeth's dysfunctional family: from being young, single, and living with her aunt, to starting a new family with also single Dr. Wright. But later he finds Beth too weak for not being able to fight off the other undesirable personalities: "too weak to remain consistently loyal" (*Nest* 146), that is, loyal to the project of the nuclear family and the nation. Thus, Dr. Wright sets off to build a new personality to his taste, "much like a Frankenstein with all the materials for a monster ready at hand" (*Nest* 143), contradicting his previous theories.

Yet the fact that Betsy's sexual abuse at the hands of her mother's boyfriend never comes to light during therapy signals both the failure of Dr. Wright's treatment—fulfilling Betsy's prophecy of nicknaming him Dr. Wrong (*Nest* 55)—and the impossibility of speaking up about power abuses within the nuclear family. Dr. Wright in fact takes advantage of his institutional power as he tries to tries to "right" and "write"[10] Elizabeth through his invasive means, full of sexual innuendos:

> My problem was, specifically, to get back through the pipe to where the obstruction was, and clear it away. Although the figure of speech is highly distasteful to one as timid of tight places as myself, the only way in which I might accomplish this removal is by going myself (through hypnosis, you will perceive) down the pipe until, the stoppage found, I could attack it with every tool of common sense and clear-sighted recognition. There; I am thankful to be out of my metaphor at last, although I confess I think Thackeray might be proud of me for exploring it so persistently. (*Nest* 43)

In this affirmation, Dr. Wright considers the "cleaning of the pipe"—a metaphor for psychological rape he is aware of—a heroic deed, and he even likens himself to the author a Victorian novel. These novels usually dealt with the purity of the female protagonist or the lack thereof, and the world's attempt to take advantage over the girls' naïveté. However, while in nineteenth century traditional romantic plots women are the ones who marry up by means of sex and beauty, he is the one who covets Elizabeth's money and her ability to restore the nuclear family. In the end, one of the reasons

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[10] For a further analysis on Dr. Wright's role as an author and masculine authority, see Caminero-Santangelo (58–68).

why he fails to see Elizabeth's sexual abuse at the hands of her mother's boyfriend is that he suspects that Elizabeth's problem was her embarrassment at being sexually active: "I strongly suspected that what Miss R. meant by 'embarrassing' was precisely what any untutored young girl might mean by the world" (*Nest* 45). Wright's suspicions about Elizabeth's own sexual desires—probably closer to his own fantasy than to what she may ever articulate—make him overlook Elizabeth's past traumas and render her a perennial child, a practice that we find in Morton Prince's, Sigmund Freud's or Josef Breuer's cases.[11] As Stanley Hall affirmed, along with Freud, adolescent girls would eagerly display "natural sexual impulses" in order to attract boys and men, orienting themselves, in their performance of femininity, "towards marriage and reproduction" (DeLuzio 39).

However, Marta Caminero-Santangelo reads the trend in the appearance of multiple personality disorder in popular culture as a representation of postwar anxieties about an all-too-powerful woman with "contradictory selves that could not coexist in a healthy, 'normal' woman" (53). In this sense, Elizabeth's split personalities show a lack of agency and the impossibility of complying with the expectations of society *and* developing an independent self. As Caminero-Santangelo affirms, "though multiple personality can be understood as a demand for the recognition of subjectivity, it ultimately demonstrates the absolute powerlessness of one who cannot completely claim the 'I' for herself" (58). Dr. Wright's solution, when he realizes that none of the four personalities is normal or desirable enough, is creating a new one—via making Elizabeth forget who she is: "Each life […] asks the devouring of other lives for its own continuance" (*Nest* 254). It is not until Elizabeth declares one summer evening "I am through with remembering" (*Nest* 235) that she is considered "cured." This forgetting includes her traumas and her inheritance money, which would have been fully hers once she turned twenty-five, only a few months before her "recovery" (*Nest* 180). She is now an heiress to her society, as Dr. Wright points out: "[t]he creature at odds with its environment […] must change either its own protective coloration, or shape the world in which it lives" (*Nest* 255). Shaping Elizabeth's own world proves impossible in Jackson's narrative.

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[11] See Rosenzweig (1987) for the possible aetiology of Beauchamp's personality split. For Dora's case, see Bernheimer and Kahane (1985).

Thus, in the final chapter, entitled "The naming of an heiress," Elizabeth is renamed Victoria Morgen after her two corrective, surrogate parents, Dr. Victor Wright and Aunt Morgen. Not only that, but Aunt Morgen's spinsterhood is fixed as a collateral measure: Dr. Wright restores the status quo and makes a dysfunctional family functional—i.e., nuclear—again. In a way, Victoria Morgen becomes the Child that stands for "telos of the social order" (Edelman 11). "You can be her mommy, and I'll be her daddy," suggests Aunt Morgen, ironically subverting parental stereotypes because she is both described as masculine (*Nest* 8) and wealthy. While Victoria Morgen is more compliant than the former four Elizabeths, there is a slight hint of hope when she tells Dr. Wright, "You can't catch me, I'm the gingerbread man [...] Doctor Wrong. [...] I may be worse [...] I've run away from a little old woman and a little old man" (*Nest* 239). Her rebelliousness and her unfeminine new haircut, which she got without her Aunt's permission, could mean that Betsy is somehow still buried within her, and so is the potential to rebel against the social order. After all, Elizabeth resists the sexual and romantic advances of Dr. Wright, and turns into a daughter, not a wife—which might mean that she is still resisting the reproduction of the nation.

THE POLITICS OF UNBELONGING IN *THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE*

The protagonist of *The Haunting of Hill House*,[12] Eleanor Vance, has cared for her controlling, demanding mother all her life, only to find herself as an adult orphaned, single, friendless and penniless, despised and abused by her sister's family.[13] Like Elizabeth in *Nest*, she has not had much adult experience nor love from others. The invitation of Dr. Montague to explore the paranormal energies of an old manor fills Eleanor's head with romantic fantasies of belonging, in a fairy-tale sort of narrative. In the house, Eleanor meets Luke and Theodora, who, together with Dr. Montague and his wife, form a new kind of family, one which resembles the nuclear family but differs from it in queer ways, as Lootens (2005) and Banks (2020) have identified.

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[12] Hereafter *Hill House*.

[13] For instance, her sister's husband will not let Eleanor use their car to go to Hill House, even though Eleanor paid for half of it (*Hill House* 10).

Eleanor, who "had spent so long alone, with no one to love*"
(Hill House* 6), appears to be ready to have a family to belong to and
love, hence "she fixes her fantasies both on Luke and Theodora"
(Lootens 151). The choice will signify whether Eleanor consents to
femininity and to the reproduction of the nation or not. As a
projection of this fantasy, Eleanor singsongs *Twelfth Night*'s phrase
"Journeys end in lovers meeting" like a mantra throughout the novel.
Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night* presents the performativity of
gender and sexuality, as two twins are mistaken for the one of the
opposite sex, making allegedly heterosexual people fall in love with
them. Despite the play's transgression, the ending is restored by the
heterosexual marriage plot, ominously foreshadowing what will
happen in *Hill House*.[14] Ironically, Dr. Montague reads eighteenth
century marriage-plot novels such as *Pamela* (1740) or *Clarissa*
(1748), failing to recognize the parallel between the novels'
protagonists and Eleanor, who is "the same sort of long-abused,
unloved, and morally exacting woman as the heroines he reads
about" (Roberts 88). If Elizabeth had four different personalities
coexisting at once, Eleanor has none; in the manner of the girl, she is
still defining herself through others, as we see in her first encounters
with the other guests in Hill House: "And you are Theodora […]
because I am Eleanor" (*Hill House* 61). According to Catherine
Driscoll, adolescent girls figure "mostly as a marker of immature and
malleable identity, and as a publicly preeminent image of
desirability" (2). These reciprocal definitions also allow for the
creation of new personas: the first night, the guests invent theatrical
characters for each of them as a whimsical game (*Hill House* 61–62).
However, these identities will become fixed and normative, which will
lead to Eleanor no longer being recognized as part of the family of
Hill House.

In Theodora, Eleanor finds an equal companion for the first
time. They self-describe as girls in a "boarding school" (*Hill House*
45), that is, a place for girls' development surrounded by sameness
where they can explore their identity.[15] According to Banks,
lesbianism was portrayed in the 1950s "as erotic continuation of
friendships between young girls" and "was central to the way many
young women came to understand their sexual preferences" (179). As

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[14] See Charles (1997) on gender, performance and sexuality in *Twelfth Night*.
[15] For the erotic undertones of the relationship between Eleanor and Theo, see Lootens
(164).

DeLuzio indicates, early twentieth-century scientific theories about normative sexuality claimed that a healthy sexuality in adolescent females included a "homosexual" period that girls would grow out of when heterosexuality was established (172). In fact, Theo is ambivalent towards Eleanor: when Eleanor proposes that they go and live together when they leave the house, escaping the nuclear family, Theo refuses. Theo also flirts effortlessly with both Eleanor and Luke, playfully exploring the possibilities of her sexuality in a way that only adolescence—broadly understood as not being an adult woman yet—allows. However, scientists also warned of the dangers "to the adolescent girl's psychological health if she failed to move on and achieve the developmental goal of heterosexual adjustment" (DeLuzio 172). In this sense, female adolescence becomes the necessary step to transition to normative heterosexuality, but it is also portrayed as a dangerous period of lingering between choices that may be irreversible once they have been made.

On the other hand, scientists did also attempt to define and justify the ways in which coming of age meant something different for men. In particular, endocrinologists charted how sexual hormones impacted bodily and sexual development differently (DeLuzio 173). In *Hill House*, Luke attempts to woo the two girls with the intention of fulfilling the marriage plot—and finding someone to replace the motherly role he lacks (*Hill House* 166). This upfront demand for unpaid labor shocks and upsets Eleanor, since Luke is "the only man [she] ever sat and talked to alone, and [she was] impatient" to meet him, yet she finds that "he is simply not very interesting," and proceeds to tell him to "grow up" by himself (*Hill House* 167). In this way, Eleanor unravels the intricate workings to tame girls into femininity via the fantasy of romantic love and belonging: "I am learning the pathways of the heart, Eleanor thought quite seriously, and then wondered what she could have meant by thinking any such thing" (*Hill House* 164).[16] Even if her emancipatory discourse is constantly undermining itself, she refuses compulsory heterosexuality. In realizing how Luke's courting comes in between she and Theodora, Eleanor defines how the fantasy of romantic love

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[16] On the fantasy of romantic love as a way to tame women into femininity, see Berlant (2008). Since Eleanor reads her mother romance novels, Banks points out that Eleanor's "escape from maternal oppression is also an escape from the romantic narratives that were forced upon her" (175).

and the promise of belonging stand in between a political alliance between women against patriarchy: "she wondered, and the thought was unwelcome, did Theodora know him as well as this?" (*Hill House* 166). Eleanor is well aware that family and society coerce girls into growing into a pre-defined identity that consists of caring for and fulfilling the demands of others. On her journey to Hill House, she encounters a family in a café with a little girl who refuses to drink milk from a cup that is not her own cup of stars, and thinks: "Don't do it [...] insist on your cup of stars; once they have trapped you into being like everyone else you will never see your cup of stars again" (*Hill House* 22). Later, we find that Eleanor used to have one herself, and wishes to get it back in her imaginary adult apartment, where she can live by herself, apart from others (*Hill House* 88), and where she does not have to follow social rules.

Thus, Eleanor's queerness and her refusal to go through with the heterosexual marriage plot brings the haunting of the house upon her: the group expels Eleanor from the "queer family"—now turned nuclear—of Hill House, deciding that "Eleanor has to go back the way she came" (*Hill House* 243). But since Eleanor does not want to leave the house, wishing to live there all alone or with a female companion like Hill House's original owner (*Hill House* 77), she disrupts the logic of nuclear power, replicating the queer female companion of the original owner (also a woman). The owner of Hill House, who left her house to her lesbian partner, broke the male lineage of property inheritance and was considered "a scheming young woman" (*Hill House* 80) because of this. However, Eleanor does not have any right of ownership over the house, and she is shunned from the group as soon as she appears to disturb their newly formed nuclear family by choosing Theo and rejecting Luke. Having nowhere to go, Eleanor ends up committing suicide. Critics such as Rubenstein (1996) and Lootens (2006) point to Eleanor's dominant mother as the source of her suicide; while Banks reads it in parallel with the tragic endings depicted in lesbian pulp novels in the 1950s due to the impossibility of exercising their queer desires (Banks 175). Under this reading, the unfeasibility of fulfilling the promise of the nuclear family, or of finding a queer alternative to which Eleanor can belong to, leads her to put an end to her life.

However, Brittany Roberts sheds light on how "the psychoanalytic model, which privileges human familial relationships and conventional domesticity, has led many critics to take the novel's ambiguously positive ending for a cruel tragedy" (73). Instead,

Roberts aims to reconstruct the novel's complex relationships by claiming that *Hill House* "presents social isolation—perhaps even agoraphobia—not as a tragedy, but as a potential alternative route to female happiness and liberation" (73). In finding a home of her own and a self that she has never been allowed to explore, Eleanor fulfils a satisfactory alternative ending for her Gothic "fairy tale." Already at the beginning of the novel, when Eleanor begins her drive towards Hill House, we are told that she relishes in the journey (*Hill House* 14) and thinks about living alone somewhere (*Hill House* 22). The novel thus evinces how US postwar society rejects a woman who chooses a different path for herself—a woman who wishes to live alone and unmarried, without providing any of the care labor that femininity is bound to give as part of the family. Further, archival evidence shows that Jackson wanted to work on the ever-present haunting "emphasis upon (yippee) togetherness" (Jackson qtd. in Lootens 155) when she wrote *Hill House*. From Jackson's ironic celebratory exclamation, we can infer that she posited belonging as uncanny and disrupting for the self, who is constricted by external impositions. In breaking with the heteronormative fantasy of the heterosexual nuclear family and national belonging, Eleanor achieves a kind of freedom where she is not defined in relation to her place in society. Nevertheless, this alternative fantasy of solitude turns out to be death, which implies that it is impossible for Eleanor to become an adult woman in postwar America.

CARE AND COMMUNITY IN *WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE*

The key role of women in the material and symbolic reproduction of the family, like Elizabeth's in *Nest* and Eleanor's in *Hill House* is also central to *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*,[17] Jackson's last completed novel, where the Blackwood family feeds its assets on the wealth of previous female generations: "as soon as a new Blackwood wife moved in, a place was found for her belongings, and so our house was built up with layers of Blackwood property weighting it, and keeping it steady against the world" (*Castle* 1), even though wealth is transmitted through male lineage. In the Blackwood house we find two sisters, Constance and Merricat, living in isolation

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[17] Hereafter *Castle*.

with their disabled uncle. Their parents and brother died of poisoning, and, although the village accused the elder sister Constance of killing them, the trial was abandoned for lack of proof. Merricat, the youngest sister, is the unreliable narrator, and the reader soon begins to suspect that she was the actual murderer, subverting our expectations for a teenager and stating the danger that girlhood actually entails.

The village, which they visit at times to buy groceries, despises the sisters not only for the murder, but also because of their financial independence, granted by their parents' inherited fortune. As Carpenter argues, "[h]aving vanquished one patriarchy, the women are confronted with another in the form of a village controlled by men, by other fathers" ("Establishment and Preservation" 35). Like the owner of Hill House, their refusal to form a nuclear family endangers the passing of wealth back to society. But soon, cousin Charles comes into their lives to take up the father's place and thus the sisters' fortune—we are told that he in fact looks like their father (*Castle* 57)—similarly to the way that Luke comes between Theo and Eleanor (Banks 174). Charles does not only try to usurp their fortune, but to reproduce the original nuclear family: Constance being the submissive, loving wife, and Merricat the devilish child who will be punished for not consenting to femininity, like she was punished by her parents because "she was a wicked, disobedient child" (*Castle* 34).[18] Under Charles's influence, Constance is lured by the privilege that compulsory heterosexuality involves: belonging to the community, as Charles is accepted by it. Constance begins to think that they "should live like other people," even telling Merricat that she "should have boy friends"; Merricat then notes that "[Constance] began to laugh because she sounded funny even to herself" (*Castle* 82). The fact that Merricat sees this as a "performance" of gender (Butler 1990) that Constance is enacting signals the way that compulsory heterosexuality and femininity are consented to in order to access female maturity and being recognized as part of society.

However, Merricat's refusal to partake into this newly formed nuclear family that will try to tame her into femininity causes the destruction of its foundations. In order to expel Charles from their lives, Merricat sets the house on fire, which will have further

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[18] See Hall (1993), where she argues that Constance and Merricat actually display symptoms of the after-effects of sexual abuse.

consequences: the death of their uncle—their last living male relative, besides from Charles—, the destruction and raiding of the remains of the house by their neighbors, and the sisters' end as women in society. In other words, the sisters' possibility of transitioning to a correct performance of femininity and womanhood comes to an end through Merricat's act: they will never leave the house again, they will have to subsist on their past female relatives' canned food, and they have to give up on marriage, having children, wearing feminine clothes, and rituals such as inviting family friends to their mother's tea room. They will even "have to wear Uncle Julian's clothes" (*Castle* 135), which points to the end of their existence as female members of the community. Before the fire, Merricat rightly notes that her sister "bur[ies] food the way [she] bur[ies] treasure" (*Castle* 42): while Merricat buries the family jewels, connected to their relatives' dowries, so as not to attract more covetous strangers, Constance and previous generations of Blackwood women stock up on what will feed the sisters for a lifetime. Thus, money is rendered irrelevant in this new economy of care; and food, which was hinted at as an expression of love[19]— Merricat's punishment was often being sent to bed without dinner (*Castle* 94)—now becomes the currency for this new order: even the scared neighbors leave food as offerings to keep them at bay (*Castle* 139). Preservation and self-preservation are implied to be "the opposite of reproduction" (Banks 182), the way of not giving up their resources further down the male line. Thus, through the fire—that is, the symbolic destruction of their past and of the patriarchal order— the sisters give up both patriarchy and capitalism.

The sisters are then transformed into witches in the town's lore: a neighbor claims that "[t]hey hate little boys *and* little girls. The difference is, they *eat* the little girls" (*Castle* 141). In other words, the village "contains" the sisters out of the fear that they may transform little girls into women like *them*, as this consumption is again linked to nurture and the transformation of the economy and society. As Stanley Hall affirmed in his 1904 study on adolescence, "girls everywhere shared a singular biological destiny, which could be ignored by themselves or their communities only at great biological, psychological, and social peril" (DeLuzio, 205). Edelman's idea of the child as the future of the nation (2004), and especially of little girls

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[19] See Ingram and Mullins (2018) and Muñoz González (2018) for an exploration of the role of food in *Castle*.

as both future and reproducers of the nation, is embedded here, as the sisters may threaten the development of those girls into normative femininity and thus into the nuclear family. However, there are still gender roles in the small family formed by Merricat and Constance: Constance takes up the role of the mother who feeds, cares for and protects Merricat, while the latter has freed herself from the constraints of femininity. Merricat even romanticized Constance and "thought [she] was a fairy princess" when she was younger (Castle 19). Emily Banks points out that *Castle* and *Hill House* aim at the construction of a queer future and "in addition to complicating Edelman's concept of queer anti-futurity with her visions for an antinormative future, Jackson pushes against it by conceiving of alternative ways to collect, preserve, and produce that deviate from both heteronormative and capitalist standards" (181). However, while it is clear that Merricat rejects the maternal role, for she smashes a milk pitcher after Constance expresses her desire to go outside (*Castle* 27),[20] Constance never has the chance to leave this role, perhaps because she has already "consented to femininity" and cannot escape this rationality any longer, or because of the ambivalence and lack of referents that complicate this kind of queer relationship, as we saw in the case of Eleanor and Theodora.

Although Merricat claims that "[they] are so happy" (Jackson, *Castle* 146), it is only her voice that we get to hear, so we might think that another form of oppression occurs, one where structures of power and gender roles are established between the sisters: Merricat mimics her tyrannical father; Constance is the caring Blackwood mother whose legacy will never be passed on. Thus, this new order is reminiscent of the old one, as though the remnants of the nuclear family were still haunting them in their confinement. As Wallace contends, the fact that the ending "restores equilibrium in the manner of traditional narrative might render [the story] [...] traditional" (185). Although Wallace problematizes Merricat's behavior as a response to challenging patriarchal structures, he admits that Merricat is "oddly empowering, a warped model of what can [...] be achieved once one claims one's own desires and forges an identity accordingly" (187). Thus, Merricat's ending might be a happy one, in the fairy-tale sense of restoring the roles Merricat and Constance had at the beginning of the novel, offering the sisters the

[20] Both Banks (178) and Rubenstein (318) point at the connection between milk and the rejection or acceptance of the maternal.

ability to live isolated from the rest of the world in their own familial structure, but Constance's silence is revealing of her lack of options within and without the family.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that Shirley Jackson's novels posit girlhood as a threat to US postwar society if girls refuse to perform normative femininity, following Butler's (1990) idea of gender as a performance, where the hierarchical relation between the binary genders is sustained by compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1985). In this sense, girls in Jackson's novels are presented as disruptive elements which hinder the nuclear family from successfully establishing itself, or which may blow it up, as in the case of Merricat, who kills her parents and brother first and then removes cousin Charles and his expectations of marrying Constance from the house. The role of women in passing down their wealth and material legacy is also emphasized: for instance, Elizabeth in *Nest* has her four personalities erased and a new one created so that Dr. Wright and Aunt Morgen can get hold of her inheritance. Finally, Eleanor's queer leanings towards Theo threaten the new family at Hill House. All three protagonists end up refusing the heterosexual marriage plot and, therefore, their destiny—if they succeed in not "consenting to femininity" (de Lauretis 133). However, their identities are put at risk and are virtually annihilated. Like Elizabeth or Eleanor before their demise, they are infantilized; like Constance and Merricat, they are forever estranged from society. Likewise, belonging to a community is portrayed as crucial to survive, but also as life-threatening. The fixed roles of the nuclear family endanger its own stability, as anyone deviating from them in the slightest is considered to be a menace. Thus, these roles emphasize the fragile structure of the postwar nuclear family. Deviating girls must then be coerced into fitting back again into their assigned role, or otherwise eliminated lest they scatter these ideas around. Both the family and medical institutions are shown to be abusive, and since girls are perpetually rendered powerless—for becoming an adult woman means, following de Lauretis, accepting one's subordinate place in society—, Jackson's texts imply that it is not possible to belong to postwar US society as a woman who does not wish to "consent to femininity."

Elizabeth, Eleanor and Merricat give up belonging to society after trying to be reoriented towards compulsory heterosexuality, normative femininity and the reproduction of the nation. Since they still have not crossed the threshold that turns them into women, they can renegotiate and create new spaces to exist outside the norm. These attempts are not proven fruitful—except, perhaps, in Merricat's case, to an extent, which in turn reproduces the nuclear family within her own confined house—for the main characters all end up losing agency and even their own lives. Nevertheless, their narratives question the given status quo and suggest the possibility of a different social order where girls are allowed to develop their own identity outside of gender mandates. However, "the destruction of the current world and the possibility of discovering something new" may go together (Banks 184). As Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman affirm, "negativity signifies a resistance to or undoing of the stabilizing frameworks of coherence imposed on thought and lived experience" (xii). In undoing the coherence of the postwar nuclear family and resisting the reproduction of the nation, Jackson sheds light on how patriarchal rationality is entangled in the formation of female subjectivity and advocates for new forms of living.

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PERFORMATIVE SUBJECTHOODS: LESBIAN REPRESENTATIONS IN SPLIT BRITCHES' *BELLE REPRIEVE*

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ABSTRACT
Emerging postmodern theories of gender and sexuality frame the terms in which society has understood these concepts in an evolutionary way throughout history. The last century has witnessed the radical changes carried out mainly by feminist and LGTB movements. On the other hand, the theater, a subversive space where it is possible to experiment with different forms of subjecthood and communication, has been the laboratory in which it has been attempted to give a plastic form to these new currents of thought. In this sense, the work of Split Britches is remarkable for the innovative ways of bringing the abject to the political forefront. From the lesbian body to drag representation, *Belle Reprieve* (1991) is developed under the *queer* premise to dismantle heteropatriarchal hegemony and the binary gender system.

RESUMEN
Las emergentes teorías postmodernas del género y la sexualidad enmarcan los términos en los que la sociedad ha entendido estos conceptos de manera evolutiva a lo largo de la historia. El siglo pasado ha sido testigo de los cambios más o menos radicales llevados a cabo principalmente por los movimientos feministas y LGBT. Por otra parte, el teatro, un espacio subversivo donde es

posible experimentar con diferentes formas de subjetividad y de comunicación, ha sido el laboratorio desde el que se ha tratado de dar una forma plástica a estas nuevas corrientes de pensamiento. En este sentido, la obra de Split Britches es destacable por las novedosas formas de traer lo abyecto a un primer plano político. Desde el cuerpo lesbiano hasta la representación drag, *Belle Reprieve* (1991) es desarrollada bajo la premisa queer, con el fin de desmantelar la hegemonía heteropatriarcal y el sistema binario de género.

THE POLITICAL DISCOURSES OF THE BODY: GENDER AND SEXUALITY

It was already in 1949 when Simone de Beauvoir's statement "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (274) was largely disseminated among theorists of feminism and other cultural studies. De Beauvoir laid the foundations for the continual questioning of the category 'woman' and allowed other philosophers to continue the research on the incongruence of biological assertions and the effects of discourse upon sex and gender identity. After much debate throughout decades, Monique Wittig in *The Straight Mind* continues challenging the role of women and their position in society by declaring that women's oppression is based on history and biological arguments. She considers sex and gender as political categories that define one's role in society, so against this thought, she claims that "there is no nature in society" (13). However, and this may be Wittig's Achilles heel, she proposes to exit the category 'woman' in order to enter that of 'lesbian'. This poses two problematic ideas. First, she is falling into the same contradiction by making the category of 'lesbian' a natural one instead of a social construct like the rest of labels. Second, Wittig presupposes the inherent subversion of the category of 'lesbian' as a political instrument that may disrupt the heterosexual matrix. More recently, Judith Butler, in a critique to the former philosopher, brings some new light to gender and sex considerations from a postmodern and poststructuralist point of view. In her opinion, it would be a mistake to construct a lesbian/gay identity "through the same exclusionary means, as if the excluded were not, precisely through its exclusion, always presupposed" (*Gender Trouble* 163).

To comprehend the construction of the subject, it is

interesting to attend to Jacques Lacan's theory of subject formation through the mirror reflection of the Other. From a psychoanalytical perspective, Lacan believes that it is only through the recognition in a mirror that an infant is able to recognize himself/herself and this would lead to the symbolic structure and formation of his/her subjectivity. He supports the vision of the subject where the figure of the Other is essential to the formation of identity structures. In his own words:

> What I have called the mirror stage is interesting in that it manifests the affective dynamism by which the subject originally identifies himself with the visual Gestalt of his own body: in relation to the still very profound lack of co-ordination of his own motility, it represents an ideal unity, a salutary imago. (15)

This is, according to Lacan, how ego subjectivity is created in the early years of an infant's life, while the reflected image posits a dilemma for the infant because this image is recognized as part of himself/herself but also as some external part; some other he/she is unable to recognize but where desire starts, as it is the other's desire as well. This thought leads Lacan to believe that the infant has got the capacity to form his/her subjectivity—although fictional—through agency. In his own words:

> [...] this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject. (2)

Nonetheless, Lacan is presupposing here a subject pre-existing social conventions, which means that the subject is pre-formed independently and outside social conventions and norms. On the contrary, the American philosopher Judith Butler, far from considering the subject as a pre-existing entity, believes that it is developed under the law of institutions, discourses, and practices, arguing that the mirror stage described by Lacan coincides with the infant's entry to the symbolic order of language, so it is actually language itself and the laws derived from it the aspects that contour the politics of the body. Similar to the critique to Foucault, the problem for Butler is that Lacan is assuming a kind of materiality prior to signification and form.

For this reason, many critics have seen a kind of "death of the subject" in Butler's idea (Salih 11) which becomes the appropriate site for reconstructing the category of the subject and thus, the appropriate site for subverting existing power structures. This supposed 'death' is not a literal one but a sort of decomposition of the subject that makes it possible to reconstruct it from a strengthened position. This transformation takes place as soon as the subject attempts to overcome its bodily limits by desiring the Other. As Butler states:

> [...] what desire wants is the Other, where the Other is understood as its generalized object. What desire also wants is the Other's desire, where the Other is conceived as a subject of desire. This last formulation involves the grammar of the genitive, and it suggests that the Other's desire becomes the model for the subject's desire. [...] I desire what the Other desires (a third object), but that object belongs to the Other, and not to me; this lack, instituted through prohibition, is the foundation of my desire. (*Undoing Gender* 137-8)

The Other here becomes the target of prohibition, this is, the subject longs to become the other inner self that has been repressed. As a result of this prohibition, sex as much as gender are the results of the taboo against homosexuality. In this way, gender could be considered a choice, a fictive category that can be disrupted and altered as it has been constructed by discourse and the law. It is then clear enough that the role of gender acts as a way of masquerade, a repetition of patterns that have been commonly assimilated through their practices. This is where the debates about drag performances, cross-dressing acts, and femme/butch role-playing take part as they have been harshly criticized even in feminist circles because of their exaggerated imitation of masculinity and/or femininity. However, it is precisely this exaggeration which "reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (*GT* 137). In other words, drag performances evince the falseness and possible imitation of naturalized forms of behavior rooted in heterosexual male/female subjects and they cause a disorder that attempts to reveal the performativity of gender. What is more, the repetition of cultural gestures and behaviors often fails and, "in that failure, open possibilities for re-signifying the terms of violation against their violating aims." (*Bodies That Matter* 124). This is where Butler criticizes Lacan for addressing the body

before the symbolic world because even before being born, one has probably already entered the symbolic world of language by being assigned a fixed and immutable sex and gender and, with these labels, all the subsequent cultural implications. This is where drag performances become relevant in relation to Butler's theory of the performative:

> Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (*GT* 173)

Butler's notion of subject formation through language derives in part from J. L. Austin's linguistic theory in his work *How To Do Things With Words*[1] and, apart from her critique on Austin's work, Butlerian ideas go beyond the materiality of words and speeches, transcending any tangible aspect of subjectivity. Based on Austin's relation between discourse and the subject's formation, Judith Butler suggests the inability to set up a

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[1] Originally published in 1962, Austin focuses on what he calls *constatives* and *performatives*. In disagreement with the traditional ideas that utterances can merely be used to describe "some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', which it must do either truly or falsely" (1), the author distinguishes between these two notions to develop his thought. On the one hand, *constative* utterances define those statements that seem to merely describe a true or false statement, and these are accomplished or neglected according to their trueness/falseness. On the other hand, *performative* utterances are not dependent upon their true or false nature but are more related to an action that is carried out through words. Straightforwardly, what is said has a clear effect and an implicit intention, and then, issuing a *performative* utterance is not about describing but rather about doing something. As Austin outlines: "[...] the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as, or as 'just', saying something." (5). In this context, it is clear enough that when one says something, it is not just describing a state or an event but is implicitly or explicitly performing an action (or persuading someone else to do some kind of action. Judith Butler disagrees with the idea suggested in Austin's work where the speech is solely formed by the utterer since the subject and thus, the speech one might produce is not designed in solitude but is the result of a learned discourse through the words we have been exposed to. In her own words: "We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do." (*Excitable Speech* 8).

coherent line among the different categories of sex, gender, and sexuality. Instead, being largely influenced by Monique Wittig's idea of the straight mind as a political institution and regime as well as by Adrienne Rich and her concept of both compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence, Butler develops the idea of gender as "the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality" (*GT* 31). In this case, the formation of the subject is nothing but a non-material substance that has been overexposed to continuous doses of binary and heterosexual forces injected through cultural assumptions and its discourses. Identity is, then, created under this unavoidable pressure that attempts to create a homogeneous and unidirectional way of being.

Furthermore, Butlerian postmodern ideas go further in the attempt to compare the imitation of gender to drag performances, a concept that helps her to deconstruct the notion of an original identity. As she notes: "the original [is] nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original." (*GT* 31). From this point of view, being heterosexual is no longer perpetuated as the normal nor the homosexual as the perverted, in so much as gender falls under the presupposition of its capacity of performance. Instead, both gender and sexuality become ways of cultural applications that have been somehow imposed by the heterosexual regime and we, as individuals, have the capacity to deconstruct them in terms of their ontology. To put it simply, cross-dressing, drag, and butch/femme performances can be metaphorically used in order to provide displaced forms of subjecthood with a space to safely perform their true nature while supplying them with the opportunity to become agents of subversive modes of subjecthood. However, it becomes compulsory not only to dispute whether all drag is subversive in terms of deconstructing and/or destabilizing the sex and gender hierarchy and the constraints they certainly impose on every subject through discourse, but also to discuss, if this is to be true, what are the processes and requirements by which these practices are feasible, especially with regard to postmodern theater and performances.

RE-APPROPRIATING THE STAGE: STRATEGIES FOR PERFORMING SUBVERSIVE THEATER

Taking as background the Brechtian concept of political theater, performance itself should not be considered only a form of entertainment but also an act of resistance, denunciation, and rebellion. Despite the many varied definitions of political theater among theorists, it seems unavoidable to recall as a summary the very much disputed statement of "the personal is political." Popularized during the second wave of feminism and mainly developed by 1969 Carol Hanisch's essay "The Personal is Political," this idea gives some hints about the purposes of political theater.

In the need to agitate the stagnant and conservative theater, production from the early nineties was influenced by the prior work of playwrights such as Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator. They led their performances towards the creation of new practices and strategies that allow the audience's active involvement with the play in order to provide spectators with the space and instruments to prompt critical reflection. Both playwrights promoted new forms of representation, and whereas Brecht evolved towards new forms of dramatic experience, Piscator employed strategies such as *agitprop*, this is, the use of political propaganda such as slogans and/or pictures to arouse in the spectator the necessity to gain political awareness. This style made it possible to reach a wide mass of people and to provide them with a closer and more realistic image of society. Involving the audience in the action, the appeal to social revolt, the bare stage, the direct approach to the audience, the destruction of the 'fourth wall', the detachment of character-performer and the short format of these plays are only some of the characteristics that are still being developed in postmodern performances.

Making theater a subversive space attempts not only to subvert and deconstruct gender ontology but also to betray traditional definitions of theater. In this sense, the postmodern ideas flowering in the sixties would eventually bring notions that oppose standardized approaches of making theater. Indeed, it came with the concept of "Re-writing all the familiar things in new

terms and thus proposing modifications, new ideal perspectives, a reshuffling of canonical feelings and values." (Jameson xiv). Hence, it must be understood that postmodernism developed as a reaction against the high modern culture of modernism and as such, the boundaries between high culture and the so-called mass or commercial culture were demolished in favor of more overt and boundless forms of expression where the subject was no longer alienated but rather fragmented, distorted, even disappeared and impossible to categorize. However, following a postmodern theory of the performance does not guarantee the subversion of canonical concepts and for this reason, it is crucial to distinguish between those elements that make something subversive and those that repeat and consolidate heteropatriarchal hierarchies.

In the field of the subversive, Sue-Ellen Case has made great contributions by acknowledging many modes of subversion that should assist with the task of reconstructing the dialectics of power. As she observes during her research of the butch/femme lesbian bar culture of the seventies, there is a crucial necessity for denaturalizing political categories that affect the personal and thus, the way identities are considered within society. She notices how femme lesbians were not considered under the label of 'lesbian' because their appearance did not fit the standard image of the feminine, so denaturalizing the ontological feature of gender categories must be seen an assignment urgent to embrace. As she suggests, this should co-occur with the inversion of political terminology so as to confuse power relationships (58). In this regard, it seems transcendental to be aware of the importance of re-appropriating those terms that have been used as instruments to stifle and reduce minorities to exclusionary groups and to re-invent them, yet to achieve this aim it is indispensable to question and challenge ontological statuses as this act "may constitute a means of successful revolt" (Salih 135).

It may still seem confusing and even dangerous to talk about subversion by itself, as not everything that apparently disrupts standards can be taken as subversive. This is the point where drag performances and the concepts of parody and irony conflate into the attempt of gender deconstruction. Following the definition given by Linda Hutcheon, who defines parody as a process of coding-decoding where the speaker has to infer a second meaning, she believes that parody cannot be understood without irony if it is to be successfully subversive and vice versa.

In her own terms:

> Whether parody is intended as subversive of established canons or as a conservative force [...] the original text, in either case the reader has to decode it as *parody* for the intention to be fully realized. [sic.] (93).

Hence, one concept cannot exist without the other, and it is essential that the decoder understands the contextual background of the message that the encoder is attempting to transmit implicitly. Otherwise, if the decoder fails at the task of identifying this covert information, "he or she will merely naturalize it" and thus, "such naturalization would eliminate a significant part of both the form and content of the text" (34). Then, it is evident that the art of parody somehow conveys a complete adherence to the deconstructive process to oppose aesthetic norms because it is indeed in the power of comedy and its effects where subversion seems to be more effective.

In this context, drag performances and butch/femme role-playing have been often used as devices through which the idea of an original (cisheterosexual) identity is parodied as it can be certainly imitated and reproduced. However, it is by means of parody that these acts adhere to their subversive intention. For Butler, "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency" (*GT* 175), and by *contingency* it must be understood the instability of all categories as their nature rests upon fictive productions of being. However, not all drag acts must be understood as subversive, since sometimes they do act as devices that simply repeat patterns of normative behavior. Butler herself admitted that it would not be appropriate to identify parody with subversion, as some performances certainly manifest a reinforcement of stereotypes of cultural hegemony (*GT* 176-77).

To bring some light to this extensive debate, Fredric Jameson clearly distinguishes between the subversive power of pastiche and parody, which are directly linked to the processes of subversion in drag performances. For Jameson, pastiche is, unlike parody, "a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction" (17). This is what he calls *blank parody*, this is, a version of parody bare of any satirical purpose

and thus, with no political purpose at all. This is what happens, for instance, in the very much debated documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1991), where drag queens seem to be under the influence of the same hegemonic conventions they are supposed to dismantle. Instead, there is a rebound effect due to the fact that Livingston, the moviemaker, presented a "highly sensationalized rendering of Latino and black transvestite and transsexual communities" along with an attempt to "glamorize the experience" (Esteban Muñoz 162). This critique to *Paris Is Burning* clarifies the limits of subversion, and it is clear enough that it is in the power to make political criticism that Livingston's movie fails, exhibiting instead the pleasure in the spectacle during elitist and privileged drag balls.

The same problem occurs when considering the debate on camp style. Borrowing features from both the burlesque and *Art nouveau*, camp became in the sixties a new artificial aesthetic that aimed to dismiss the seriousness of assumptions that had been proved to be weak constructions of subjecthood. This background reflects and explains the emergence of camp as the effect of underground culture. Irony, one of the pillars of this aesthetic is essential to show incongruent concepts that have been culturally assumed. Inherent in camp and irony, humor takes the seriousness of an issue and makes it visible from a different perspective, one funny and accessible to everybody. The funny element is attained using irony; this is, by exposing the weak foundations which pre-established notions are based on. This way, the theatricality that camp offers leads one to assume the nature of one's artifice and makes it superlative to the extent of grotesque exaggeration. Although, of course, not all camp is gay; these aesthetics serve each other in order to get support far from the mainstream, and so, camp becomes a strategy that makes it possible to explore one's identity beyond the limits of homogeneous and normative identities as well as to reinvent maleness and femaleness from a parodic point of view. Essentially, what makes drag king performances subversive is addressing the feminine even though their apparent male aesthetic, because, as Esther Newton suggests: "Even one feminine item ruins the integrity of the masculine system; the male loses his caste honor." (101). The fragility of manhood can be hyperbolically exposed by drag kinging, since drag symbolizes the illusion of an original identity as artifice.

Esteban Muñoz's research on the subversive presents a paradigm where identities are never fixed but rather, the effect of a linguistic and cultural process where fixed dispositions shape the essence of an identity. Following Pêcheux, he advocates for a paradigm that is meant to be an explanation for dissident identities of queers, especially queers of color. He poses the idea that the subject is ideologically constructed by three modes of practices. The third stage, where Muñoz sees the opportunity to subvert hegemonic prescriptions, is that of *disidentification*, where the subject, as he states, is "one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, *disidentification* is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology." (11). This instrument of subject formation attempts to denaturalize gender ontologies and provide them with new meanings and forms of being. However, the complete freedom of such a subject should not be assumed, but at least, this thought would provide it with a wider spectrum to identify with and even the means to self-identify from and within a personal axis. As well, as a way of performing subjects, Muñoz regards *disidentification* as the "hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy." (25), and in this transformation, he believes that there is a whole process of coding/decoding where paradigms can be parodically subverted in order to form a strong strategy for resistance.

These processes of *disidentification* can be reflected in Jack Halberstam's analysis of masculine performance in drag king contests. She asserts that the recent rise of these types of performances—due to the gay eclipse during the nineties—drag kings had not learnt yet how to turn masculinity into theater (245), and thus, most drag king shows were just acts of male mimicry, resulting in a reinforcement of patriarchal stereotypes. These drag performances were often a copy of male aesthetics with no sense of theatricality at all, thus deriving into an imitation of a presupposed and original male behavior. On the other hand, when the drag king implies a denaturalization of the assumed original, because their main aim is to dismantle the idea of a true original, then the drag king performance succeeds at being subversive. As Butler argues, "there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic and the real are themselves constituted as effects." (*GT* 186-7). Certainly,

the drag king performances that actually work at their subversive purpose are those that adapt a campy role and those where hyperbole becomes a strategy to enact male sexism and misogyny.

To exemplify the subversive power of drag/cross-dressing performances, it is interesting to consider the American Charles Ludlam and his work on the Theater of the Ridiculous in the 1960s. As a pioneer of postmodern theater, his broad acting style was based on the inclusion of drag queens or cross-dressers in the cast, along with surrealistic stage settings and props that would blur the limits between reality and illusion. Thus, the parodies of consumerist society that Ludlam proposed borrowed items from popular culture and transformed them into devices for mockery and critical thinking. According to Tony Kushner, the Theater of the Ridiculous "[…] became the first openly gay aesthetic, […] the political act that began the modern gay liberation movement" (31). There was a real human need to make visible and appeal to the outrageous, the queer by means of an impact, and a kind of disturbance that makes the audience react. The Theater of the Ridiculous has been recently rescued by queer theory to highlight the way in which the characteristics of Ludlam's notion of theater could be applied to contemporary plays in order to dismiss the idea of gender as an intrinsic and preexisting feature of human existence. After years of research and theatrical experimentation with cross-dressing performances, by 1967 and with the first performance of Ludlam's play *Conquest of the Universe or When Queens Collide,* "Ludlam was beginning to conceive of the Ridiculous as an outrageous celebration of queer identities" (Bottoms 232). This step forward characterized the Ridiculous provoking a shift as to the idea of masculine/feminine oppositions; this is, from cross-dressing performances to the impossibility to take as natural or original any type of factual identity and thus, directing towards the artificial art of drag representation. However, this kind of portrayal of drag would have been impossible unless factors such as parody, irony and even collage and pastiche –all of them used by Ludlam– were the essence and the subversive elements of his plays.

In this context, the work of Split Britches continues the tradition of feminist and queer practices from a postmodern perspective, which entails a shift in the production of the subject as it is now, presented as fragmented, parodied, and deconstructed in order to challenge a world that seems insufficient

for a homogeneous and unique axis of desire. Lesbian bodies started to be considered within feminist discourse during the late seventies and early eighties and thus, a whole new kind of theater emerged that involved feminist and queer discussions. In this case, Split Britches shows the rise and development of women's performance and a deviation in the representation of women's desire, turning from a heterocentric theater to one that is imbued within feminist, racial, and queer issues which are all important to address. During the eighties, a whole range of feminist and lesbian theater showed up with a new aesthetic and addressing unconventional topics that differentiate them from their traditional counterparts. Troupes such as the Five Lesbian Brothers or solos like Carmelita Tropicana took a decisive and active role in the shift of perspective with regards to desire and the construction of the subject, thus creating a new concept of theater where actors base their performances on denouncing oppressive norms and which is *(the new concept)* closely linked to theory "interested in unmasking the system of representation and its ideological alliances." (Forte 4).

UNDOING GENDER: SPLIT BRITCHES' BELLE REPRIEVE (1990)

Split Britches is a theatrical company originally formed in the eighties by Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, and Deb Margolin in New York and mainly performing at the WOW Café. Disenchanted with the ways theoretical discussions were taking through the separation of feminist/queer ideas, Split Britches remained as a project "aimed to create a space for practicing alternatives to that dominant order." (*Split Britches* 12). Placing lesbians in the subject position and allowing them to freely explore their multiple and fluid identities, *Belle Reprieve* (1990) is a deconstruction of Tennessee William's play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Split Britches' performances re-locate and re-signify the lesbian subject "as artifice, through butch-femme role playing." (13), making emphasis of this plasticity by including drag and cross-dressing performers who have not been assigned a fixed gender role. Regarding the background, the work of Split Britches develops in the middle of the Reagan era which highlights the activism related to AIDS or abortion so as to struggle against political conservatism. This way, the austerity of the scenery is contrasted

with a camp style that ridicules any serious attempt of following a coherent plot.

The title of this play is interesting from a linguistic point of view since it stands as a pun—this is, a play on words that uses a similar expression but with a different meaning—on the place where Blanche lost her fortune in the southern fields of Belle Reve. Carrying the symbolic guilt of Blanche's status of *femme fatale*, the title is now subverted in order to signify a shift in the original considerations about the play. The title is then, a re-writing of the family's lost dreams where the sense of blame is mitigated, thus suggesting the lack of guilt for the queer representation.

Concerning the structure, *Belle Reprieve* is divided into two different acts with only some blackouts, which simplifies the general structure of the play at the same time that the script undergoes quantitative modifications with respect to the contents of the original play.

The characters in *Belle Reprieve* play one single role borrowing the literal names of the original play. However, as subjects, their bodies appear to be less sexualized from heteronormative standards and instead, they are allowed to freely 'play' gender and sexual desire. This play also presents the novelty of including drag representation, which is brought to the stage by the troupe Bloolips, a crew formed by professionals of drag queen performance. This strategy arouses in the audience the need of paying constant attention as well as encouraging it to question the authenticity of the identities represented on the stage. It may also serve the play as a method to destabilize the fixed categories of gender.

To start with, the character of Stella is no longer represented as the submissive woman we find in Williams' version but rather represents the values of feminist discourses that challenge the original version of the play. As presented by the script, Stella is "a woman disguised as a woman" (150), this is, she does not get cross-dressed, but the script challenges the trueness of Stella's womanhood, defining the performativity of this category. Also, she defies some of Stanley's butch lesbian behaviors by betraying their inappropriateness and incarnating a powerful role that mocks Stanley's depiction of a wrongly-assumed masculinity. In one of the many arguments between the couple, Stanley says: "I am not your enemy" to which Stella responds: "No... but you have many of the characteristics [...]." (169). Yet, her unconditional love

for Stanley is symbolized by her addiction to Coke soda, a pop element that gives her this feeling of impassivity and leads her to mental paralysis. In other words, to avoid what is actually going on in the play, "Stella, who lives in a state of 'narcoticized tranquility'" (Boxill 77) has borrowed considerably from Blanche's narcissism while she utters feminist discourses at the same time which position her as an activist. While Williams' original play emphasized her capacity for sensuality, in *Belle Reprieve*, Stella notices and acknowledges her role in the play by claiming: "Look, I'm supposed to wander around in a state of narcotized sensuality. That's my part […]". (*Split Britches* 151). This exposes the passive role to which her character was subjected in Williams' play. As the story unfolds, the reader suspects about Stella's ambiguity as she soon begins to give hints of her excessive admiration for her sister Blanche that results in a lesbian and incestuous sexual desire. The lesbian eroticism is made explicit in this fragment, a surmise that is made even more explicit when the two sisters remember their past as cheerleaders and in the excitement of the moment they sing:

> Under the covers, it's you and it's me now / Our pleasure grows, because we are two now / […] Under the covers, our fingers exploring / Those hidden dreams, we've found there is something. (160)

Nevertheless, the fact that the character of Blanche is performed by a drag queen, makes the relationship impossible to categorize in terms of gender. Even further, Stella closes the play leaving an unsolved mystery regarding her identity. In the last scene, when Stanley tells her "[…] you are the only thing we can rely on, because you are at least who you seem to be", Stella answers: "Well, Stanley, there's something I've been meaning to tell you…" (182). This enigma can be solved with the possibility of Stella referring to her lesbianism or instead, she may be suggesting her change of gender identity and thus, using Butler's words, exposing her Other desired identity.

The second character, performed by Peggy Shaw is literally described in the script as "a butch lesbian" (150), a definition that considerably diverges—at some levels—from that male stereotype marked by the iconographic model of Marlon Brando. Stanley is the quintessential representation of tough manliness, brutality,

and violence as masculine nature. His machismo promptly falls and breaks into pieces when he both confronts Stella's challenges and the ridiculous tone of the play that does not allow him to perform a real version of the original play. Despite his strong sense of masculinity, when he becomes a customs agent to search through Blanche's personal stuff, he begins to wear Blanche's clothes just for the joy of it, resulting in an attempt to parody both sides of gender expression. Stanley represents the lesbian body and butch sexual desire, although—similarly to the original play—he has assumed a wrong sense of masculinity. This is evident from the way he talks to both his wife Stella and Blanche: "When are you hens gonna end that conversation?" (160). His imposed superiority is quickly disarmed by his illogical fear of darkness. This could be read as an emotional front built to avoid showing off his real identity that would make him come out of the closet. Instead, he challenges Mitch to wrestle and feels the need to uphold his identity—the same way macho men need to—as if masculinity were something that could be materialized. Of course, this fear of femininity arises from Stanley's subconscious which warns of the loss of his authoritative position and male privileges. It is not until later in Act Two when Stanley makes his first confession, exposing publicly his true nature:

> I feel I'm never safe [...] I was born this way. I didn't learn it at theatre school. I was born butch. I'm so queer I don't even have to talk about it. [...] I'm just thousands of parts of other people all mashed into one body. I am not an original person. I take all these pieces, snatch them off the floor before they get swept under the bed, and I manufacture myself. When I'm saying I fall to pieces, I'm saying Marlon Brando was not there for me. (177)

This acknowledgment of his butch identity is proven here to be both performative and natural. Firstly, it is pure because gender roles are easily learned in the early years of life and they adjust pretty much to the personality of each person. However, they are also—as theorized by Butler—*performative* because they are learned, imitated, and reproduced to the maximum exponent in some cases. Movie star Marlon Brando would be an example of the degree that masculinity can be assumed and represented in a primitive way. In this case, Stanley rallies against the stereotype of masculinity created by the cinematographic industry since it does

not suit lesbian identities and, what is worse, contributes to the exclusion of dissident masculinities and forces lesbians to acquire awry notions of expressing manhood. In addition, this masculinity by being expressed and performed onstage by a lesbian woman, confirms the instability of gender roles and their artificial nature as stereotypes created and portrayed by famous actors such as Marlon Brando. Then, if masculine behaviors can be perfectly imitated and reproduced by a lesbian, this fact probably suggests the ontological uncertainty of masculinity as a human social behavior. This way of reversing roles certainly suits camp purposes when being influenced by the gay sensibility.

The character of Mitch, who is described in the script as "a fairy disguised as a man" (150) and interpreted by Paul Shaw, one of the members of the troupe Bloolips, could be interpreted quite similarly. Mitch, as the antithesis of Stanley, portrays femininity from the stereotype of a gay man. Mitch represents the faggot, the fake male, the sissy boy, and the deconstruction of masculinity in general. Since the beginning of the play, he seems to show a lively interest in the rape scene played by Stanley on Blanche, which gives a clue of his possible sexual interest in Stanley. Again, the existent duality of sexual attractions between male/female and heterosexual/homosexual relations depending on how one reads the role of each character is given, a fact that reinforces the theoretical notions and the need to re-write subjecthood and to bring a multiplicity of characters to the stage, an action that would eventually lead to real inclusion. This way, the arms wrestling scene becomes a reflection on the weakness of gender roles as well as evincing the social construction of the biological idea and the roles associated to each sex/gender. Thus, in the socially-thought macho challenge, Mitch and Stanley become antonyms of the possible ways in which gender can be de-constructed and re-constructed but valid in any case. In this case, Mitch, who is trying to hide his queerness under his businessman's disguise, reveals his fascination for Stanley in a comic way:

> STANLEY: (*challenging him to arm wrestle*) My big pioneer hands all over her rocky mountains.
> MITCH: (*taking the challenge*) All over her livestock and vegetation.
> STANLEY: Her buffalos and prairies.
> MITCH: Her thick forests and golden sunsets.
> STANLEY: All over her stars!

> MITCH: She's in your hands!
> STANLEY: She's in my hands and… yeeaaa… (*he pins Mitch's arms down*)
> MITCH: That's right! Bite me! Bite me! Suck on me… oops.
> STANLEY: (*pulling away from Mitch*) What are you talking about?
> MITCH: Mosquitoes! Biting me, biting me… (162-3)

The poetic language Mitch uses throughout the play recalls Allan Grey, Blanche's suicidal gay husband in Williams' play. Mitch then could be regarded as the personification of this character who died for revealing his true self. For this reason, Mitch does not seem to be as much interested in Blanche as he is in Stanley. As Solomon puts it: "Stanley and Mitch [are] parody paroxysms of male homosocial competition, each topping the other's declarations of blustery masculinity." (153-4). Mitch's heterosexual pretension is dismantled by himself in a monologue that explains his story about rejection. By being rejected he also restrains that queer part of his own nature which leads him to loneliness: "I think it all started to go wrong when I wasn't allowed to be a boy scout. […] Then one day I fell in love with a beautiful young man. […] Soon the boy left. […] Then I was alone." (178).

Blanche is, along with Stanley, the other main character in *Belle Reprieve*, both because of her essential role in the narrative of the play and her gender deconstruction as a drag queen. According to the script, Blanche is described as "a man in a dress" (*Split Britches* 150), this is, the performer Bette Bourne, a famous British actor, drag queen, and activist gets cross-dressed on the stage to play the role of an eccentric woman. Thus, Blanche in this play can be read from multiple perspectives to which it should be added the role of Vivien Leigh who Blanche sometimes believes to embody. This iconic star is—the same way Marlon Brando influenced Stanley's behavior—the highest expression of femininity. Blanche as a drag queen is going to exaggerate in a comic way the attitudes assumed by the extremely stereotyped femininity Vivien Leigh portrays, making a campy version of the movie idol. In the very first intervention, Blanche declares her intentions by reconstructing the renowned phrase: "I've always depended on the strangeness of strangers." (151). For *strangeness* she means *queerness*, something that widens the possible perspectives from the beginning of the play, calling the audiences' attention by alluding to a famous statement that has been re-

written. Throughout the play, the first barrier she encounters is when Stanley becomes a customs agent, her identity is requested, and her luggage is all muddled. Since her passport picture does not correspond to what Blanche has become, she answers: "The information in that document is a convention which allows me to pass in the world without let or hindrance." (153), and by convention she means all the possible stereotypes fixed within the binary gender system.

Blanche's prior subject has died, which has allowed room for her real identity. Yet, the Blanche written here is one who is clever, ironic, and powerful, and who does not tolerate intimidation or abuse, so she makes claims such as: "What right have you to interfere with nature?" (156), in response to Stanley's violent behavior towards the swans in the box. Her relationship with Mitch is—as shown by his little interest in her—comic, almost ridiculous and their only encounter is reduced to a scene where Mitch pulls out snot from Blanche's nose. The subtext of the finger sticking into her nose could be interpreted as a metaphorical sexual penetration between a gay man and a drag queen. This scene was obviously written with touches of what Charles Ludlam understood for Ridiculous Theater, one where the ridiculous parody leads to a more interesting political subtext. Furthermore, Blanche's famous rape scene gets subverted as she demands more realism for the play, yet her claim is both clear and funny: "I don't want to get raped and go crazy. I just wanted to wear a nice frock, and look at the shit they've given me!" (181). The very comic scene wrecks all those initial intentions of the original play and the dramatic tone is substituted by a ridiculous performance, mocking this way Williams' sense of reality that led him to represent a rape on the stage.

The beginning of the play is in every sense a political act like a 'coming out of the closet' as Mitch announces: "At four o'clock in the morning [...] the creatures that never see sunlight come out to make mincemeat" (150). Then Stella plays her part by introducing herself in the form of a metacommentary that makes the audience being aware of the explicit sensuality she represents: "Is there something you want? [...] You want my body. My soul, my food, my bed, my skin, my hands? You want to touch me, hold me, lick me, smell me, eat me, have me?" (150). With this eroticism in her words, Stella is claiming the passive and sexualized role she has in Williams' original play. On the other hand, Blanche makes

a tremendous entrance by leaving the box (a symbol for the closet) where she was hidden and saying: "I've always depended on the strangeness of strangers." (151). With this sudden appearance and re-writing of Blanche's famous utterance and identity, it is being reaffirmed the necessity of exposing one's real nature and assume it most naturally. As well, there is a rapid change in the way the characters talk to each other, since they can easily jump from one narrative into another, resulting in the split of the narrative and the disassociation between the characters and the real performers. This way, they discuss early in the play the need to change the script as a means of deconstructing men's violence on women. Referring to the scene of the rape, they argue:

> MITCH: Isn't there something you can do to stop it happening?
> STELLA: Such as…
> MITCH: Change the script!
> STELLA: Change the script. Ha ha. You want me to do what in these shoes? The script is not the problem. I've changed the script.
> MITCH: It's a start. (151)

The plot keeps the deconstruction through conversations that break up with the traditional narrative including split conversations, ridiculous scenes, jokes, and songs that have been slightly modified on purpose. For instance, while the naked light bulb symbolizes Blanche's fear for revealing her truths, in Belle Reprieve it applies to Stanley's fear for assuming his butch identity as he fears the darkness where he is hidden. As the play develops, when Blanche complains about the surrealistic tone of the play, Stella confirms: "realism works against us" (178), and thus, the separation between reality and fantasy becomes minimized. However, this assumption leads to the issue of the rape scene, which is deftly deconstructed by the troupe with a split conversation between Williams' play and *Belle Reprieve* as can be read in the following fragment:

> BLANCHE: You wouldn't talk this way if you were a real man.
> STANLEY: No, if I was a real man I'd say 'Come to think of it, you wouldn't be so bad to interfere with.
> BLANCHE: And if I were really Blanche I'd say, 'Stay back… don't come near me another step… or I'll…
> STANLEY: You'll what?

> BLANCHE: Something's gonna happen here. It will.
> STANLEY: What are you trying to pull?
> BLANCHE: (*pulling off one of her stiletto-heeled shoes*) I warn you… don't! (180).

The high-heel shoes substitute the glass bottle of the original play since they symbolize the quintessential representation of femininity. Yet this representation is reversed as one in which Blanche appears powerful and active, able to defend herself from Stanley, who tries to rape her. In this case, it is Stella who interrupts the scene: "Gimme that shoe!" (181) and they all start singing the "Pushover" song. Hence, the rape scene is deconstructed with a cross-dressing representation of Blanche that opposes Stanley's assumed realism that works against women's integrity as he says: "If you want to play a woman, the woman in this play gets raped and goes crazy in the end." (181). The drag representation brought by the character of Blanche is then essential to the purpose of deconstruction on both levels: characterization and plot development.

Belle Reprieve, in terms of re-writing, becomes the ultimate representation that deals with issues of gender and sexuality since it queers Williams' violent and heteropatriarchal perspective in *Streetcar*. Through the same weight of irony and jokes, it re-writes social relations, gender assumptions, and traditional perspectives of making theater. For this, the re-writing of the play, its symbols and songs that are popular in the mainstream culture becomes essential and they form part of the subverting strategies planned by Split Britches. Hence, the theater of the ridiculous and the comic and ironic language becomes the perfect scenario for re-appropriating meanings and, with that, the destabilization of ontological unmoving categories of gender.

CONCLUSION

The work of Split Britches has become undoubtedly an inspiration for many contemporary artists who try to challenge standardized notions of making theater and normalized identities. Hence, questioning the origins of such assumptions that have been largely proved to be actual productions of both political discourses and practices is now crucial to dismantle heteropatriarchal structures.

It is the main purpose of this paper to evince the worth of Split Britches' play *Belle Reprieve*, so as to reconsider the importance that off-Broadway non-mainstream plays have in the education of a society in order to transform it. Its value is mainly triggered by the inclusion of much complex theoretical thought that serves theater and the audience with the purpose of resistance and rebellion. This way, *Belle Reprieve* clearly reflects Lacan's theory of the Other from the perspective of Butler's critique. Refusing a pre-existing entity, the play shows how categorical assumptions are formed through language, discourses and practices and thus, they can be subverted in order to make society a more inclusive place. The play attempts to deconstruct unceasingly the political categories of the body in terms of biological sex, gender and sexual desire through cross-dressing/drag devices along with a parody camp that emerges from the incongruity of any attempt to categorize. As well, *Belle Reprieve* fulfills to a large extent the purposes of political theater insofar as it adapts similar techniques such as sober settings and props, the destruction of the fourth wall or a direct communication between performer-audience. This allows critical thinking and a direct reference to the political meaning of everything that is constituted as personal. Hence, by demonstrating the objectification of women in William's play and dismantling the culturally constructed categories, the play reflects the possibility to revolt against the traditional model of subject construction provided by psychoanalysis. This way, desire, which was represented as exclusively male, changes the axis of its representation and in *Belle Reprieve* it is female desire which is proven to be more subversive.

In terms of subversion, Split Britches' play also depicts eloquently the weakness of male power through its obtuse employment of parody, ironic commentaries and sometimes ridiculous scenes that, by embracing failure and non-sense, expose the incongruence of the heteronormative articulations of gender and desire. It is only through an adequate use of comedy, irony and theatrical performance that the audience is able to understand the powerful subversive intention.

Although this play must be understood within its cultural and literary context of the nineties, a continuous review of it is still both plausible and necessary in order to extend its value and relate to it to recent gender theories. As well, it seems still needed

in the present to emphasize the contributive worth that Split Britches offered to society from the literary field by approaching academic thought to mass audiences and introducing then, from the margins of the system, a more open alternative proposal of constructing the postmodern and poststructuralist subject.

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ENVIRONMENT AND THE SOMATIC BODY IN CHERRÍE MORAGA'S *HEROES AND SAINTS* AND EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S *THE FARMING OF BONES*

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ABSTRACT
The paper offers a cross-cultural literary analysis of Chicana Cherríe Moraga's *Heroes and Saints* (1992) and Haitian American Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998) and compares the play and the novel on the basis of their shared thematic link of interwoven environmental and racial violence directed against marginalized people of color. Despite the works' geographically distant contexts—set in the US Southwest and the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, respectively—and the differing collective traumas of genocide the texts dramatize, both narratives foreground the motif of violated nature as a primary critical lens to unveil and critique the ongoing practices of colonialism permeating twentieth-century US and Caribbean politics. The interlocking images of women-of-colors' disfigured bodies and the environmental devastation caused by (post)colonial violence underline the pervasiveness of harm done to both the earth and the somatic body.
RESUMEN
Este artículo ofrece un análisis intercultural de la obra de teatro *Heroes and Saints* (1992) de la chicana Cherríe Moraga y de la novela *The Farming of Bones* (1998) de la haitiano-

americana Edwidge Danticat, así como una comparación de ambas en base a la temática en común sobre violencia medioambiental y racial dirigida a personas de color marginadas. A pesar de la distancia geográfica entre las dos obras, ambientadas, respectivamente, en el Suroeste de Estados Unidos y la isla caribeña de La Española y los distintos traumas colectivos sobre genocidio que los textos escenifican, las dos narraciones tienen como tema central la naturaleza profanada como perspectiva crítica primaria para descubrir y analizar las prácticas colonialistas de la política estadounidense y caribeña del siglo XX. Las imágenes entrelazadas de cuerpos desfigurados de mujeres de color y la devastación medioambiental causada por la violencia (pos)colonial ponen de manifiesto la generalización del daño perpetuado tanto a la tierra como al cuerpo.

LAND, BODY, HISTORY: METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

Cherríe Moraga's *Heroes and Saints* (1992) and Haitian American Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998) are dominated by agricultural landscapes portrayed as memorial sites of actual historical injustice committed against both land and people. Moraga juxtaposes the play's setting of the pesticide poisoned Californian vineyards with somatically dysfunctional and disabled bodies of young children. Apposing images of contaminated bodies and environment, Moraga calls awareness to the environmentally racist politics of the 1980s American corporate businesses that sprayed carcinogenic fertilizers on farmlands cultivated by Mexican American laborers. Similarly, Danticat aligns somatic wounds and infant mortality with images of the Dominican sugarcane plantation to bear testimony to the political genocide of the 1937 Parsley Massacre when more than 20,000 Haitians laboring in Dominican sugarcane fields were ordered to be murdered by Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo.

I argue that the political histories of ethnic and racial violence cannot be disentangled from the materiality of environmental and corporeal harm. The postcolonial exploitation of human and the non-human environment, which is comparable and linkable in the selected narratives, substantiates a postcolonial ecocritical approach that I apply as my central theoretical framework. Concerned with exploring intersections between historical conditions of colonialism

and the environmental modes of subjugating and manipulating flora and fauna, postcolonial ecocriticism is a suitable methodological tool to demonstrate the mutually constitutive view of ecological and historical violence in the selected texts. I examine *Heroes and Saints* and *The Farming of Bones* as postcolonial narratives, which express an underlying political criticism toward the respective twentieth-century histories of social and environmental injustices committed against Chicanas and Haitians. The authors' engagement in a decolonial project to write the politically silenced stories of the corresponding ethnic communities also underscores the categorization of these works as postcolonial literatures.

My analytical framework relies on Western ecocritical scholar Stacy Alaimo's notion of trans-corporeality as expounded in her volume, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010), and Caribbean postcolonial scholar Édouard Glissant's concept of "the aesthetics of rupture" explicated in his seminal works, *Caribbean Discourse* (1989) and *Poetics of Relation* (1990). Alaimo's and Glissant's shared departure point to challenge the nature/culture divide and re-conceptualize the human and non-human worlds as inherently relational highlights a potential dialogic relationship between Alaimo's global ecocritical perspectives and Glissant's regional postcolonial polemics. From an ecocritical point of view, both conceptual frameworks challenge anthropocentrism; the Western perception that nature is devoid of and external to human culture and, thus, the environmental activity of humans has no direct effect on social and cultural processes. As such, Alaimo's and Glissant's notions are proper analytical means to elucidate that the environmental images in the texts are not limited to material, vegetative forms that provide an inert setting to the plot, but unveil their inherent embeddedness in historical realities.

While my underlying methodology is to highlight the dialogue between Alaimo and Glissant, I wish to avoid one of the most frequent pitfalls of contemporary postcolonial ecocriticism and efface the culturally specific understandings of landscapes, and the political subjectivities the particular geopolitics of these landscapes can enable (Huggan and Tiffin 10, DeLoughrey and Handley 28). The landscapes Moraga and Danticat present are nested in diverging cultural mythologies and diverse histories of political violence, which consequently, render different meanings to the physical scars these traumas leave on the protagonists' bodies. To highlight that the political and spiritual origins of ecological issues are always

culturally-anchored, I approach the selected texts through Alaimo's and Glissant's concepts, respectively. I read the poisoned farms in Moraga's play through Alaimo's notion of trans-corporeality, and explore Danticat's novel on the Caribbean colonial legacies of the planation system of slavery via the lens of Glissant's relational view of ecologies and national histories.

TOXIC BODIES AND THE POISONED MOTHERLAND IN *HEROES AND SAINTS*

The toxin-laden, sick bodies of Mexican Americans are pivotal somatic images in *Heroes and Saints*. Moraga's portrayal of the poisoned bodies makes emphatic the reality of pain caused by symptoms of bodily distortions and disability that the chemical substance imposes on the bodies who come into contact with the infected soil and water.

However, toxicity in the play does not remain reduced to its conventional medical understanding and serves as a discursive lens through which Moraga severely critiques the American government's economic exploitation and political oppression of Chicano/a people. Mexican American César Chávez's life-long political activism, his leadership of the Chicano Movement between the 1960s and 1980s, and his fight for Mexican farmworkers' human and labor rights provide the socio-political context of *Heroes and Saints*. Pivotal events in the history of Chicano Movement, including the 1960s grape boycott protests, Chávez's thirty-six-day fast, and the brutal beating of the co-leader of the union for Mexican farmworkers, Dolores Huerta at a press conference are all re-enacted on stage. Raising awareness to Chicano/a farmworkers' plight, the play claims relationship to *El Teatro Campesino*, the grassroot Chicano theatrical tradition emerging in 1965, which draws on the lived, yet, silenced realities of the Chicano farmworker community.

The play's connection to *El Teatro* and its political background of mobilizing the Chicano community to challenge US politics are also evidenced by the fact that Moraga was heavily influenced by the 1986 documentary, *The Wrath of Grapes,* a production by the United Farm Workers of America. The short film served to promote Chávez's 1986 campaign, "Wrath of Grapes," which aimed to expose the environmentally racist politics of the US, and educate the general public about the health risks of pesticides used in corporate-run agricultural food production (Zapata 49). Underlining how environmental injustice figures into the social,

cultural, and economic subjugation of Mexican Americans, the
documentary graphically presents the various sicknesses wreaked
upon the Chicano/a farmworker families, who were exposed to a
disproportionate amount of poisonous insecticides during their daily
labors on the fields. The toxic chemicals infiltrated soil, water,
human skin, and could be traced in the mothers' milk. Due to the
extraordinarily high number of severe birth defects and children's
deaths by leukemia, the American valley town of McFarland was
declared a cancer cluster (Davies 31). Set in the fictional town of
McLaughlin, a Californian agricultural town of San Joaquin Valley,
the play bears testimony to the interconnected forms of social,
political, and environmental injustices that the Mexican American
families of McFarland endured.

Juxtaposing the poisoned body and contaminated land, the
play enacts Alaimo's perception of the toxic body as a conceptual
metaphor of trans-corporeal space in which "the material cannot be
disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic,
political, cultural, scientific, and substantial" (20). The permeability
of the chemical toxin that engenders a thin boundary and close-to-
skin encounter between the soil and the workers underlines the
phenomenological interconnectedness of ill bodies and ill nature.
Moraga's stage instructions for the setting imply this connection:

> The hundreds of miles of soil that surround the lives of Valley
> dwellers should not be confused with land. What was once land has
> become dirt, overworked dirt, over-irrigated dirt, injected with deadly
> doses of chemicals and violated by every manner of ground- and
> back-breaking machinery. The people that work the dirt do not call
> what was once the land their enemy. They remember what land used
> to be and await its second coming. (333)

The exposure of the farmworkers' bodies to the contaminated dirt
elucidates the shared vulnerability of landscape and humans to
economic exploitation and underlies how both people of color and the
soil are rendered exhausted and ill due to the excessively high toxic
load they carry.

The quotation also underscores that the consequences of the
environmentally racist politics of twentieth-century American
agricultural politics far exceed the biopolitical exploitation of
marginalized Latino/as. The chemical poisoning of the vineyards also
violently exploits and allegorically breaks the Chicano/a

community's primordial spiritual tie to the land, which beyond providing labor and food source, also figures as a repository of collective cultural memory. The preservation of the land's memory and its "second coming" (333) in the quotation above allude to Chicano/as' ancestral homeland, Aztlán, which was seized by the American government after the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that officially ended the Mexican-American War (1846–48). Thus, the chemically induced harm, which simultaneously ruptures the ecology and the human body, mirrors Mexican Americans' primary historical wound of land loss and being subsequently viewed by US politics as unwanted border citizens.

Moraga's wheelchair-bound protagonist, the teenager Cerezita Valle—who is a head without body and was born without limbs due to the toxic pollution that affected her mother's womb—epitomizes the interlacing web of environmental, health, gender, and social injustices. Cerezita's chemical-permeated body can be read as a critical site of trans-corporeality. Moraga's stage instructions establish an unusual association between the character's material reality of somatic injury and her more-than-human, spiritual qualities of feminine beauty:

> CEREZITA is a head of human dimension, but one who possesses such dignity of bearing and classical Indian beauty she can, at times, assume nearly religious proportions [...] This image, however, should be contrasted with the very real "humanness" she exhibits on a daily functioning level. (332-33)

This atypical embodiment endows Cere with the ability to straddle the rift between her dispossessed "natural" body and her mestiza Indian cultural identity that legitimates her ancestral tie to the land. Her liminal subjectivity, located in-between the material and spiritual spheres, distinguishes her from the other members of the farmworkers community who are alienated from the poisoned land and, consequently, from their collective cultural identity that bonds them to the soil. Cerezita's simultaneously spiritual and material representation re-signifies her passive, paralyzed body as an active agent in reestablishing the tie between people and land that the chemical injected to the soil severed.

In one of the last scenes of the play, Cerezita figuratively heals the breach engendered by the toxin, and re-members the people and the violated land. At the end of the play, she takes the

initiative to act against the American oppression of her community. Instead of organizing a political protest, Cerezita opts for ritually sacrificing herself in the middle of the fields and lets the toxin-spraying helicopters shoot her from above. Preceding her sacrificial act, during which she personifies the Virgin of Guadalupe, she addresses the people as follows:

> Put your hand inside my wound. Inside the valley of my wound, there is a people. A miracle people. In this pueblito where the valley people live, the river runs red with blood; but they are not afraid because they are used to the color red. It is the same color as the river that runs through their veins, the same color as the sun setting into the sierras, the same color of the pool of liquid they were born into. […] You are the miracle people because today, this day, that red memory will spill out from inside you and flood this valley con coraje. And you will be free. Free to name this land Madre. Madre Tierra … (374)

Correlating the poisoned life blood the valley inhabitants and the soil share, Cerezita enters into a dialogue with the violated environment and reestablishes the connection between Chicano/as and the land as their native motherland. By reconfiguring her bodily difference from a personal to a collective wound that interweaves sick bodies and the toxic environment, Cerezita exemplifies Alaimo's notion of trans-corporeality. At the moment of her speech, she develops a trans-corporeal consciousness of her self by understanding—and making the pueblo people also comprehend—"the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (Alaimo 2). The protagonist's disrupted body, thus, transforms into a decolonial site of social change which—by reinstating the nature-culture dialect the toxin interrupted—gestures toward the liberation of Mexican Americans from postcolonial power systems of subjugation.

The play stages another mode of bodily resistance against the environmentally racist US culture. It represents the quite macabre practice of the public crucifixions of small children who died as a result of the pesticide poisoning. The performative crucifixions of dead babies taking place in the middle of the toxic farmlands further underlines that the agricultural landscape in the play functions not merely as a theatrical backdrop to the Chicano people's plight. The land becomes a politicized geography, as it exposes the histories of racial hierarchies that render Mexican American communities inferior and disposable in the US. I share Linda Margarita

Greenberg's argument on the "pedagogy of crucifixions" (170) with which, according to Greenberg, Moraga's play performs an alternative, corporeal form of resistance against racialized systems of power by reconfiguring the dead as not segregated from, but interacting with the living human and non-human environment (170-171). The indissoluble bond between bodies, history, and nature that Moraga stages resonates with Danticat's postcolonial portrayal of nature as a repository of painful memories related to political histories of collective and personal dispossessions.

SOMATIC WOUNDS, NATURE, AND RACIAL POLITICS IN *THE FARMING OF BONES*

Drawing on interlacing images of violated bodies and soils, Danticat's novel shares with Moraga's play an apprehension of and pointed critique against postcolonial ethno-racial politics, which in the Caribbean context of the novel harks back to the colonial era's "coevolution of dominating nature and human beings through racially hierarchized 'natural Histories'" (Braziel 111). In Danticat's work, the central environmental image of the sugarcane plantation evokes the sixteenth-to-nineteenth-century transatlantic slave trade—the practice of mass-scale transplantation and settlement of enslaved Africans to the Americas—that Glissant identifies as the primary rupture in Caribbean cultural memory. As the postcolonial scholar advances, the slave trade established the foundations of Caribbean history on a pervasive sense of alienation from nature, as the land became associated with forced labor and the black subjects' genocidal subjugation (*Caribbean Discourse* 154). Consequently, the black population's dislocation made impossible for the following generations to "relate [...] a mythological chronology of this land to their knowledge of the country, so nature and culture have not formed a dialectical whole" (63).

In the Introduction to *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Cultur*e, Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey and the co-editors of the volume recognize Western historiography as the main contributor to the dialectical rupture between Caribbean cultural and natural histories (3). To contest the ahistorical approach of Western philosophical thought to Caribbean geographies, the book aligns its postcolonial ecocritical approach to literary texts with Glissant's notion of "the aesthetics of earth." Glissant's concept resides in his perception that the poetic evocation of the natural

environment as a site of historical trauma restores the politically disrupted ties between nature and culture, the environment and the human subject (*Poetics of Relation* 151). As he points out, the memorial engagement with the multiple experiences of ruptures in the Caribbean history are, ambiguously, regenerative; they enable the reconnection with the Caribbean land as a geographic marker of cultural belonging and identity.

Illustrating how historical injustices are mapped on both bodies and landscapes, Danticat's novel conveys Glissant's ultimately affirmative concept of rupture as an aesthetic mode of resistance against the erased link between cultural and natural histories of violence. The novel's title, *The Farming of Bones*, prefigures the underlying interplay of ecocide and genocide as defacing, close-to-skin experiences. On the one hand, the image of "bones" conjures the historical rupture Glissant associates with the Middle Passage, the colonial slave trade route across the Atlantic Ocean, which is scattered with the skeletal remains of numerous captive Africans who did not survive the voyage to the Caribbean islands. On the other hand, the novel is abundant of images depicting how harvesting the sugarcane often causes deep cuts in the skin, which leaves "a map of scars" (Danticat 62) on farmworkers' bodies. Therefore, the bone like sharpness of the agricultural plant serves as a particularly appropriate botanical symbol for Danticat to portray the sugarcane as a daily bodily reminder of black Haitians' marked racial inferiority in the Dominican side of Hispaniola. The title also recalls the 1937 massacre when "many human beings [were] cut down like mere stalks of sugarcane at harvest time" (Wucker qtd. in Hewett 127). This juxtaposition of colonial and postcolonial histories of racial violence is an underlying aspect in both Moraga's and Danticat's works and illustrates the ongoing colonial logic that entangles the domination of land with the physical subjugation of humans.

Danticat's recurrent use of the motif of the sugarcane as an allegorical symbol of Caribbean historical traumas related to cultural dispossession and racial subjugation of blacks reflects Glissant's ecopoetic formulation of rupture as both a thematic and formal feature of the novel. As Glissant argues, due to the violent "ruptures […] that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade" (*Caribbean Discourse* 61), the Caribbean historical consciousness reflects a "tormented chronology," which defies linear progression and, instead, highlights that the traumatic past continuously haunts the present

(65). In the novel, the "tormented chronology" characterizing Caribbean history is expressed through non-linear storytelling. The protagonist, Amabelle Desiré's retrospective narration of her own story is structured as a dialogue between her present and past selves. Presenting a stream of consciousness mode of narration, the chapters alternate between Amabelle's hallucinations and haunting reminiscences of Haiti (the geography signifying her homeland and lost family) and the Dominican Republic, where she works as a domestic servant for a white elite Dominican family. The novel starts with Amabelle assisting her mistress, Señora Valencia, in delivering the twins Rafael and Rosalinda. The abrupt death of the few-days-old infant, Rafael, temporally overlaps with the first day of the new harvest season.

> Just then the cane harvest began: the first moment saw the fires set to clear the fields, singeing the leaves off the cane stalks before they could be chopped down. Clouds of thick white smoke blanketed the sky. The smell of burning soil and molasses invaded the air, dry grass and weeds crackling and shooting sparks, vultures circling low looking for rats and lizards escaping the blaze. (86)

The natural images of death that ominously foreshadow the white Dominican newborn baby's demise mark the end of a human life while, at the same time, indicates the beginning of new cycle in nature, the harvest time of the sugarcane. The interplay of death and birth in this harvest scene illustrates the interaction between "rupture and connection" that Glissant views as inherently embedded in his notion, "the aesthetics of earth" (*Poetics of Relation* 151). The portrayal of the baby boy's death signals an emotionally rupturing and traumatic experience for the family. Yet, in a Glissantian mode, this familial trauma has the potential to reveal the inseparably intertwined issues of race and ecology that are often eroded in Western historical accounts of the Caribbean.

Comparably to Moraga's images of dead children as the politicized locus of the play (Greenberg 164-65), in Danticat's novel Rafael's death is political, and marks the haunting presence of racial hierarchies, which sharply contrast the black Haitians with the white-washed identity of the Dominican elite. However, as Janice Spleth clarifies, "Danticat produces numerous episodes to show that racial identities are far from clear as Haitians are mistaken for Dominicans and vice versa, and Señora Valencia's twin babies

emphatically demonstrate that race, as a category, is highly problematic" (148). The ambiguous racial distinctions that fuel the hatred between Haitians and Dominicans are evidenced by the fact that it is Rafael's twin sister, the bronze-colored Rosalinda, who survives. Her darker skin color, however, constitutes a taboo subject from the very beginning of her birth, which makes her the symbol of the Dominican elite's uncanny fear of being contaminated by "the racial Other," who should be silenced and suppressed. Thus, while the quoted image of the burning sugarcane field seems to underline the sharp geographical (and racial) demarcation line between Senora Valencia's family and the cane cutters, Danticat's depiction of the death of a Dominican child uncovers the ambiguity of this separation and unsettles the normative discourse of rigid racial distinctions.

Interlinking the burning cane with genocidal acts of burning Haitian bodies, the novel expands the metaphoric meaning of the sugarcane bonfire and utilizes it as a poignant metaphor of the Trujillo regime's ethnic cleansing. The suffocating air related to the beginning of the sugarcane harvest haunts a later scene in the novel when, fleeing from the Dominican soldiers, Amabelle tries to cross the Dajabón (Massacre) River, a natural border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Spending a night in the woods hiding from Dominican soldiers, Amabelle recalls the smell of the burning sugar fields, which she now associates with the genocide of her people:

> There was no mistaking the stench toward us. It was the smell of blood sizzling, of flesh melting to the last bone, a bonfire of corpses, like the one the Generalissimo had ordered at the Plaza Colombina to avoid the spreading of disease among the living after the last great hurricane. (181)

The recurring motif of fire that separates human flesh from the bone eerily resonates with "singeing the leaves off the cane stalks" (86) in the initial harvest scene. The analogy between the chopped sugarcane and the somatic bodies stripped to their skeletal bones elucidates an underlying postcolonial ecocritical imagery in Danticat's work which highlights the Dominican government's colonial legacy regarding the racial subjugation of Haitians.

The trope of disability and bodily distortion as metaphors of the oppressed ethnic communities' political paralysis are central motifs in both Moraga's and Danticat's works. In a similar manner to

Moraga's disfigured female protagonist, Danticat foregrounds the Haitian orphan, Amabelle's scarred and disintegrated body as a critical space to make palpably visible the relationship between the rupturing effects of ecological and historical violence in the Caribbean region. At the beginning of the novel, Amabelle is only an observer of the mutilating effects of the economic exploitation mapped on Haitian women's bodies. She takes part in the morning ritual performed by the cane cutters and their relatives who take a bath in the river before starting the daily work. Amabelle observes the women standing around her in the water.

> There were women in the stream who were ancient enough to be our great-grand-mother [...] Among the oldest women, one was missing an ear. Two had lost fingers. One had her right cheekbone cracked in half, the result of a run-away machete in the fields. (61)

Amabelle shares the collective wound these women's disabled bodies signify, as she also becomes the victim of border violence. In her attempt to escape through the Massacre River, Amabelle is seriously beaten up by a Dominican mob. The brutal incident leaves enduring scars on her body: her knees could not bend and her jaw becomes misaligned, which impedes her ability to speak. Taken to a border hospital after suffering severe injuries, Amabelle perceives several truncated bodies around her that she envisions as mutilated trees:

> I was taken past a line of people with burns that had destroyed most of their skin, men and women charred into awkward poses, arms and legs frozen in mid-air, like tree trunks long separated from their branches. (206)

The pervasive images of Haitian victims' somatic injuries and dismemberments reverberate with Glissant's perception of the Caribbean's history as characterized by ruptures and dislocations.

Amabelle, however, reconfigures the intertwined effects of historical and physical rupture the border river signifies when many years after her injury she revisits the river. Lying still in the water, her distorted body establishes a physical contact with the same body of water that carries the collective memories of slaughtered Haitians and her personal traumatic memories regarding the loss of her parents, who drowned in the same river when she was a child. Thus, Danticat aestheticizes the river as a powerful environmental symbol

that merges different temporalities of historical and personal traumas through images of bodily contact.

The encounter of Amabelle's body with the wounding memory of the river toward the end of the novel has a transformative potential. Danticat narrates Amabelle's reconnection with the personal and collective site of trauma as peaceful and soothing. At the end of the novel the river is conveyed as a sanctuary in which Amabelle feels like "cradled by the current", sensing a "gentler embrace" and "relief from the fear of mudslides and blood bubbling out of the riverbed, where it is said the dead add their tears to the river flow" (310). Although Amabelle's re-entering the river does not engender the recuperation of her own body, her bodily contact with the water performatively heals the dialectical rift between nature and culture, past and present, personal and collective wounds. Thus, simultaneously being a victim and the healer of the mutilating effects of historical violence aligns Amabelle with Glissant's postcolonial notion that literature has the power to address the ruptures in Caribbean history by re-membering with and re-writing ecological sites of trauma.

CONCLUSIONS

Portraying distinct ethnic histories of postcolonial violence simultaneously committed against human bodies and the environment, *Heroes and Saints* and *The Farming of Bones* share an ecopoetic sensibility. Both texts foreground ecological and agricultural images as aesthetic strategies of resistance against postcolonial modes of genocide targeting Mexican Americans in the US Southwest, and Haitians in the US Caribbean. Both texts raise awareness to the pervasiveness of human rights violations that continue to affect racially marginalized groups even in the postcolonial era of the twentieth century. Moraga's play stages the American government's chemically induced poisoning that specifically targeted Mexican American vineyards in the 1980s, while Danticat dramatizes the 1930s Dominican regime's systematic political massacre of black Haitian cane cutter communities. The ecological approach applied to the texts—which are interpreted through the critical lens of Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality and Glissant's notion of "the aesthetics of rupture"—reinforces that the somatically dysfunctional, sick, and violently ruptured bodies exposed in both works function as rhizomatic spaces, interlinking

the physical, mental, environmental, and political implications of colonial brutality. Therefore, Moraga's and Danticat's dialogical portrayal of environment and human bodies transcends being merely an aesthetic exercise to unveil historical traumas. In both works the utilization of environments and plants as metaphors of dispossession of land and racial subjugation can be read as a decolonializing "aesthetics of the earth." The distorted bodies of the female protagonists, Cerezita and Amabelle, are particularly instrumental in bringing forth this decolonial dimension of the narratives. Both are endowed with the potential to figuratively re-member the bond between nature and culture, past and present, environment and the somatic body, as well as bridge the ruptures established by the injustices committed against Chicanas and Haitians.

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"THE LONG ROADS TO FORGOTTEN REGRETTED NOSTALGIAS": TRAUMATIC WOUNDS IN THE LETTERS OF ZELDA SAYRE FITZGERALD[1]

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ABSTRACT
When twenty-five-year-old Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald asked her husband Scott Fitzgerald to resume her ballet lessons, he saw no objection to it. Fitzgerald thought the lessons would keep Zelda busy while he focused on his novel *Tender is the Night* (1934). Little did he know then that strenuous dancing rehearsals would lead Zelda to her first mental breakdown. While confined at several mental institutions from 1930 to 1948, Zelda used the epistolary form in an attempt to move from victim to artist. It is through her letters to Scott Fitzgerald that we discover her inner struggles and her longing for a career of her own. This article analyzes a selection of Zelda Fitzgerald's letters in order to determine whether the epistolary form allows Zelda to overcome or perpetuate her traumas while confined at several mental institutions.

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[1] A shorter version of this article was presented at the "14th SAAS Conference The Image and the Word: Interactions between American Literature, Media, Visual Arts and Film," held at the University of Salamanca in April 2019. The research carried out for this article has been funded by the Galician Government ("Programa de axudas á etapa predoutoral" da Xunta de Galicia. Consellería de Cultura, Educación e Ordenación Universitaria). In September 2019, I visited the Princeton Archives, where I had access to the Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald Papers, located at the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections (Firestone Library, Princeton University).

RESUMEN

Cuando con veinticinco años Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald le preguntó a su marido Scott Fitzgerald si podía retomar sus clases de ballet, él no se opuso. Fitzgerald pensó que las clases mantendrían a Zelda ocupada mientras que él se centraba en su novela *Tender Is the Night* (1934). Poco sabía entonces que los ensayos de baile extenuantes llevarían a Zelda a su primera crisis emocional. Mientras estuvo confinada en diferentes instituciones mentales desde 1930 hasta 1948, Zelda utilizó la forma epistolar en su empeño por retratarse como artista en lugar de víctima. A través de sus cartas a Scott Fitzgerald, descubrimos sus luchas interiores y su deseo por una carrera propia. Este artículo analiza una selección de las cartas de Zelda Fitzgerald para determinar si la forma epistolar le permite superar o perpetuar sus traumas mientras está confinada en varias instituciones mentales.

INTRODUCTION

Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald (1900-1948) is still widely known as the mad wife of Jazz Age writer Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940).[2] Zelda's personality as an extravagant and troublesome wife can be traced back to twentieth-century biographies and works on Scott Fitzgerald, which have often described Scott as a victim of his own marriage and have blamed Zelda for his lack of productivity.[3] One of the most well-known detrimental descriptions of Zelda's bad influence on her husband can be found in Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* (1964):

> Zelda was jealous of Scott's work and as we got to know them, this fell into a regular pattern. Scott would resolve not to go on all-night drinking parties and to get some exercise each day and work regularly. He would start to work and as soon as he was working well Zelda would begin complaining about how bored she was and get him off on another drunken party. They would quarrel and then make up and he would sweat out the alcohol on long walks with me, and make up his mind that this time he would really work, and would start off well. Then it would start all over again. (178-79)

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[2] Zelda's biographer Sally Cline has investigated how Zelda has been given different labels both during her lifetime, and after her death in 1948. Cline noticed "how the labels progressed from 'eccentric' to 'mentally disordered' to 'schizophrenic', finally to 'the crazy wife of Scott Fitzgerald'" (5).

[3] See Arthur Mizener's *The Far Side of Paradise: A Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (1951) and Andrew Turnbull's *Scott Fitzgerald* (1962).

Unfortunately, Hemingway's negative description of Zelda as the jealous wife who constantly distracted her famous husband from work has lasted up to our days. Furthermore, contemporary movies such as Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* (2011) or Michael Grandage's *Genius* (2016) present Zelda as a mentally disturbed person without paying attention to her artistic skills. It is through Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald's insightful letters, however, that we discover her own side of the story, her inner psychological traumas, and her unremitting longing for a career of her own. Though Zelda's epistolary productions have been mentioned by biographers and scholars, little in-depth analysis has been published yet.[4] Merely classified as 'love letters,' these writings show Zelda's lifelong traumas, along with her subsequent nostalgic and regretful feelings towards the past.[5] Despite the fact that Zelda also corresponded with friends and relatives, for the sake of conciseness and close analysis, I will exclusively comment on the letters addressed to her husband Scott Fitzgerald. Thus, this article seeks to examine a selection of Zelda Fitzgerald's letters in order to find out whether the epistolary form allows Zelda to overcome or perpetuate her suffering while confined at several mental institutions.

To start with, it should be borne in mind that letters written by women writers have been traditionally neglected, and Zelda's are no exception. The fact that they are still read as 'love letters' underestimates the artistic and meaningful potential of the epistles *per se*. As Elizabeth Goldsmith sustains in the introduction to *Writing the Female Voice*, "the association of women's writing with the love-letter genre has been perhaps the most tenacious of gender-genre connections in the history of literature" (viii). Goldsmith's statement is based on Linda Kauffman's comprehensive work on the epistolary form, titled *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions*. While it is true that the love-letter association comes through in Kauffman's book, she also elaborates on the "suffering and victimization" along with the transformation "from victim[s] to artist[s]"

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[4] See Deborah Pike's *The Subversive Art of Zelda Fitzgerald* (2017). Pike's chapters "Masquerading as Herself" and "Zelda Fitzgerald's Letters from the Asylum" comprise the most extensive analysis of Zelda's correspondence hitherto published.

[5] See Jackson Bryer and Cathy Bark's edition of the letters of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. This edition labelled Scott and Zelda's correspondence as 'love letters': *Dear Scott, Dearest Zelda: The Love Letters of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald* (2002). While it is true that their courtship letters are quite romantic, most letters written after 1930 are full of reproaches, and portray how tumultuous and toxic their marriage has become.

female writers experience when writing letters (26). Although Zelda's pattern of suffering and victimization shows in most letters, she occasionally moves from victim to artist, thus, giving a voice to her artistic and personal self. Drawing on the work of several trauma theorists, I will focus on Zelda's literary discourse in order to explore the healing—or traumatizing—effects of her own words.

Trauma scholars have often drawn their attention to the challenging intersections between trauma and narrative, agreeing on the difficulties to speak the "unspeakable" or narrate the "unnarratable" (Herman 1; Felman and Laub xiii; Whitehead 4). As Judith Herman claims in her work *Trauma and Recovery*, "[t]he conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (1). This contradictory conflict between "telling" and "not telling" is further explained by theorist Dori Laub when he claims that "[t]he act of telling might itself become severely traumatizing", but he later notes that "the 'not telling' of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny" (67; 79). We could then argue that the therapeutic effects of Zelda's letters might vary depending on the language choices she makes, which are undoubtedly conditioned by her husband's and doctors' demands. In this sense, while we find letters written in an assertive and direct style, there are also a great number of them characterized by an apologetic and submissive attitude. As Leigh Gilmore explains, "trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency" (6). The "insufficiency" Gilmore refers to definitely parallels the above-mentioned "unspeakable" quality of trauma. Nonetheless, Gilmore also pays attention to the fact that "those who can tell their stories benefit from the therapeutic balm of words" (7). That is to say, once the "unspeakable" is finally spoken, language leads to liberation, allowing the female writer to move from "helplessness and isolation" to "empowerment and reconnection" (Herman 197). As we will see, Zelda Fitzgerald's empowerment shows in several letters, and it is precisely when she reaches this self-confidence that she is able to narrate her traumatic wounds, leave her isolation behind, and focus on her artistic and personal self. The paper division here follows Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald's traumatic events from pursuing a career in dancing in 1927 to her hospitalizations from 1930 onwards.

ZELDA'S DANCING OBSESSION: THE RE-EDUCATION PROGRAM

"[Zelda] want[s] to have something for herself, be something herself," responded a reluctant Scott Fitzgerald when asked why Zelda Fitzgerald insisted on dancing (qtd. in Milford 149). Scott's statement brings to light Zelda's main reasons to pursue a career in ballet. Zelda, known in the early 1920s as a frivolous flapper with no job prospects in mind, was now willing to turn into a professional ballerina. As early as 1925, Zelda began to realize she did not want to depend on her husband, and wished to have something of her own. Spending periods of time in Paris and the French Riviera in the mid and late 1920s allowed Zelda to get acquainted with some of the most important intellectuals of the time, as well as to make long-lasting friends. She met, for instance, ballerina Olga Koklova (Picasso's wife), and established a strong friendship with Gerald and Sara Murphy, who invited Zelda to a wide range of art exhibitions and performances. According to Zelda's biographer Kendall Taylor, when attending the Ballets Russes, Zelda would go "backstage afterward to meet the dancers and choreographers" (157). No wonder that surrounded by such educated people, Zelda became deeply interested in the arts, and was particularly fascinated by ballet.[6] Between 1925 and 1926, Zelda asked Scott for permission to resume her ballet lessons, and it was thanks to their common friend Gerald Murphy that Zelda was introduced to Madame Egorova, a ballet teacher who had opened her studio in Paris back in 1923.[7]

Although Zelda took several lessons from 1925 to 1926, it was not until 1927 that Zelda—now aged 27—became seriously determined to evolve into a first-rate ballerina. According to Scott Fitzgerald, Zelda's sudden decision to be a premiere ballerina was influenced by Isadora Duncan's death in the fall of 1927:

> Isadora was an extraordinary woman. One in the limelight, one she [Zelda] would like to have been. Isadora did it on her own. It was

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[6] As a teenager, Zelda had already attended ballet lessons in her hometown. She participated in performances held at the Sidney Lanier High School, and at the Montgomery Country Club—both located in Montgomery (Alabama).
[7] Madame Lubov Egorova was one of the most renowned ballet teachers in Paris in the 1920s. As a former Russian princess and ballerina, she was now in charge of training ballerinas for Diaghilev's Ballet Russes. She also taught private and group lessons at her studio in Paris.

> Zelda's insane wish to do the same. Replace Isadora now that she was dead, and outshine me at the same time. (qtd. in Wagner 188)[8]

Not only did Scott affirm that Zelda was willing to replace famous Isadora Duncan, but he also claimed that Zelda wanted to "outshine" him. For a few years now, Zelda's artistic talents had irritated her famous husband, and as Zelda focused on her artistic ambitions, Scott's artistic and personal insecurities increased. Among all Zelda's biographers, only Kendall Taylor goes as far as to claim that Zelda, echoing Scott's own words, suddenly turned to dance right after Duncan's death:

> When news came late that summer of Isadora Duncan's accidental death, Zelda's aspirations shifted toward dance. She was invigorated by the idea that she might replace Duncan as America's premiere dancer. (196)

Thus, once the Fitzgeralds settled down in the United States again, Zelda immediately began attending Catherine Littlefield's lessons in Philadelphia, as Scott writes in a letter to Ernest Hemingway in October 1927: "Zelda is ballet dancing three times a week with the Phila symphony" (Bruccoli 152).[9] Apart from the lessons, Zelda strenuously practiced at home for long hours, playing the same tune over and over again. According to Cline, "she practised to 'The March of the Toy Soldiers', playing the record over and over until Scott was wild with exasperation" (213). Back in 1925, Scott did not object to Zelda's dancing at all. However, from 1927 on, he began to see things in a very different light. Initially thinking Zelda's dancing would allow him more time to focus on his endless novel *Tender Is the Night* (1934), Scott became more distracted than ever. He increased his alcohol consumption, and could not stand Zelda's constant efforts to make ballet the priority and center of her daily life. No time was left now for Zelda's role as a mother and wife, and Scott felt left apart.

The worst was yet to come. Zelda's ballet training got even more intensive when the Fitzgeralds returned to Paris in the Spring of 1928.

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[8] Linda Wagner is quoting from Tony Buttitta's memoir titled *The Lost Summer, A Personal Memoir* (1987).

[9] Catherine Littlefield founded the Philadelphia Ballet Company and directed the Littlefield School of Ballet. She was also a former student of Madame Egorova. See the first-ever-published biography on Catherine Littlefield entitled *Catherine Littlefield: A Life in Dance* (2020).

Under Madame Egorova's instruction, Zelda obsessively practiced for eight hours a day, and she barely ate to keep fit. Furthermore, her daily practice left her exhausted with no time for her husband's drinking and partying demands. Emotionally unstable, Zelda saw ballet as a way to escape the loneliness she felt—and that included her husband. As Taylor maintains, "Zelda's focus on ballet, to the exclusion of everything else, masked the desperate unhappiness she felt being emotionally and physically estranged from Scott" (211). Zelda's dancing routines led her to take lessons not only in Paris, but also in Nice during the summer seasons. Besides, she performed in several recitals in Cannes and Nice, and she even produced a ballet, titled *Evolution* (214).

All these dancing efforts were rewarded in September 1929 when Zelda was offered a solo debut in the San Carlo Opera Ballet Company in Naples; bewilderingly, she rejected it. According to her sister Rosalind, Scott was the one to be blamed since he did not allow her to accept the offer: "[Zelda] told me that she received an offer from one of the Italian Opera companies as a premiere ballerina, but that Scott would not allow her to accept it" (qtd. in Cline 236; Taylor 215). This traumatic decision along with the loneliness Zelda felt led to her withdrawal from social events, and, not surprisingly, to an increasing obsession with ballet lessons. It is also at this time when she started hearing voices. Zelda progressively became more anxious, and, in April 1930, she entered a psychiatric clinic near Paris called Malmaison— this was just one out of the seven mental institutions she was admitted to from 1930 to her dramatic death in 1948. According to a doctor's report at Malmaison when Zelda entered the clinic, she was in a state of anxiety, and begged her doctors to allow her to continue her ballet lessons: "Mrs. Fitzgerald entered on April 23, 1930, in a state of strong anxiety [...] persistently repeating: 'It's dreadful [...] what's to become on me, I must work and I won't be able to [...] let me leave.'"[10] As events turned out, Zelda could not possibly adjust to the routine, and she left the institution some days later to carry on with her dancing. After some time passed and some medical consultations were made, it was decided that Zelda should be hospitalized at Le Rives de Prangins in

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[10] Translated by the author from the French typescript kept in the F. Scott Fitzgerald Papers at Princeton University: "Madame FITZ-GERALD est entrée le 23 Avril 1930, en état d'anxiété vive [...] répétant continuellement: 'C'est épouvantable [...] qu'est-ce que je vais devenir, je dois travailler et je ne pourrais [...] laissez-moi partir.'"

Switzerland, one of the most renowned sanatoriums in Europe at the time.

During her stay at Prangins, Dr. Forel, as well as famous psychiatrist Dr. Bleuler diagnosed Zelda with schizophrenia.[11] They both agreed that Zelda should stop dancing, and stay focused on her treatment. To achieve this goal, Dr. Forel decided to apply a "'re-education program' for Zelda; that is, a program that would direct her toward good mothering, femininity, and the revaluing of marriage and domesticity" (Pike 84). Not only did Scott agree with Dr. Forel's program, but he also reached his own conclusions about the importance of domesticity for Zelda's improvement. In a letter written to Dr. Forel, Scott went as far as suggesting the need to adjust his visits to Zelda's biologic and sexual cycle:

> I believe she needs [...] all you include under the term reeducation. Renewal of full physical relations with husband, a thing to be enormously aided by an actual timing of the visits to the periods just before and just after menstruation, and avoiding visits in the middle of such times or in the exact centre of the interval. (Bruccoli 207)

Nonetheless, Zelda was not concerned about mothering in the slightest, as she made it clear when questioned about the role Scottie played in her life. Zelda told her doctor at Valmont Clinic: "That is done now, I want to do something else" (qtd. in Milford 160; Cline 261).[12] While at Prangins, though, Zelda still hoped to become a famous ballerina and her infatuation led her to beg Scott to ask Egorova whether she was good at dancing or not: "If you could write to Egorova a friendly impersonal note to find out exactly where I stand as a dancer it would be of the greatest help to me" (Bryer and Barks 80). In view of Zelda's obsessive thoughts, Dr. Forel saw the opportunity to trace an evil plan whereby "Scott [asked] Egorova to discourage her pupil, even

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[11] Psychiatrist Paul Eugen Bleuler coined the term 'schizophrenia' in 1908. According to the American Psychiatric Association, "[w]hen schizophrenia is active, symptoms can include delusions, hallucinations, trouble with thinking and concentration, and lack of motivation." Although Zelda suffered from hallucinations, delusions, and lack of motivation, among other symptoms, both her last doctor and art therapist at Highland Hospital (Asheville, North Carolina) firmly believed she had been misdiagnosed. For further information on Zelda's diagnoses and treatments, see Kendall Taylor's and Sally Cline's biographies.
[12] Dr. Trutmann was one of Zelda's doctors at Valmont Clinic (Switzerland)—a hospital specialized in gastrointestinal ailments where Zelda stayed very briefly before moving to Prangins.

if it meant deceiving Zelda" (Cline 272). Scott did not subscribe to Forel's plan; instead, he decided to ask Egorova where Zelda actually stood as a ballet dancer.

In the letter to Egorova in June 1930, Scott included seven questions that might clarify whether Zelda could ever succeed as a ballerina or not. The first one is perhaps the most remarkable of all as it has to do with Scott's ongoing obsession with rating Zelda's talents all the time. He asked whether Zelda could "ever reach the level of a first-rate dancer" (Bruccoli 186). Scott also added that dancing was preventing Zelda from getting better, and that she would not be able to dance as intensively as before. A couple of weeks later, in July 1930, Madame Egorova replied to Scott's letter. Egorova explained that Zelda could perform minor roles and become a great dancer, but would never become a first-rate dancer because she was a late bloomer:

> Zelda will not be able to become a first-rate dancer; she has started too late [...] I am sure that in the Massine ballets, without being a star, Zelda could successfully fulfil important roles [...] I cannot stop repeating that Zelda is likely to become a very good dancer.[13]

Despite Madame Egorova's encouraging words, Zelda became deeply disappointed. The frustration and anxiety caused by Egorova's letter—the woman and dancer she venerated—did little to help improve her mental health.

ZELDA'S CRYING WOUNDS: TRAUMA, NOSTALGIA, AND REGRET

What Zelda's doctors as well as her husband failed to understand was that Zelda's quest for her own artistic voice depended on her artistic skills—be it dancing, writing, or painting. Depriving her of her artistic inclinations did nothing but worsen her condition. In fact, her last psychiatrist believed that Zelda had been misdiagnosed, and argued that "the failure of her psychiatrists was their failure to take her

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[13] Translated by the author from the French typescript located at the F. Scott Fitzgerald Papers (PUL): "Zelda ne pourra pas devenir une danseuse de première classe; elle a commencé trop tard [...] Je suis certaine que dans les ballets Massine, sans en être l'étoile, Zelda pourrait s'acquitter avec succès des rôles importants [...] Je ne puis que répéter que Zelda est susceptible de devenir une très bonne danseuse."

talents seriously" (qtd. in Cline 286).[14] Zelda's artistic frustrations triggered different mental and physical disorders such as the painful eczemas she had to endure for the rest of her life. Thus, during her stay at Prangins, she suffered from eczemas "that covered her face, neck, and shoulders," and this skin reaction became a "warning device" to her psychological distress, which would last until her death (Milford 169 and 177). As Karen Tatum remarks, "not only does eczema cause physical pain [but] it is also frequently accompanied by varieties of anxiety and depression" (3). Zelda herself found the eczema episodes physically and mentally exacerbating. "I would have chosen some other accompaniment for my desequalibrium [*sic*] than this foul eczema," Zelda wrote to Scott in 1930 (Bryer and Barks 91). Hence, the relationship between psychic and physical trauma should not be overlooked since Zelda's eczemas, asthma attacks, and extreme slimness might be associated with a number of traumatic life events such as declining the ballet offer, or her lifelong dependence on her husband.

As a matter of fact, the need to focus on both mental and physical trauma comes from the term 'trauma' itself. According to Cathy Caruth, 'trauma' originally meant "an injury inflicted on a body" whereas "[in] its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud's text, the term trauma [was] understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (3). Sigmund Freud argued that whereas the physical wound could be healed, the psychological wound remained longer, haunting the mind of the person who suffered from traumatic experiences (4). However, in the case of Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald, physical wounds (e.g. eczemas) are not that easy to heal as they are related to her mental illness. Apart from the connection between body and mind, it is also relevant to pay attention to the link between trauma and reality. In Caruth's words, trauma "is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth" (4). Thus, it is in her letters to her husband that Zelda attempts to write down her own truth in order to heal her crying wounds. Yet, she does so in a contradictory manner. Whilst we find letters where Zelda adopts an assertive attitude, there are others where she submissively regrets how much pain she has caused her

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[14] Dr. Irving Pine was Zelda's last psychiatrist at Highland Hospital, where Zelda readmitted herself on several occasions while living with her mother in Montgomery from 1940 to 1948.

husband. In his work "Morning and Melancholia," Sigmund Freud claims that "[t]he woman who loudly pities her husband for being tied to such an incapable wife as herself is really accusing her husband of being incapable" (248). Following Freud's hypothesis, we could conclude that when blaming and reproaching herself, Zelda might be instead blaming Scott for her own suffering.

Whether written in an assertive or passive style, it goes without saying that Zelda's letters allow us to discover her artistic and personal frustrations firsthand. Overall, as Bryer and Barks sustain, there are two recurrent themes in Zelda's correspondence with Scott in the 1930s:

> [T]here are striking consistencies in Zelda's letters, in the form of two outstanding and recurring themes: first, how primary her relationship to Scott was; second, how driven she was, broken at the age of thirty, to find real work for herself—a coherent vocational identity, when her personal identity was so fractured—and a clear sense of purpose amid the chaos of her illness. (78)

Bryer and Barks' assertion needs further elaboration if we are to explore Zelda's traumas. Firstly, her relationship to Scott was "primary" because her doctors encouraged that dependence; Zelda was left with no other options, but to be re-educated into domesticity. Secondly, while it is true that Zelda compulsively insisted on having a vocational job while she was hospitalized, this was not caused by her fractured personal identity since her artistic dreams had been nurtured prior to her mental breakdowns.

One of the most faithful descriptions of Zelda's traumas can be found on a forty-two-page letter written in September 1930 while Zelda was at Prangins under Dr. Forel's re-education program. By writing this letter, Zelda tried to work through her crying wounds. Despite the fact that this letter would reach her doctors as well as her husband, she did not hesitate to elaborate on the most striking traumatic experiences she underwent as Scott Fitzgerald's wife at the same time she unveiled her innocent same-sex relationship:

> We quarreled and you broke the bathroom door and hurt my eye. [...] Rome and your friends from the British Embassy and your drinking, drinking. [...] Then I was horribly sick, from trying to have a baby and you didn't care much and when I was well we came back to Paris. [...] I was always sick and having [injections] and things and you were naturally more and more away. [...] I began to work harder at

> dancing—I thought of nothing else but that. You were far away by then and I was alone. [...] I became dependent on Egorowa [*sic*] [...] Twice you left my bed saying "I can't. Don't you understand"—I didn't. [...] it was wrong, of cource [*sic*], to love my teacher when I should have loved you. But I didn't have you to love—not since long before I loved her. (Bryer and Barks 66-73)

As the letter clearly shows, Zelda firstly rebukes Scott for his violent attitude during their first years of marriage. She then goes on to describe their travels in Europe, and emphasizes Scott's drinking habits. Zelda also refers to Scott's careless attitude concerning her illnesses, and describes the couple's estrangement, which triggered Zelda's dependence on her ballet teacher Madame Egorova. Along with all the above-mentioned traumas, a fact that hurt Zelda was Scott's unwillingness to have sexual intercourse with her. The letter is indeed relevant for the analysis of Zelda Fitzgerald's traumas for it provides a faithful description of her suffering during the years she lived under the shadow of her famous husband. Zelda's straightforward style is one of the most remarkable aspects and it should be emphasized. Her assertiveness allows us to discover her own voice, her desperation, and her mental distress. For the sake of clarity, Zelda uses short sentences such as "We came home." Punctuation marks such as dashes are used to add relevant and shocking information as in "—I thought of nothing else but that." Finally, she also makes use of the anaphora device and repeats words at the beginning of sentences such as "There was/were," "We," and "Then". Regarding the use of the anaphora device, in her book *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead emphasizes the "prevalence of repetition" in her reading of several writings representing trauma (161). More importantly, Whitehead elaborates on the ambivalence of repetition since it might admit two readings: a) it can be viewed as paralyzing, or b) as a way to work through one's own traumas (86-87). In the case of this letter, it is clear that repetitions help Zelda empower her reality as she makes sure Scott knows about the most troubling moments of their tumultuous marriage. Likewise, Zelda's discourse could be considered therapeutic as she is successfully speaking the "unspeakable"—echoing Herman's and Laub's research works. Viewed from the outside, there is no doubt

that in expressing her inner struggles, Zelda is attempting to transform herself from victim to artist—at least in her mind.[15]

Therefore, Zelda shows her strength and ability to move from dependence to independence, and from passivity to action, as this other letter demonstrates. Here, she goes as far as to show her willingness to start a new life without Scott:

> You have always told me that I had no right to complain as long as I was materially cared for [...] since we have never found either help or satisfaction in each other the best thing is to seek it separately. You might as well start whatever you start for a divorce immediately [...] For us, there is not the slightest use, even if we wanted to try which I assure you I do not—not even faintly. In listing your qualities I can not find even one on which to base any possible relationship except your good looks, and there are dozens of people with that. (Bryer and Barks 87-88)

Written in August 1930, this letter illustrates Zelda's opinion about her relationship to Scott, and her determination to divorce him. The first sentence shows the passive role Zelda might have played in her marriage. That is, Scott acted as the provider of the family while Zelda was relegated to being the decorative wife of a famous author. However, it should be noted that while Zelda was financially cared for, she was not emotionally tended at all. Money allowed Zelda to be a fashionable flapper in the 1920s, as well as to be admitted to renowned mental hospitals in the 1930s; yet, by no means did money provide Zelda with the love and empathy she needed from her husband at the time. In fact, Scott Fitzgerald's lack of empathy for his wife's suffering affected her mental instability, as Dr. Carroll once wrote to Scott: "you are her emotional disorganizer" (qtd. in Milford 309; Cline 359).[16] Furthermore, regarding Zelda's traumas, the fact that she could not count on a supportive and empathetic husband to share her struggles only helped to intensify her anxiety. As Laub defends, "the absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an *addressable other* [...] annihilates the story," and I would also add that in neglecting

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[15] As part of the therapy, not only did Zelda write letters, but also journals retelling her past and present memories. Therapeutic writing was to become a common practice in mental institutions all through the twentieth century. American poet Anne Sexton (1928-1974), for instance, suffering from postpartum depression and several mental breakdowns, began writing poems following her doctor's advice.

[16] Dr. Carroll was one of Zelda's doctors at Highland Hospital (Asheville, North Carolina).

Zelda's narrative, her absent—but controlling—husband is definitely perpetuating Zelda's crying wounds (68). As for the rest of Zelda's letter, she seems confident enough, as she makes use of the first personal pronoun several times, and writes a dash to emphasize she does not want to work things out with Scott: "even if we wanted to try which I assure you I do not—not even faintly." More importantly, after ten years of marriage, Zelda exclusively refers to Scott's "good looks" as the only quality he might possess. To summarize, throughout her letter to Scott, Zelda finds the courage to speak her own mind, and show how she will henceforward move on.

Unfortunately, Zelda's straightforward style would become more complex to understand as time went by. She got rid of clarity in favor of a poetic, abstract, and surrealistic style. According to Pike, Zelda represented "states of being almost impossible to communicate such as 'madness,' hyper-awareness, and physical and psychological torment" (6). In fact, it is at times difficult to draw the line between reality and fiction due to the number of figures of speech, as well as the literary references she uses. These complex-language letters could be then analyzed as oppressive tools which perpetuate Zelda Fitzgerald's self-inflicted permanent traumas. Paralleling Gilmore's argument about the "insufficiency" of language to represent trauma, Christian Perring also claims that telling a personal story can lead to oppression instead of liberation:

> People may use words, phrases, and forms of stories that work against their own liberation. Ways of telling stories carry values with them, and if a person adopts a mode of story-telling with values that demean her or endorse her oppression, then telling her own story may be self-defeating. (260)

Following Perring's argument, it can be observed that in most letters written from 1931, Zelda's apologetic language only helps to oppress and defeat her. It is by means of regretful and nostalgic statements that she adopts 'the nice wife of' label. Did Zelda really want to remain a passive wife or did she use this sort of language as a strategy to liberate herself? Perhaps, Zelda realized that the more she followed her doctors' advice about being a good wife, the sooner she would be released from mental institutions. That would explain why her initial resentful letters are surprisingly followed by loving and caring ones. As Cline argues:

> [H]er initial letters of anger, betrayal, distrust, resentment, which were seen by the medical establishment as signs of 'instability', ultimately gave way to more conciliatory, affectionate letters which were viewed as signs of 'improvement'. (265)

Accordingly, in the eyes of her doctors, Zelda was progressively improving; yet, what we really find in these letters is the distorted voice of a woman who plays the role of a victim, while she keeps trying to please her husband at whatever the cost. It should be mentioned, though, that prior to adopting this submissive and remorseful attitude (in most letters from 1931 on), Zelda tried to make Scott understand she was in pain due to Dr. Forel's treatment at Prangins. She was so desperate that she begged Scott to leave Prangins: "Please, out of charity write to Dr. Forel to let me off this cure" (Bryer and Barks 96). Once she realized this conciliatory tone did not work, Zelda assertively claimed she wanted to leave the clinic as she was prepared to take care of herself:

> I want to leave here. [...] I am thirty years old and quite willing to take full responsibility for myself. Neither you nor Dr. Forel has any legal right to keep me interned any longer. [...] I am not going to stay here any longer, and if you make a row about it there are lots of things that will be aired in the courts that won't do anybody any good, now or later. (97)

This time, Zelda did not play the role of a victim. On the contrary, she went as far as to threaten Scott with taking legal action if he demurred. After this letter, however, she went back to the placid tone her husband and doctors had expected from her. Though she strove for freedom, Zelda could not definitely cope with her husband's strong will. Thus, her impotence led her to feel nostalgia and regret.

However, despite her mental illness—or perhaps as a consequence of her mental problems—at times we find a hopeful Zelda—as it is the case with the letter she wrote in June 1934 from Sheppard Pratt Hospital:

> I wish we could spend July by the sea, browning ourselves and feeling water-weighted hair flow behind us from a dive. I wish our gravest troubles were the summer gnats. I wish we were hungry for hot-dogs and dopes and it would be nice to smell the starch of summer linens and the faint odor of talc in blistering bath-houses. Or we could go to the Japanese Gardens [...] We could lie in long citroneuse beams of

> the five o'clock sun on the plage at Juan-les-Pins and hear the sound
> of the drum and piano being scooped out to sea by the waves. Dust
> and alfalfa in Alabama, pines and salt at Antibes, the lethal smells of
> city streets in the summer, buttered pop-corn and axel grease at
> Coney Island and Virginia beach […] we could see if all those are still
> there. (Bryer and Barks 201)

The repetitions of "I wish" and "we could" show Zelda's willingness to
spend quality time with Scott. Specifically, since the expression "we
could" stands for a possible situation, Zelda might have used it instead
of "we can" to subtly seek her husband's approval, and preserve her
role as a passive wife. In this letter, she refers to her pleasant life in
the Deep South, as well as to the summer vacations the Fitzgerald
family spent on the French Riviera. The memories from these places
enable Zelda to feel hopeful about the future. However, she bases her
hopes on a past which was not as happy as she now cognitively
distorts. Notwithstanding, that seems the only way to keep on moving.

Hence, romanticizing the past became a frequent theme in
Zelda's correspondence with Scott in the late 1930s. While confined at
Highland Hospital in August 1936, she wrote a quite chaotic—albeit
romantic—letter where she idealized her life with Scott, and looked
forward to spending quality time both with her husband and their
daughter Scottie:

> I wish we had just been swimming together, the way it seems—I'll be
> so glad when you come home again. When will we be three of us again
> […] we'll be three […] Oh, I'll be so glad to see you on the tenth. […] O
> my love O my darling […] That's what we said on the softness of that
> expansive Alabama night a long time ago […] Happily, happily
> foreverafterwards [*sic*]—the best we could. (Bryer and Barks 226-27)

In this letter, Zelda makes use of powerful descriptive verbs such as "I
wish." She mentions the adjective "glad" twice, and refers to the
determiner "three" to emphasize her longing for Scott and her
daughter Scottie—as the happy family they might have been. Zelda's
joy is also portrayed by the use of the interjection "oh" (repeated three
times—with and without the "h"), along with words of endearment
such as "love" and "darling," preceded by the possessive adjective
"my." This letter comprises one of the most wistful and loving
descriptions among all the letters Zelda wrote to her husband. As proof
of these fond memories—which are quite distant in time and
geography—Zelda wraps up her letter in a poetic manner: "Happily,

happily foreverafterwards [*sic*]—the best we could." Though beautifully written—and at times quite passionate—in this and other letters Zelda appears to be hiding her own traumas, camouflaging her own pain and sorrows, and concealing real problems by nostalgically glorifying the past. As Elizabeth Ouka notes, in Modernist literature, "nostalgia was at best a distraction and at worst a dangerous mask for serious problems" (255). Hence, nostalgia led Zelda to fabricate a perfect life, but it took its toll on Zelda's mental health bolstering her long-lasting traumas.

In addition, Zelda was also tormented with regret, and she frequently apologized to Scott for the trouble she might have caused. For instance, in 1934, she wrote to Scott blaming herself for her own mental distress: "I am miserable in thinking of the unhappiness my illness has caused you" (Bryer and Barks 200). Similarly, in a letter written later that year she apologized for the quarrels they had while Zelda lived with him in 1932: "I am so sorry for the unhappy times we had in that house" (202). Zelda's apologetic attitude steadily increased as time went by. In quite a few letters she wrote in 1935 from Sheppard Pratt, we find several painful assertions as the following ones: "I wish I could have done it better. You have never believed me when I said I was sorry—but I am" (211); or "The thought of the effort you have made over me […] You have been so good to me" (212). These statements, among others, illustrate Zelda's remorse and sadness about her own demeanor, and her subsequent need to ceaselessly ask for forgiveness. She remarks how "good" Scott has been to her, especially because of the financial burden she has caused. There is no doubt that Zelda is once again stressing her role as the compliant and re-educated wife Scott wishes to have. It is also relevant to note the redundant use of the verb "wish" followed by the past tense as a way to regret her emancipating actions from the years Zelda pursued a career in dancing. Sadly, Zelda got to the point that she was sorry for her own illness, and her self-regretful words represent her fear and paralysis. In Janet Landman's *Regret: The Persistence of the Possible*, the author highlights that "regret tends to be viewed as harmful because paralyzing" (10). Following Landman's research on the causes of regret, two might be the main reasons for Zelda's regretful statements: 1) her low self-esteem and 2) her passivity as a woman (162-69). Therefore, in Zelda's epistolary productions, we can identify how her regretful feelings provoke her paralysis as well as they keep her traumas alive.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this article, I have focused on Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald's artistic aspirations as a ballet dancer, paying attention to her daily exhausting routines and to her willingness to have a career of her own. Likewise, I have analyzed how Zelda's inner struggles are represented in her letters to her husband, and how she often hides her traumas away by looking nostalgically and regretfully towards the past. By following Herman's, Laub's, and Whitehead's research on the "unspeakable" quality of trauma, I have scrutinized the "telling" v. "not telling" dichotomy underlying Zelda's letters, and how both options might be equally traumatizing. In addition, Gilmore's hypothesis on the "insufficiency" of language has provided my work with a solid basis to explore Zelda's discourse, and determine to what extent her letters allow her to overcome or perpetuate her crying wounds. After thorough examination, I argue that Zelda's letters fall into two categories: assertive and apologetic. The former definitely allows Zelda to empower her own reality as she assertively vindicates her right to be and have something of her own. The latter, however, leads her to submissively comply with her husband's and doctors' re-education requirements.

        Moreover, regarding the therapeutic outcome of the letters analyzed in this paper, we could safely conclude that while Zelda's assertive style might have helped her overcome her suffering—albeit temporarily—her apologetic language works against her own independence perpetuating her crying wounds. Hence, the healing or traumatizing consequences of these epistolary productions are largely associated with Zelda's language choices—these being influenced by her mental struggles, her unsupportive husband, and the patriarchal psychiatric system of the 1930s she was immersed in. Apart from Zelda's own words, a fact that cannot be overlooked as it really worsened her emotional instability was the absence of an "addressable other." In her effort to ultimately be listened to by her absent husband, she anxiously tried to find and create a new self. Nevertheless, more often than not, Zelda ultimately resigned herself to embracing nostalgia and regret, as she once claimed: "I begin to love the long roads leading to forgotten regretted nostalgias" (Bryer and Barks 255). It is on those long roads to forgotten regretted nostalgias that we can listen to Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald's own voice, explore her permanent and complex crying wounds, and clearly identify her quest for artistic identity.

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BETWEEN HOPELESSNESS AND DESPAIR: AFROPESSIMISM AND BLACK NIHILISM IN TA-NEHISI COATES'S WORKS[1]

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ABSTRACT
Most of the criticism that Ta-Nehisi Coates received in the aftermath of the publication of his work *Between the World and Me* orbits around its lack of hopefulness. Indeed, it is several times in the text that Coates tempers his son's expectations about foreseeing an end to racial conflicts as he tells him that "I do not believe that we can stop [racists], Samori, because they must ultimately stop themselves" (*Between the World* 151). Certainly, the previous contention has drawn critics into reading Coates's work as an attack against black agency (Chatterton Williams n.p.). It is our contention that, far from being read as a manifestation of cynicism, Coates's negativity also has a galvanizing dimension. In fact, by emphasizing the futility of hope, which for Coates traps black individuals in an "unending pursuit" of progress (Warren "Black Nihilism" 221), he provides readers with many alternatives to confront the rampant racism that still pervades U.S. society nowadays.

RESUMEN
Gran parte de las críticas que recibió Ta-Nehisi Coates después de publicar su obra *Between the World and Me* giran alrededor de su falta de optimismo. En el texto, Coates le explica a su hijo que es complicado ver soluciones a los problemas raciales que les acechan, ya que "no creo que podamos detener [a los racistas], Samori, porque son ellos mismos los que deben hacerlo" (*Between the World* 151).

> Ciertamente, el desalentador mensaje de Coates para su hijo ha sido interpretado como una clara negación a la capacidad de agencia de las personas afroamericanas (Chatterton Williams n.p.). En este artículo proponemos una relectura del cinismo de Ta-Nehisi Coates y explicamos que éste también esconde un potencial para promover un cambio social y político. Así, cuando enfatiza que para las personas afroamericanas la esperanza no es más que una falsa sensación de progreso creada por la supremacía blanca, Coates también está ofreciendo a sus lectores otras maneras de hacer frente al racismo que impera en la sociedad actual.

> Hope is a luxury afforded to those who are given the space to dream far beyond the limitations of their conditions

> Darnell L. Moore, "On Mourning and Manhood" (2020)

Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015) has been described as a "searing indictment of America's legacy of violence, institutional and otherwise, against blacks" (Nance n.p.). Indeed, the memoir, which is framed as a letter addressed to Coates's fifteen-year-old son, seems to be a detailed register of the multifarious forms of violence black bodies are exposed to—from direct manifestations of physical brutality, including pull overs, beatings, arrests, and murders; to less conspicuous expressions of racism, such as legal disenfranchisement, or redlining. Immediately after its publication on July 14, 2015, the text became a breakthrough in racial studies and literary texts dealing with racial profiling and, by the end of that same year, Coates had already turned into an eminent writer of international renown and, for many, even into "the single best writer on the subject of race in the United States" (Smith n.p.). Nonetheless, the memoir was not met with universal approval, and as much as Coates was praised for providing a trenchant commentary on the precarious situation endured by black citizens in the U.S., he was also criticized for not offering any solutions to the problems he poses in the text. In fact, Coates's cynical rhetoric, together with his proclivity to tell his son that there is nothing black individuals can do to bring racist conflicts to an end, are certainly the two primary reasons why Coates has often been rebuked, as they do not only lead readers to wonder whether or not "freedom or equality will ever be a reality for black people in America" (Alexander n.p.), but also cast black agency into doubt (Chatterton Williams n.p.). In several of his texts, Coates

reads blackness as an imposed incapacity; as a product of slavery and, verging upon black pessimist ideals, as a form of violence in itself. Coates's understanding of blackness makes his hopelessness easier to understand—what consolation is he to offer, if he foresees none? In view of the devastating critiques brought about by Coates's negativity, this essay sets out to foreground the galvanizing dimension of Coates's memoir, and interprets his pessimism not as disabling, but rather as enabling and necessary.

"THE END OF OUR SUFFERING SIGNALS THE END OF THE WORLD:"[2] PESSIMISM IN THE BLACK LIVES MATTER ERA

Coates's belief that blackness and violence are inextricably bound opens up the possibility of considering him an adherent of a critical framework that focuses on approaching blackness as a form of suffering—Afropessimism. At risk of oversimplifying, Afropessimists posit that black lives are still subject to the principles of slavery, that is, that not only are black individuals today haunted by a ubiquitous threat of violence, but they are also considered people "who can be killed by anyone without that act of killing being considered either a homicide or a sacrilege" (JanMohamed 211). Although Jared Sexton notes that it is difficult to track the origin of the framework down to a particular moment in history ("Afro-Pessimism" n.p.), most pessimists agree that it was Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) that fired the starting signal for its development as it is known nowadays. Indeed, Patterson considered slaves as absolutely "powerless in relation to another individual" (4) and as below the framework of human legibility—as objects, or as "social nonperson[s]" (5). For Patterson, the social death of slaves, a concept on which black pessimism was later based, was granted through the "constituent element[s] of slavery" (10), namely the subjection of slaves to experiencing all sorts of gratuitous violence, their natal alienation, and their dishonor, since they "had no power and no independent social existence, and hence no public worth" (10).

Although it was Patterson who defined social death, the key concept of black pessimism, he has insisted that he should not be considered its forerunner, which is, in his own view, somewhat of a misnomer. In an interview published by *The Harvard Gazette*,

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[2] Wilderson, "Afro-Pessimism" n.p.

Patterson noted that "I find myself in an odd situation, because the Afropessimists draw heavily on one of my books, *Slavery and Social Death*, which is ironic, because I'm not a pessimist," since "I don't think we're in a situation of social death" (Mineo n.p.). Certainly, the major reason why Patterson's theorizations veer away from the ideas defended by black pessimists is his belief in the transitory character of the condition of blacks as slaves. For Patterson, slavery worked by way of "recruitment" (13)—a process whereby "free human beings" (22) were turned into objects of property. After manumission, however, slaves could regain at least part of such freedom; and so "the slave who was freed was no longer a slave" (3). Patterson's conviction that suffering is incidental to blackness testifies to why he cannot be considered a pessimist himself. In fact, he believes that although segregation still persists, black individuals have undeniably achieved real progress, since "we're very integrated in the military [as well as in the civic community and the public sphere], which is the quintessence of what defines who belongs" (Mineo).

This is, precisely, a significant tension that arises between Patterson and other towering figures in the field of black pessimism, such as Frank B. Wilderson or Jared Sexton, for whom there was no prior freedom for slaves to get back to. As R. L. puts it, "the violence of anti-blackness produces black existence; there is no prior positive blackness that could be potentially appropriated" ("Wanderings" n.p.). For Wilderson and Sexton, the concept of blackness did not exist before slavery, but it emerged with it—which means, in turn, that former black slaves had no past of freedom to covet; nor could they aspire to a future devoid of suffering, for that matter. Put another way, there was for slaves no previous state of equality to return to from their state of inequality. "Blackness is coterminous with slaveness", Wilderson writes, "blackness is social death, which is to say that there was never a prior meta-moment of plenitude, never a moment of equilibrium, never a moment of social life", and so "blackness, as a paradigmatic position […], cannot be disimbricated from slavery" ("The End of Redemption", n.p.). Wilderson's claims clearly verge upon a similar reading of blackness as suffering proposed by Achille Mbembe in *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), where the philosopher states that the concept of blackness "arrived with the organized despoliation of the Atlantic slave trade" (2), which ended up "dissolving human beings into things, objects, and merchandise" (11). As Patrice Douglass and Frank Wilderson put it, violence becomes, in this way, "a structural necessity to the constitution of blacks" (117); something that Coates

also staunchly defends in his work—that there can exist no black future bereft of violence because the very concept of blackness *is* violence.

Whilst black pessimists concur in all the aforementioned, most of them hold opposing views as to whether black individuals are, as Patterson said, below the framework of human legibility, and whilst many of them, such as Calvin Warren or Jared Sexton, contend that accepting that black lives are lived in social death does in no way mean that black lives do not exist, but rather that they are lived in a different dimension than white lives,[3] others, such as David Marriott, Adbul JanMohamed, or even Frank Wilderson, have suggested that black people are in fact human *non*-beings. For yet another group of pessimists, heavily influenced by Frantz Fanon's postcolonial thinking, black individuals are neither human beings nor human non-beings, but rather empty objects—a reading that draws upon a phenomenological perception of the black body that has also been widely explored by Claudia Rankine in her most recent work, *Just Us: An American Conversation* (2020), where she intimates that black bodies are "containers" destined to be void (7). Not surprisingly, Ta-Nehisi Coates himself constantly alludes to black individuals as being "objects" (*Between the World* 55) and "vessels" (58, 82, 87), too. The comparison between black bodies and vessels is also prevalent in the work of Saidiya Hartman, who, in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), notes that it is the fungibility of slaves, that is, their characterization as chattel, that enables their being equated with vessels. "The fungibility of the commodity," she writes, "makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values" (21). Hartman's contention that black bodies are but receptacles to be filled with the wills of others reverberates with the arguments deployed by Martin Heidegger in his essay "The Thing" (1971), where he draws upon the concept of the jug in a bid to establish a distinction between objects and things in which the latter are claimed to be self-sufficient in a way that the former are clearly not. He posits, "the jug is a thing. What is the jug? We say: a vessel, something of the kind that holds something else within it. The jug's holding is done by its base and sides. This container itself can again

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[3] Fred Moten dubs this other dimension as "our commons or undercommons or underground or outskirts" of whiteness ("Black Optimism" 4).

be held by the handle. As a vessel the jug is something self-sustained, something that stands on its own" (164).

Besides underscoring the self-sustaining capacity of vessels, Heidegger also points out their artificiality; in fact, the thingness of the thing, to employ his own terminology, resides precisely in that which triggers its making. "Standing forth has the sense of stemming from somewhere," he contends, "whether this be a process of self-making or of being made by an other" (166). On the other hand, "standing forth [also] has the sense of the made thing's standing forth into the unconcealedness of what is already present" (166). By the aforementioned Heidegger is certainly denying that the thingness of vessels stems from their being objects of production. Instead, he notes, "the jug is not a vessel because it was made; rather the jug had to be made because it is this holding vessel" (166)—knowing what constitutes a vessel is a necessary precondition for anybody to make one. And, in fact, for Heidegger, the essential trait of the jug, its vacuity, cannot even be "brought about by its making" (166), but it precedes it. As Walter Biemel succinctly suggests, "that which makes a jug a jug" is precisely its emptiness and "its holding" (59). In a way that is reminiscent of Hartman's perception of black bodies as empty receptacles, Heidegger contends that "when we fill the jug, the pouring that fills it flows into the empty jug," and so it is "the emptiness, the void, [...] [t]hat does the vessel's holding. This empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel" (167).

That black pessimism also resorts to the analogy between black bodies as vessels is thus no accident—as David Marriott states, "the [black] person is a dead object filled, so to speak, by its own vertiginous absence, by its own force of disaggregation" ("Judging" n.p.).[4] In fact, the so-called nothingness that fills black bodies has been Frank Wilderson's object of study on several occasions (*Red, White, and Black*), but it is in his work *Incognegro* (2008) where it becomes most evident:

> How does one speak the unthinkable? [...] I am nothing, Naima, and you are nothing: the unspeakable answer to your question within your question. This is why I could not—would not—answer your question that night. Would I ever be with a black woman

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[4] This notion is also explored by Calvin Warren in "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," where he writes that "blacks, then, have function but not being—the function of black(ness) is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing)" (5).

again? It was earnest, not accusatory—I know. And nothing
terrifies me more than such a question asked in earnest. It is a
question that goes to the heart of desire, to the heart of our black
capacity to desire. But if we take out the nouns that you used
(nouns of habit that get us through the day), your question to me
would sound like this: would nothing ever be with nothing again?
(265)

If we take into consideration everything that we have
mentioned so far—that blackness is coterminous with bondage; that
black individuals cannot be conceived of as human and are, in this
way, either non-human, non-beings, or even *no*thing—, it should not
be surprising that black pessimism was met with backlash from a
group of black people who considered it to be "so very negative" and
who believed "that things are getting better" (Warren *Ontological
Terror*, 4). In a bid to smooth things over, a small group of pessimists
headed by Jared Sexton emphasized that the fact that black
individuals are trapped in social death must not be mistaken for a sort
of apostasy nor for a negation of black agency ("The Social Life of Social
Death"), and denounced that black pessimism "has been
misconstrued as a negation of the agency of black performance, even
a denial of black social life" (Sexton, "Anti-Ante Blackness" n.p.). This
notion is significantly expanded upon in his article "The Social Life of
Social Death," where Sexton notes that black individuals must be
considered human beings even if "black life is not lived in the world
that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space"
(28). In this way, he eschews a reading of blackness as non-being,
suggesting that, instead, black individuals are indeed human beings
who are forced to suffer from, in his own words, a social death:

> A living death is as much a death as it is a living. Nothing in afro-
> pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that
> black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of
> state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture,
> of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things that
> colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that
> capital has in common with labor. (28)

Sexton is also concerned that restoring the humanity of black
beings may open up the possibility of reading blackness as
pathology—and it is perhaps this flawed argument that has led critics
to rail against the hopelessness that permeates Ta-Nehisi Coates's

memoir. In a reading of Frantz Fanon's works, Lewis R. Gordon brings into the open the extent to which black individuals' being considered problematic led to blackness being associated with decay, and ultimately to its being pathologized. "[Blacks] more than symbolize or signify various social pathologies—they become them," Gordon maintains. "In our antiblack world, blacks are pathology" (87). Although black pessimists admit that blackness tends to be defined as pathology, they also posit that it is precisely the fact that blacks have been constructed as social dropouts that not only insists upon black life, but that it also exposes the real pathogen—not blackness itself, but the society that has endorsed such construction. In the words of Jared Sexton, "blackness is not the pathogen in Afropessimism, the world is" (Sexton, "The Social Life" 31).

IN THE NAME OF LOVE: ASTROBLACKNESS AND THE LIMITS OF HOPE

Afropessimism has gained momentum in particular during the last few decades, when the increasing visibility towards the brutal deaths of black youth in the streets, coupled with the acquittal of their murderers, has ruled out the possibility for blacks to hold good prospects for their futures. As Sexton has claimed, "what would one hope for in a scenario where one's murder is required for others' peace of mind?" ("Afro-Pessimism" n.p.). It is surprising, then, that the aforementioned despair has been met with the skepticism of those who claim that blackness and suffering are bound, but not inextricably so (Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness" n.p.). In fact, the antithesis of black pessimism, dubbed as black optimism, can be observed in works authored by black writers all along the twentieth century, from James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and Cornel West's *Race Matters* (1993), all the way to Paul Gilroy's *Against Race* (2000) or Daphne Brooks's *Bodies in Dissent* (2006), texts that throw into relief a will "either to fold blacks into humanity and resolve the ontological problem or to move beyond race and embrace an optimistic future of universal humanism" (Warren, "Black Mysticism" 220). Black optimism may be best explained by way of West's politics of conversion, which are a means to counter the pervasiveness of nihilism in black communities. For West, the history of racial nihilism in the U.S. is long and deep-rooted—black bodies have been degraded and devalued to such an extent that even black individuals themselves have internalized their own worthlessness. West describes it as "the

lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and [...] lovelessness" that results in "a numbing detachment from and a self-destructive disposition toward the world [...] that destroys both the individual and others" (23). West urges black individuals to resist the nihilistic threat posed to blackness through a politics of conversion—"a last attempt at generating a sense of agency among downtrodden people. [...] Self-love and love for others are both modes toward increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance on one's community" (29). In regarding blackness as prophetic and full of potential, black optimism is calling for a present restoration of black subjectivity—racism will keep existing, but it must not devalue the importance of black lives. "As long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive," West concludes. "Without hope there can be no future, [and] without meaning there can be no struggle" (23).

Afrofuturism is, in all likelihood, one of the most recent expressions of black optimism. Described as a "flourishing contemporary movement" (English n.p.) and a cultural aesthetic that figures blackness as hopeful, celebratory, and even pioneering in a technologically advanced counter-world (Capers 7), it was first introduced by Mark Dery in his essay "Black to the Future" (1994), where he linked it to "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (180). That Dery was the first to coin the concept does in no way mean that topics of the sort had not previously been broached by other black authors. In actual fact, according to several scholars (Anderson and Jones; Capers; Glass and Drumming; Steinskog), Afrofuturism finds its roots in the science fiction published by black authors by mid-1850, such as Martin R. Delany's *Blake; or, the Huts of America* (1857), a work that recounts a slave's getaway from a plantation and his arduous journey to bring together black communities from all around the world in a bid to create a thriving and independent all-black nation. Other outstanding examples of science fiction books that paved the way for black futurism to develop are certainly Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) or most of the works by Octavia E. Butler, in particular the Xenogenesis trilogy, published during the last two decades of the

twentieth century.[5] It was not until 1994, however, that Mark Dery claimed that the latest technological advances clearly required the original definition of the term to be revised, and so black futurism ceased to be a way to refer to science fiction narratives and turned instead into a cultural aesthetic on its own. This shift also brought about new possibilities of reading blackness as *beyond* slavery, as Andrew Rollins suggested when he coined the concept of Astroblackness—"an Afrofuturistic concept in which a person's black state of consciousness, released from the confining and crippling slave or colonial mentality, becomes aware of the multitude and varied possibilities and probabilities within the universe" (Anderson and Jones vii).

Although the differences between pessimism and black optimism are glaringly obvious, the fact that Ta-Nehisi Coates, who until now has been considered a major representative of the former, has been the writer of the *Black Panther* series of Marvel Comics (2016), a landmark work thanks to which the latter started to gain traction,[6] has contested the extent to which he can be considered a supporter of either one. In fact, the years following the publication of the memoir witnessed a clear transformation in Coates's public standing. First regarded as an author with "either a cynical or a woefully skewed way of looking at the world" (Chatterton Williams n.p.), Coates was now slowly becoming somebody who in fact believed that progress for the black community was finally being achieved (Klein, "Why Ta-Nehisi"). His transition, as he himself claims in a conversation with Ezra Klein, is owed to the ways in which black individuals are currently coming together, organizing, and fighting for

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[5] The Xenogenesis trilogy is made up of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989).

[6] The character of Black Panther, the undercover identity of king T'Challa, was originally created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby and appeared for the first time in the 52nd instalment of the *Fantastic Four*, which dates back to 1966. T'Challa is the black leader of a prosperous and technologically advanced black community known as Wakanda, located in East Africa and undisclosed to everyone but its inhabitants. Although the character appeared several times in different publications between 1966 and 1976, in 1977 he earned his own series, and Ta-Nehisi Coates became its writer as of 2016. *Black Panther* gained visibility in particular after it was adapted into an eponymous blockbuster film starring Chadwick Boseman and Lupita Nyong'o in 2018. Nowadays, the movie has turned into one of the clearest examples of Afrofuturism (Capers; Glass and Drumming; Steinskog). Amongst other cultural products that portray black optimist ideas is also the 2019 HBO adaptation of the comic series *Watchmen*, in which two central characters, Angela Abar and Dr. Manhattan, who were originally white, are played by black actors.

their own rights. When asked about his feelings in light of the international mass protests staged in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020, Coates replied that "I can't believe I'm gonna say this, but I see hope" (Klein, "Why Ta-Nehisi" n.p.). Nonetheless, even if he "see[s] progress right now" (Klein, "Why Ta-Nehisi" n.p.), he did not do so right after the publication of *Between the World and Me*, when he told Klein, in a strikingly different conversation, that "there's not gonna be a happy ending to this story" (Klein, "A Big Believer" n.p.).

Coates's recent self-identification as an optimist has astounded critics, who until that moment had considered Coates skeptic, hopeless, or plainly defeatist. In fact, the flood of reviews about Coates published in particular after 2018 has addressed, to a greater or lesser extent, Coates's hopefulness rather than his lack of it. To mention but a few, Eric Levitz published a conversation with Coates entitled "Ta-Nehisi Coates Is an Optimist Now" (2019), which was soon followed by Ezra Klein's "Why Ta-Nehisi Coates Is Hopeful" (2020) and Nancy Letorneau's "Even Ta-Nehisi Coates Is Optimistic Now" (2020). Tobin Miller Searers and Joseph Winters explain the critics' obsession with Coates's perception of progress by way of the analysis of the public impact of his work. In fact, Coates's *Between the World and Me* has turned into, in Toni Morrison's terms, "a required reading" ("Between the World" n.p.) for many—not only has it been included in the syllabus of several university courses (Keaggy n.p.), but it has also been granted with a top position in *The Guardian*'s list of the best books of the 21st century. This suggests that the experiences narrated in the book may have turned into a model for black youth to follow, and that the messages that Coates conveys are far-reaching and may have an enormous bearing upon his readers; which is, precisely, the main reason why Coates's hopelessness has been regarded with contempt. Fully cognizant of this situation, Coates has also addressed it in two articles published in *The Atlantic*, "Hope and the Artist" (2015b) and "Hope and the Historian" (2015c), where he contends that the real value of art should not rest upon whether it transmits hopeful ideas or not, as an excess of hopefulness is but a distraction from the real problems that are being addressed (Searers 1972). "I've been thinking a lot about the implied notion that writing that does not offer hope is necessarily deficient or somehow useless," he notes. "To be less coy, I've been thinking a lot about the idea that my own writing is somehow cheating the reader because it seems so unconcerned with 'hope'. I admit to having a hard time with this notion" ("Hope and the Artist" n.p.). And he goes on,

> If one observes the world and genuinely feels hopeful, and truly
> feels that the future is not chaos, but is in fact already written,
> then one has a responsibility to say so. Or, less grandly, if one can
> feel hopeful about a literal tomorrow and one's individual prospects
> one should certainly say so. [...] But hope for hope's sake, hope as
> tautology, hope because hope, hope because "I said so", is the
> enemy of intelligence. One can say the same about the opposing
> pole of despair. Neither of these—hope or despair—are "wrong".
> They each reflect human sentiment, much like anger, sadness,
> love, and joy. Art that uses any of these to say something larger
> interests me. Art that takes any of these as its aim does not. ("Hope
> and the Artist" n.p.)

Again, that Coates rejects hope as the only way to face the
problems he poses in the memoir does not mean that he despairs.
Tobin Miller Searers explains this by drawing upon Coates's atheism
(2018). In his view, Coates does not find comfort in religion, but he
does find it somewhere else—in something that he names
"consciousness" (*The Beautiful Struggle*; *Between the World*). As
Searers himself notes, "rather than religion, Coates draws on [black]
epistemology" (1948), which he learns about from his father, and
which is pivotal for him to develop a full awareness of blackness and
to worship not only black thinkers, but also his own black community.

On a different note, Joseph Winters contends that it is the fact
that Coates's writing was published in the heyday of Barack Obama's
presidency that had misled his readers into expecting his work to be
hopeful and reassuring. In his view, when critics contend that Coates
is hopeless, they often mean that he is so in relation to the "kind of
hope attached to triumphant narratives of achievement that
subordinate dissonance to harmony, or instability to order" that ruled
in the Obama administration (2452).[7] Calvin Warren approaches the
subject of optimism by way of Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism,"
noting that "it bundles certain promises about redress, equality,
freedom, justice, and progress into a political object that always lies
beyond reach" ("Black Nihilism" 221). In this way Coates would not be
against optimism, but against the sort of optimism that flattens out
the complexities of black strivings. In his interpretation of Tressie

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[7] Peter Dula and David Evans establish a comparison between Obama's "creedal or
liberal reading of U.S. history," which is evocative of "Abraham Lincoln, Frederick
Douglass, and the early King," and Coates's "radical alternative that descends from Du
Bois, Malcolm X, the latter King, and Critical Race Theory" (161).

McMillan Cottom's last review of Coates's work ("Not Trying to Get Into Heaven"), Winters punctuates that it is Coates's withdrawal from Obama's hopefulness that makes his readers despair—"because Coates departs from Obama's 'audacity of hope' mantra as well as the rhetoric associated with sanitized versions of the Civil Rights Movement, his 'hope feels stark and brutal'" (2464). "What critics expect from Coates," he goes on to explain, "is some projected resolution, some kind of benediction that converts, for instance, the police killing of Prince Jones into something positive, upbeat, and encouraging" (2464). Coates may not be hopeful, but he is not a nihilist either—he feels the need to highlight the limitations of hope, and he seeks to offer his readers other narratives that allow black individuals to keep fighting without underestimating their plight.

Calvin Warren offers important commentary on the centrality that hope has had in anti-racist movements in his essay "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope" (2015), where he calls attention to the fact that the slipperiness of the concept—its logic of linearity, in particular when coupled with "bio-political futurity, perfection, betterment, and redress"—not only sustains, but also reproduces, black suffering (218). For Warren, one of the main risks of hopefulness stems from it "posit[ing] itself as the only alternative to the problem of anti-blackness" (221) in a way that it rules out all the other possibilities to confront racism. Certainly, Warren's claims cast a new light on why Coates's pessimistic views in the memoir have often been discredited—because, for the hopeful, no forms of engagement other than hope itself are convenient, at least at first sight (223). "The politics of hope masks a particular cruelty under the auspices of 'happiness' and 'life'," he writes, "it terrifies with the dread of 'no alternative'" and "life itself needs the security of the alternative, and, through this logic, life becomes untenable without it" (222). Warren notes that hopefulness becomes particularly dangerous for black individuals, as the object they long for always remains an impossibility—they keep drawing closer to an end that ultimately does not exist. Warren exemplifies this by drawing upon Barack Obama's exhorting black people to keep fighting and to not give way to despair in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin's murder—a message that bears striking similarities to the one spread after Emmett Till's lynching almost sixty years earlier, and which did not hold down the alarming rates at which black people were being murdered (Brady n.p.). In this way, Warren notes, black individuals are trapped in "an unending pursuit" of progress (221)—they are told to be hopeful even though all

solutions ever devised to put an end to anti-blackness have only led to a dead end (Warren, *Ontological Terror* 3).[8]

The problem is exacerbated when hope is erroneously equated with action, which is precisely why Coates's point of view has been object of criticism—just as hopefulness is perceived as a direct exhortation to act, hopelessness is considered to be analogous to passivity and even defeatism, and in this way "the nihilist is labeled 'pathological', 'troubled', 'faithless', 'suicidal', 'fatalistic', and 'reckless'" (Warren, "Black Nihilism" 242). Nonetheless, as Warren concludes, being hopeful can be as problematic as being hopeless, as the former rests upon the violent structures that sustain discrimination; that is, it operates along the violent structures that catalyzed its development in the first place. "Black suffering is an essential part of the world," Warren writes, "and placing hope in the very structure that sustains metaphysical violence […] will never resolve anything" (244). In a similar vein, Coates also wonders why readers insist, or rather demand, that he must be hopeful when he clearly believes in the inherent character of black suffering. In "Hope and the Historian," Coates writes that "the point here isn't that white supremacy won't ever diminish, nor that it won't ever change form. The point is that it will always be with us in some form, and the best one can reasonably hope for is that it will shrink in impact". For him,

> The black political tradition is essentially hopeful. […] I was raised closer to the nationalist tradition. For many years, even after I grew distant from nationalism, I shared this faith in the primacy of black politics. But the problem is history. The more I studied, the more I was confronted by heroic people whose struggles were not successful in their own time, or at all. To the extent that they were successful, black politics was a necessary precondition, but never enough to foment change […]. This is neither the stuff of sweet dreams nor "hope". But I think that a writer wedded to "hope" is ultimately divorced from "truth". Two creeds can't occupy the same place at the same time. If your writing must be hopeful, then there's only room for the kind of evidence which verifies your premise. The practice of history can't help there. Thus, writers who commit themselves to only writing hopeful things, are committing themselves to the ahistorical, to the mythical, to the hagiography

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[8] In other words, hope "merely provides temporary reprieve from the fact that blacks are not safe in an anti-black world, a fact that can become overwhelming" (3); a view that Coates certainly endorses too.

of humanity itself. I can't write that way—because I can't study that way. I have to be open to things falling apart. Indeed, much of our history is the story of things just not working out. ("Hope and the Historian" n.p.)

As we have been noting, Coates's repudiation of hope must not be confused with his denying black people a futurity. Instead, in refusing to believe blindly in hopefulness, Coates is in fact suggesting that the previous is not the only but one amongst several motivating forces for black people to get involved with the fight of racial equality. *Between the World and Me* sets out to offer ways other than, rather than in addition to, hope to confront the rampant racism that permeates U.S. society and, amongst them, it is love that Coates favors. Tobin Miller Searers has extensively worked on the centrality that love plays in Coates's oeuvre:

Coates finds his ultimate imperative in love. As expected, however, his idea of love holds no space for saccharine nostalgia, fawning sentimentality, or rose-scented romance. Rather, Coates allows for "softness" but centers on love as "an act of heroism" given freely, often unexpectedly, and rooted in protection and care for the black body. That love stems from his grounding in "people," his people, the black community that has sustained, nurtured, and elicited the "broad love" that allows him to express a "specific love" for his son. The love shows up for Coates not only in relationships and family connections but also in poetry and art. (2052)

That love replaces hope in Coates's works ultimately hinders the possibility of regarding Coates's pessimism as a manifestation of violence. In *The Beautiful Struggle*, Coates's previous memoir, readers learn about the extent to which Coates treasures his family, as dysfunctional as it is; about the extent to which he loves his friends and his community; and, not less important, about the extent to which his father instils in him a great passion for black artists in general, and black thinkers and black writers in particular. On the other hand, in *Between the World and Me*, Coates succeeds in informing his readers that his rapport with the world as an adult is not only influenced but in fact radically shaped by the affection he received as a kid—he focuses on expressing a deep love for his parents, for his wife, for his son, for his deceased friend Prince Jones, and for all the other black individuals that accompanied him throughout his life, such as the girl with the dreadlocks he met at Howard University or

the man he visited Paris with when he was younger; similarly, he focuses on explaining the extent to which his devotion to blackness, as well as to black consciousness, has solidified over the years.[9]

CONCLUSIONS

Most of the criticism that Ta-Nehisi Coates received in the aftermath of the publication of his work *Between the World and Me* orbits around its lack of hopefulness. Indeed, it is several times in the text that Coates tempers his son's expectations about foreseeing an end to racial conflicts as he tells him that "I do not believe that we can stop them, Samori, because they must ultimately stop themselves" (151). Certainly, the previous contention has drawn critics into reading Coates's work as a clear manifestation of cynicism and defeatism (Archie n.p.), and so it is not surprising that they posit that Coates's representation of racism is stacked against itself—not only does it deny an actual reality exempt from racism, but it also rejects black agency (Chatterton Williams n.p.). Coates's negativity is not only manifest in *Between the World and Me*, and it can also be traced back to several of the op-eds he had published earlier on in *The Atlantic*, in particular "The Case for Reparations" and "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration". Directing particular attention to the latter, Thabiti Anyabwile notes that most, if not all, of the works authored by Coates carry their "own heavy coat of despair" because "it's not that Coates simply leaves off hope; he in some respects *refuses* it" (n.p.; emphasis in the original). For the pastor, that Coates veers away from hopefulness is problematic insofar as he may be actively denying something that has been a fundamental constituent of racial progress.

For Coates, though, "hope is the fatalistic posture" (Sexton, "The Unclear Word" 57) since, in his view, believing in a society in

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[9] Coates's take on love, however, can be considered very controversial. In *Between the World and Me* Coates vividly remembers that his father used to beat him under the pretext that "either I can beat him, or the police" (16); something that he also mentions in *The Beautiful Struggle* when, eavesdropping on a conversation between their parents, he hears his father say, "Cheryl, who would you rather do this: me or the police?" (141). Coates holds his father in high esteem regardless of all the aforementioned, and so he notes that, during his childhood "violence was administered in fear and *love*" (17; my emphasis). Although this topic is central to understanding Coates's experience as a black man, for the sake of space and purpose it cannot be further addressed in this article. For more information on the role that whupping plays on black families and on the interplay between love and abuse see Bradshaw, Herron, and Patton.

which racial struggles do not exist is but a sheer impossibility—blackness is violent by ontology; so how to imagine a world in which both concepts can be separated? Instead of emphasizing the ways in which Coates's viewpoint verges upon despair, our essay has sought to open up the possibility of interpreting Coates's negativity not as disabling, but as enabling. In fact, as Winters makes plain in his text "Between the Tragic and the Unhopeless" (2018), "a different kind of hope is made possible through melancholy, struggle, and anguished love" (2286) in the memoir. A similar point is raised by Jonathan Orbell, who notes that although he has "been gripped by this facet of Coates's writing," he believes that "Coates's hopelessness may function, somewhat paradoxically, as a source of tangible change in public policy" and so "it may well be necessary for progress to be made" (2015, n.p.). Orbell's final ruminations on the galvanizing dimension of Coates's pessimism is something that is addressed verbatim in the memoir, where Coates himself writes that "these are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope" (71). Certainly, Coates's work is not merely an inventory of the myriad ways in which black bodies can be destroyed, but also a eulogy of sorts; a way of memorializing all the lives lost to racism and of remembering "the black people in Harlem, in West Baltimore, in the South Side of Chicago, and in Washington, DC, who inspired that book, [and] who empowered that book" (in Klein, "A Big Believer" n.p.). For Coates, hopefulness is a futility, as hoping has never improved anything for black individuals, who are still told to keep wishing that things will get better as the number of black persons murdered in the streets keep increasing every day. As Darnell L. Moore writes, "black people hold on to hope despite the absence of hope's fulfillment" ("On Mourning" n.p.). Instead of longing for the better, Coates suggests, black people have to cling to the present; to the things that are already here—to the love for the people, which might in the end, paraphrasing Cornel West, give meaning to struggle (23).

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THE HYBRIDIZATION OF THE NOIR GENRE AS EXPRESSION OF ETHNIC HERITAGE: RAFAEL NAVARRO'S *SONAMBULO*

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ABSTRACT

In his ongoing comic book series *Sonambulo*, versatile artist Rafael Navarro has been able to channel his Mexican American cultural heritage by creating a unique blend of narrative genres. In his work, Navarro exploits classic American film noir as a fundamental reference and hybridizes it with elements distinctive to a shared Chicanx heritage, such as *lucha libre* cinema, horror folktales, and border-crossing metaphors; the construction of an oneiric dimension helps bring the narrative together, marking it with a peculiar ambiance. Drawing heavily on a diverse range of film genres, as well as ethnocultural pivots, this comic book series carves out a definite space in the panorama of the Mexican American production of popular culture, adding a powerful voice to the expression of US ethnic minorities.

RESUMEN

En su serie de cómic *Sonambulo*, el versátil artista Rafael Navarro ha conseguido canalizar su herencia cultural mexicoamericana, creando una mezcla única de distintos géneros narrativos. En su obra, Navarro toma el cine negro clásico estadounidense como referencia fundamental y la hibrida a través de elementos peculiares de una herencia chicana compartida, como por ejemplo el cine de luchadores, leyendas de terror, y metáforas del cruce fronterizo; la construcción

de una dimensión onírica ayuda la armonización narrativa, creando
una atmosfera distintiva. Inspirándose en una variedad de géneros
cinematográficos, así como en pivotes etnoculturales, la serie forja un
espacio definido en el panorama de la producción mexicoamericana
de cultura popular, añadiendo una voz poderosa a la expresión de las
minorías étnicas en los Estados Unidos.

Born in the border town of Nogales and raised in Los Angeles,
where he has been based since, Rafael Navarro has built a fruitful
career as illustrator, storyboard artist for widely known US TV
animated shows[1] and independent comic book creator. The products
of his work have been as diverse as his personal interests, ranging
from film to literature (Navarro in Aldama, "Your Brain" 225). In 1988
he began to work as a freelance penciller for mainstream comic book
publishers such as DC Comics, Marvel, and Dark Horse (ibid 224), as
well as in the field of animation, cultivating the idea of producing his
own independent, self-published comics. A keen comic book reader
himself, Navarro felt the need to create a character that would open a
space he felt was missing in the industry; a space in which could fit
genres, tropes, and styles whose blending would come across as
unexpected, especially by a Mexican American author. Since 1996,
Navarro's quest has been condensed in his ongoing comic book series
Sonambulo[2], shaping a peculiar hybrid genre that could be defined as
lucha-noir, as it blends most tropes characterizing classic American
film noir—a genre often characterized by its intrinsic whiteness (Lott
546)—and fundamental elements of the Mexican American cultural
heritage, such as horror folktales, *lucha libre*, and heteroglossia
(Aldama, "Your Brain" 67).
          The exploitation of Mexican American folktale tropes has been
touched on as well by various artists—such as for example Navarro's
longtime friend Javier Hernandez, in his ongoing comic book series *El
Muerto*—and likewise others have exploited Mexican myths and

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[1] Among many, it is worth mentioning Daytime Emmy award-winning *Tutenstein*
(PorchLight Entertainment, 2003–2008), *Rugrats* (Nickelodeon, 1991–2004), and *lucha
libre*-themed *¡Mucha Lucha!* (Warner Bros., 2002–2005).
[2] The series is composed, so far, of two 3-issue long arcs (*Sleep of the Just* 1996; *Mexican
Stand-Off* 2004-2006), two standalone issues (*Ghost of a Chance* 2002; *Sonambulo Lives!*
2009), issues collecting short stories and/or with the collaboration of fellow comics
creators (*Sonambulo's Strange Tales* 2000; *Masks of Sonambulo* 2003), participations in
anthologies (such as "The One That Got Away" 2006). At the present date, a new
Sonambulo issue is in the works, composed by short stories written by different authors
and drawn by Navarro.

cosmogony, a notable example of which is Rhode Montijo's *Pablo's Inferno* (2000). It is worth reminding—albeit briefly—that in the 80s Chicanx creators such as, chiefly, the Bros. Hernandez, managed to create longstanding comic book series in which ethnically diverse, slice-of-life stories intertwined with sci-fi subgenres, introducing Latinx perspectives and themes, shaping and nurturing the panorama of Chicanx alternative comics (among many, see Merino; García). Still, genres such as noir seem to be hardly considered as "authentically" Latinx, somehow limiting the possibilities of expression of the creators and possibly circumscribing them to selected, allegedly heritage-relevant themes. Nonetheless, an analysis of *Sonambulo*'s diegetic pivots demonstrates that hybridized noir can be an effective tool to convey precisely the expression of US ethnic minority heritage.

Interweaving textual and visual references deriving from his personal background, Navarro has created a unique comic book series, laced with his own Mexican American identity. As he expressed through a short bio/graphic narrative (Navarro, "Mi Voz" 155), bringing forth his culture, as well as his personal perspective on it, he began to share his own, unique voice. A voice that is intrinsically Mexican American, as the spelling of the title character's name—as well as the occasional usage of Spanglish in dialogues, or the simplification of Spanish spelling—reveals: Sonambulo is neither a *sonámbulo* nor a sleepwalker, he is his own hybrid identity. The fundamental elements are well-defined and structured, creating a peculiar genre, allowing *Sonambulo* to find its own liminal place/space between *lucha*, noir tradition, and supernatural horror. Infused with Mexican American heritage themes, an articulated oneiric dimension brings Navarro's fictional world together, in a formula-defying product that reconfigures the boundaries of American alternative comics.

LUCHA-NOIR: A CHARACTER TORN BETWEEN NOIR TRADITION AND LATINX CULTURAL HERITAGE

The protagonist of Navarro's series is Salomon Lopez, a man of Mexican origins who used to be a renowned luchador in the heyday of *lucha libre*, wrestling under the name of Sonambulo and living the life of a successful and beloved performer. Nonetheless, when pressed by the local mob, he did not accept to abide by their requests, faithful to his own moral code; he was consequently beaten up, shot, and left for dead. However, Sonambulo simply fell into a deep sleep that lasted for decades and from which he happens to wake up in present times,

adapting himself and starting a new life as a private detective in Los Angeles. The uncanny sleep he had fallen into has left him cursed: on the one hand he seems to be unable to sleep ever again, while on the other, he acquired the ability to read the dreams of others. Through dreams, Sonambulo can fathom people's fears, hopes, and memories, entering an oneiric dimension he is accustomed to and in which he often faces his own ghosts. The private eye finds himself dealing with cases that involve supernatural entities, getting entangled in suspenseful, quirky adventures. Among the fundamental themes characterizing the comic book series, the iconography and tropes related to Mexican *lucha libre* are embodied by the mask its eponymous protagonist invariably wears. If that is certainly the most evident *lucha* element at first sight, Sonambulo's stories are disseminated with wrestling details and the construction of the character is solidly based on a distinctive *lucha*-inspired ethos.

Figure 1 Sonambulo: Strange Tales, 1.

Sonambulo is marked by a definite noir ambiance, a feature the author highlights as essential and encompassing the nuances and foreboding darkness of classic film noir (Navarro, "Tell Him Your Dreams"). It is worth noting that Navarro is a keen cinephile, and his passion for black and white films—ranging from Italian neorealism to Mexican *época de oro* cinema—is evident (ibid.; Navarro in Aldama, "Your Brain" 228). In that regard, his inspirations can be traced in the cinematographic quality pervading his panels throughout the whole series, and in the *Sleep of the Just* arc (1996)[3] in particular. In comics, paradigms distinctive of the noir genre have been exploited by series such as, among others, Frank Miller's renowned—and crudely violent—*Sin City* (1991-2000), as well as zoomorphic *Blacksad* (Díaz Canales and Guarnido, 2001-2013), sexploitation-driven *Black Kiss* by Chaykin (1988-1989), Brubaker and Phillips' *The Fade Out* (2014-2016), and the notable Will Eisner's *The Spirit* (1940) and *Torpedo 1936* (1981-2000) by Sánchez Abulí and Bernet. From film noir, *Sonambulo* draws the archetypic private detective as a protagonist—remindful of hardboiled literary characters—as well as the presence of music, stark black and white aesthetics, non-linear narratives, nightmarish plots and criminal motives.

Classic American film noir—as it will be analyzed further on—emerged in the early 40s and was characterized by the reconstruction of criminal adventures, usually happening in grimy urban settings and suffocating interiors, marked by a sense of bleakness, cynicism, and moral ambiguity. Despite its representation of social tensions and recurrent focus on working class characters, the genre seemed to obliterate the existing conflicts related to ethnicity and remain exempt of critique in such regard. In most noir films, the represented otherness is constructed around moral boundaries rather than cultural or racial, revolving around the "'dark' side of the white Western self" (Lott 543). Later on, African American filmmakers—such as Spike Lee—have appropriated and interpreted classic noir moods to enrich Black film, exploiting the capability intrinsic to film noir to express social criticism and thereby question the normalcy of existing social structures (for a thorough study, see Flory). Nonetheless, the genre in its classic configurations seems to still lack a Latinx perspective, despite its potential possibilities.

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[3] All page references that will be made to the *Sleep of the Just* arc from now on will refer to the collected edition (2001).

It is worthwhile noting the existence of a few films set on and across the US–Mexico border, or directly involving Mexican American characters. Among them, Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1959) captures the essence of the border through a noir lens, quite effective in conveying its gritty, ambiguous dynamics (Nericcio 39-80); the movie delivers articulated representations of borderland otherness and its constructs, and it revolves around the clash between a Mexican agent and his American counterpart. Anthony Mann's *Border Incident* (1949) also focuses on the border and the collaboration between two such characters, whereas Ida Lupino's noir road movie *The Hitch-hiker* (1953) exploits the trope of border crossing as escape route for a deranged criminal. As the genre reached its apogee in the 50s, the Mexican film industry was fruitfully producing film noir—or *cine negro*—as well, reproducing the features distinctive of the US production; the genre counted with renowned *época de oro* directors such as Julio Bracho, Alejandro Galindo, and Roberto Gavaldón (especially with his recurrent collaborator José Revueltas). It is worth mentioning the occasional production of films with a transnational setting, such as Juan Bustillo Oro's *Asesino X* (1955), focusing on the noir misadventures of a Mexican man framed for murder in California after serving repeatedly in the US army. Interestingly, the plot facilitates the representation of discriminatory practices toward Mexicans living on US soil. Aside from the occasional—and quite effective—transnational settings, the main cities used as backdrop for noir cinema and literature have been New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. The latter functions as a suitable setting for stories characterized by sordid plot developments and compromises, as Los Angeles itself symbolizes the place where dreams can come true and yet, the pursuit of such dreams is often tied to delusion, struggle, and eventual failure. Despite the historical presence of a diverse Latinx population, in film and roman noir Los Angeles rarely endows ethnic characters with articulated agency. Sonambulo moves across the city and through areas that have been consistently populated by Latinx communities such as Whittier, thus enriching the stereotypical noir description of Los Angeles.

If Latinx are invisiblized, the occasional presence of African American tertiary characters usually happens when the white protagonists move within some specific milieus, such as boxing gyms and, more relevantly, nightclubs. Even though the relation between noir ambiance and jazz has consolidated through the years following the apogee of classic film noir—to the point that it has been defined as a

"perceived collaboration between film noir and jazz" (Butler 2)—it is safe to say that film noir proposed sequences featuring bands playing music suggestive of jazz. As David Butler has underlined, the combination between film noir and jazz is, in fact, quite common in the public imaginary and it has been exploited by the music industry to market jazz recordings, including jazz variations of film noir scores that mostly relied on symphonic soundtracks. Drawing on this perception of jazz performance as evocative of noir ambiance, in the case of music as well Navarro brings forth his own personal taste and connection to a markedly Latinx background, endowing his protagonist with a passion for Afro-Cuban jazz. The strongly emotional quality of noir blends with the choice of music and permeates the sequences in which Sonambulo's memories and nostalgia are constructed. The fundamental role and presence of music is set clear right from the beginning, as *Sleep of the Just* opens with a city view starring the sign of a club called "Mango Mangue" in the foreground, establishing the main perspective line guiding the reader's gaze (9). From this initial wink at Charlie Parker and Machito's eponymous Afro-Cuban jazz piece (recorded in 1948) to the presence of boleros such as "Piel Canela", Navarro articulates his protagonist's relation with music and mambo dancing throughout the series (Marini). A particularly interesting example is the exploitation of the lyrics of the bolero "Mala Noche" as a diegetic intertextual device descriptive of Sonambulo's mood, bringing together multimodal elements to convey a more nuanced meaning (42). It is worth noting that this device has been exploited by other artists in the comic noir genre, especially later on; for example, it is considered as a distinctive feature of Díaz Canales and Guarnido's *Blacksad* (Austin).

The most evident element of noir hybridization, though, is the quintessential role of *lucha libre*, pervasive throughout Navarro's comic book series. Imported by European migrants to North America during the second half of the 19th century, Greco-Roman wrestling evolved into a spectator sport performed especially in the US–Mexico borderlands. In 1933, Mexican entrepreneur Salvador Lutteroth saw a potential in the dynamics intrinsic to such performances and founded the Empresa Mexicana de Lucha Libre, promoting it as a sports entertainment (for a historical overview, see Monroy Olvera and Reducindo Saldivar). The popularity and pervasiveness of it grew rapidly, reaching an apogee in the 50s and 60s. Aside from the actual *lucha* performances—usually taking place during the weekend in large arenas—recognizable themes and elements peculiar to *lucha libre* were

disseminated across the available media. A prolific production of movies and magazines reprising the salient moments of bouts, as well as blends of comics and photo novel, contributed to increasing and feeding the popularity of wrestling.

The flashbacks in the comic—reproducing Sonambulo's wrestling life before the sleep—take place indeed in 1959, whereas the storylines set in the present correspond to the time in which the issues were published. In both cases, the reconstruction of the context is rendered through establishing details, while the protagonist himself and his memories function as a bridge between the two fundamental chronological moments. References to the so-called *cine de luchadores* are scattered throughout the *Sonambulo* comic books. Such kind of references often characterizes lucha-inspired comics, together with fragments of storylines reprising lucha tropes, produced by Mexican American creators; among others, it is worth mentioning Rhode Montijo's *Pablo's Inferno* (2000, #3), as well as Jason Gonzalez's *La Mano del Destino* (2011-2018). The strong cultural link that Mexican American communities have maintained with classic Mexican *lucha libre* has been facilitated by means of televised broadcasting of matches and, in particular, the films produced during its apogee, starring actual *luchadores*. Most of these films are characterized by a peculiar blend of subgenres, usually verging toward campy horror—in particular revolving around a diverse range of monsters—and science fiction. The *cine de luchadores* is usually marked by paradigmatic narrative patterns, in which the *luchador*-hero acts out of the ring for a "good cause". Most often he intervenes to save the main characters—innocent people, close friends, or acquaintances—from the threats posed by either evil antagonists, classic horror monsters, or extraterrestrial entities. A good example of this kind of films is represented by those in which the protagonist is the legendary *luchador* El Santo; the performer starred in more than 50 feature films in which he played himself, without ever breaking out of character. The use of a mask is, in fact, the key element structuring a form of kayfabe distinctive to Mexican wrestling. In the beginning, wearing a mask was a mere device to allow defeated luchadores to continue wrestling under a new identity. In the 50s, some of the most legendary luchadores—such as El Santo, Blue Demon, Huracán Ramírez—rose to fame as masked characters, whose articulation revolved around the mask itself. The suspension of disbelief intrinsic to professional wrestling—also called kayfabe—is necessary to support the staged quality of the performances. The audience pretends to believe in the

genuineness of the show, interacting and directly participating in it, as—borrowing Barthes' words—the very virtue of the spectacle is the theatricality, the mimicry of justice, and the amplification of rhetoric, rather than its realism (Barthes 13-23). In *lucha libre*, wrestlers not only avoid breaking character during the show, but they also maintain the kayfabe throughout any public appearance; hiding their actual identity behind the mask, wrestlers never step out of the mythic dimension they live in. Sonambulo remains bound to his *lucha* past and always appears wearing his mask no matter the context (figure 1), reminding of the luchadores' daily life as represented in *lucha libre* films.

Sonambulo is, in fact, a character built according to the ethos intrinsic to *lucha libre* in its prime. Aside from resorting to lucha moves whenever he fights[4], he acts abiding by a clear set of values and beliefs, helping others without any personal benefit or interested goal. Despite embodying the noir private eye archetype "midway between order and crime […] responsible for himself alone" (Borde and Chaumeton 7), Sonambulo emerges as a positive subject in the otherwise noir-driven contexts and surreal situations he gets entangled in. He usually acts following his own code of conduct and for "the right reasons", seemingly sticking to a lucha ethos remindful of El Santo's filmic stints. Despite his occasional sentimental faltering—often triggered by his memories (see for example the *Ghost of a Chance* arc)—he doesn't yield to the cynicism or moral quandaries characterizing his antagonists. Sonambulo is "a paladin, our last resort to protect us all from all the terrors of the unknown, as well as the borderland of the subconscious" (Navarro, "Tell Him Your Dreams"). In fact, noir-related obsessions and derangements also emerge through the dreams represented in the comic book series, as an outlet for the subconscious of both Sonambulo's adversaries and himself.

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[4] In each of the main narrative arcs wrestling sequences are present; it's worth mentioning in particular a fight employing chairs—as it commonly occurs in *lucha libre*—in *Sleep of the Just* (2000, 84-86), as well as a long sequence of wrestling on the ring in *Ghost of a Chance* (16-19).

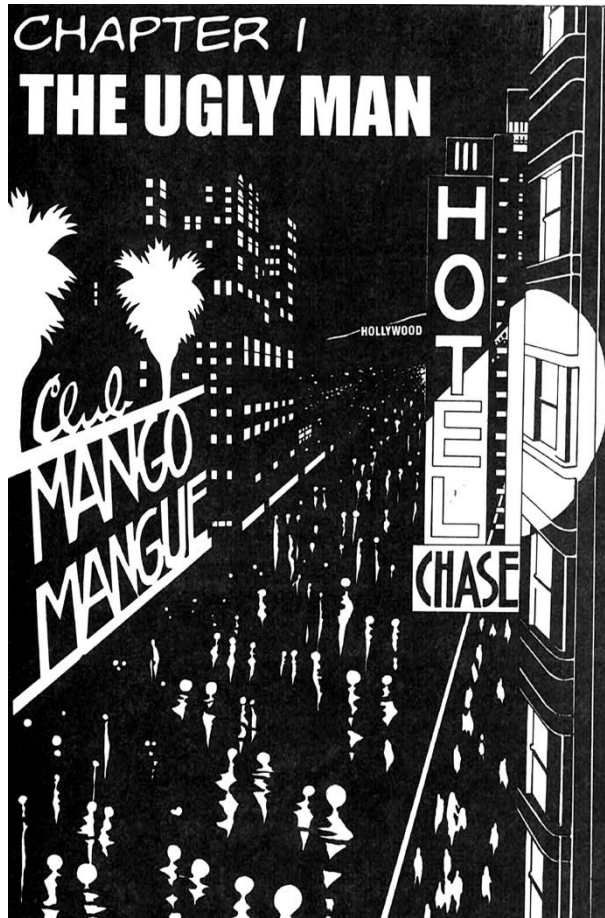**TELL HIM YOUR DREAMS: THE ONEIRIC INTERPRETATION OF NOIR**

Figure 1 *Sleep of the Just. The Collected Case*, 9.

The definition of the noir genre is, in itself, somehow problematic to tackle. Deriving from a certain type of hard-boiled literature—facilitated by a growth of criminal fiction in the 20s and 30s, fueled by the gloom of the Great Depression—film noir as it is classically intended was produced in Hollywood starting in the early 40s through the 50s. The filmographic boundaries of the genre are

debated according to the stylistic parameters considered; nonetheless, critics have often set them by indicating Boris Ingster's *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) as a first consistent example, and Orson Welles' aforementioned *Touch of Evil* (1959) as the last noir masterpiece. Film noir is often associated with some visual and narrative key traits which, yet, don't seem enough to define clear genre boundaries. It seems, rather, that noir should be defined as well by its underlying discourse and the representation of society it provides, infused with a modernist spirit (Naremore 40-97).

Aesthetically, film noir is usually characterized by low-key lighting, asymmetric composition, vertiginous angles, oppressive urbanscape settings, and often indistinguishable interiors. The shaping of the genre's mood and atmospheres was possibly inspired by German Expressionism (Vernet 7-12), as well as Surrealism—in particular regarding certain facets that can be connected with *Sonambulo*'s articulation. The link between noir and Surrealism has been highlighted by several scholars and critics, as surrealist cinema defied bourgeois art and lifestyle, de-sublimating everyday life through its dream-related symbolic representations and irrational imagery (Naremore 18). In Navarro's comic book series, the noir mood is set clear from the beginning, as *Sleep of the Just* opens with a splash page reproducing a busy street seemingly crowded with venues and the renowned "Hollywood" sign landmark in the far background (figure 2). In the following page, paper waste marketing some show lies on the floor, wetting in the rain, throwing the reader right into the tropes characterizing the signification of Los Angeles as a place where hopeful dreams get wasted and the value of many people's life is commodified (for an interesting perspective on the topic, see Silver and Ursini). Noir draws on the contradictory images of Los Angeles in the popular imaginary (Olsin Lent 329-330). If on the one hand the city has been long considered as a land of opportunities—as well as one of the places of the American Dream closest to the southern border—on the other hand it inevitably becomes a place of alienation, due to deracination, unrealistic expectations, and socioeconomic inequality. The weather itself has a recognizable role in the reconstruction of the noir ambiance, as "in the noir city, like the human condition, [weather] fluctuates between extremes" (Christopher 32); characters move through deceptively sunny, scorching hot suburbs and rainy, inclement pursuits in dark urban alleys. In fact, in Navarro's series, Sonambulo participates in frantic pursuits often happening in the pouring rain. Two sequences worth mentioning in this regard are

found in *Sleep of the Just* (10-20) and the story "The One That Got Away."

   As it happens in film noir, the nocturnal setting is prevalent in *Sonambulo* and supported by the fact that the protagonist is not able to sleep since he woke up in the present. Besides, he deals with shady small-time criminals, as well as supernatural-driven situations, and therefore often acts at night. Noir exploits the metaphorical darkness inherent to the night itself; aside from prevalent visual stylizations, the genre usually brings forth a representation of relations within society that comes across as pessimistic, often cynical and subjected to personal interest. Noir characters seem to move in an ambiguous dimension, where the storyline follows changing power relations, non-linear narratives, a certain eroticism usually confined to dialogue and visual implication, and often a disconcerting unfolding of the action. Moral boundaries often blur, according to the characters' needs, impulses, and desires. The psychology of crime intrinsic to film noir sees the concepts of good and evil merging and overlapping, inevitably eliciting contradictory emotions in the viewer. There is an underlying description of otherness in film noir, an implicit crossing of boundaries, whether physical—as in going to "darker" places within the urban fabric—or metaphorical, breaking conventional moral codes. The diegetic articulation of unlawful activities, shocking violence, sordid behaviors, unrepentant corruption, contributes to creating an unsettling sense of ambivalent alienation. Dreamlike—or rather, nightmare-like—is the atmosphere common to many a film noir. The viewer is disoriented by the uncertainty of the motives eluding conventional frames of reference (Borde and Chaumeton 11) and constructing the oneiric quality of the genre. As crime fiction writer James Ellroy has pointed out, film noir is "photographed to give you a heightened sense of displacement" so that as a spectator "you're inside somebody's dream, or somebody's nightmare" (in Kuperberg and Kuperberg). Ellroy maintains that the fascination with both roman and film noir stems from the entanglements and circumstances that cause the protagonists' lives to go awry and things inevitably ending badly—"the big fuck up" as he calls it (ibid). In some cases, overwhelming dream sequences actually appear in film noir, as it happens in the aforementioned *Stranger On the Third Floor*. In many a situation, the spectator is faced with sequences in which the boundary between dream and fictional reality is unclear. Especially when they serve the staging of the characters' displacements—whether to escape or chase someone—noir directors exploited a sense of hallucinatory

drive pushing them. In *Sleep of the Just*, the city melts noir and oneiric dimension as the transition between a dream and reality gives the reader a glimpse of some Antonio Sant'Elia-esque architectural renditions of a futurist world, characterized by machine-like superstructures (36).

In most narrative sequences, Navarro evidently favors the oneiric quality of noir rather than the sense of malaise often intrinsic to the genre, while retaining its nocturnal atmospheres. The evocation of angst and unease relies on horror elements rather than the noir ambiance itself. The artist's take on the oneiric dimension overlaps noir ambiance and a filmic magic realism—also defined as *fantarealismo*—remindful of Fellini's eeriest sequences, with their bizarre and yet congruent take on reality and nostalgia. Navarro indeed draws his dream related inspiration from several sources. If on the one hand his passion for cinema led him to tap into influential works such as Fellini's[5], on the other hand his own sensibilities as an artist definitely stem from his cultural heritage as well. As it will be analyzed further on, the Mexican American folktale tradition comes with an intrinsic sense of supernatural magic, often characterized by a blur between dream and reality indeed. Fellini's influence can be traced through the most visionary *Sonambulo* sequences, as well as in a peculiar sense of reality Navarro's character seems to live by. In films such as *8 ½* (1963), the Fellinian protagonist—getting in touch with his feelings and dreams—incurs in moments of clarity and irony on the reality of life; a stance assumed by Sonambulo as well, possibly thanks to his belonging to another era and yet moving shrewdly in the present.

Aside from a deep fascination and interest in dreams, their articulation and representation, Navarro humbly shares with Fellini a versatile approach to artistic expression. A keen comic books and strips reader, the Italian director himself was a cartoonist (in particular at the beginning of his career in the 40s), as well as—from the 60s till the summer of 1990—a steady transcriber of his own dreams, mostly by means of colorful illustrations (collected in Fellini, *Il Libro dei Sogni*). Fellini's later incursions into ways of exploiting the comic medium were marked, as well, by a strong connection with oneiric and fantastic moods, almost supernatural and yet realistic. It is worth mentioning his collaboration with artist Milo Manara, as in *Viaggio a Tulum* (1986) the protagonists set off to undertake a real-life

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[5] Rafael Navarro. Personal conversation with the author, August 2, 2020.

quest, extracting useful details about reality from dream sequences. The director underlined on many an occasion the strict correlation between his cinema and comics, identifying the latter as his main matrix of inspiration (Fellini, "Interview"). Besides the evident mutual influence on diegetic construction and the framing choices made by both comics and film creators, he recognized the role of comics in giving rise—by means of stimulating imagination and humor—to a critical approach to reality and social conventions (ibid.). Therefore— despite the apparently oxymoronic nature of the notion of "oneiric realism"—the dream becomes, indeed, a mechanism to bare the actual face of reality and, at the same time, lucidly highlighting its absurdity and relativity.

Dreams are primarily visual experiences and so are comics. Allowing the exploitation of both verbal and visual elements, the combinatory possibilities offered by comics facilitate the diegetic insertion of dream sequences, as well as the exploitation of the bizarre imagery peculiar to dreaming. Likewise, a disruptive play with the sequentiality of the medium can enhance the insertion of dream-related content (Barrett and McNamara 146). Aside from comic strips such as pioneering McKay's *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend* (1904-1913) or *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905-1914)—as well as Rick Veitch's reprise of the former as comic books in the 90s (1994-2016)—some relevant overtly dream-based comics have been created. In this regard, it is necessary to mention at least the *Sandman* saga written by Neil Gaiman (1989-1996) for its take on the representation of dreams and dreamworlds, as well as its popularity. More in general, the oneiric dimension has fascinated comic creators, even leading to the publication of eerie, investigation-based series such as Kirby and Simon's *The Strange World of Your Dreams* (1952-1953), in which various characters delve into the relation between reality and dreams, trying to trace connections and resolve mysteries through the interpretation of dreams. Through his characters, Navarro becomes the narrator of the oneiric dimension that lies behind people's attitudes and actions, translating their subconscious into images; his protagonist delves into people's dreams to see the truth behind words. Nonetheless, *Sonambulo* remains within its peculiar cross-genre, without yielding to fantasy, sci-fi, or dystopian subgenres.

Given how dreams exacerbate the anguish intrinsic to noir narrative, Navarro inserts often disturbing dream sequences in key moments in which the protagonist faces his criminal antagonists. The first sequence of this kind appears in *Sleep of the Just* (16-19),

introducing as well Sonambulo's trademark request "tell me your dreams". The visual construction of the following page reminds of Escher's stark graphic effects (17) playing with the black and white. Then, the dream recreation slides into a diegetic sequence (18-19) almost remindful of Japanese yōkai visuals. In "Surrealistic Pillowtalk"—Navarro's story in *Masks of Sonambulo* (2-7)—the artist has condensed Sonambulo's relation with the oneiric dimension, as the reader sees him "visiting" and coping with a series of dreams while musing on the connection people have with them, his internal monologue caught by means of thought captions. The artist evidently exploits the theatrical quality intrinsic to dreams, conveying anguish, memories, and expressions of the unconscious. Sonambulo accesses the supernatural dimension through dreams, outlining an uncanny zone—related to his deep sleep—between the real world and the unreal.

As commented above with regard to Fellini's dream transpositions, the myth of the director as a magically vaticinating character is deceptive—as well as a possible over-interpretation—and, at the same time, proves correct in his foretelling narratives (Ceccarelli 17). Sonambulo himself reads people's dreams to extrapolate details useful to unravel the case he's working on. The dream sequences might appear as hallucinatory and confused, yet they tend to carry images useful to the interpretation of reality, pointing the protagonist's investigations in the right direction.

TRANSNATIONAL FUSION OF NOIR AND FOLKTALE HORROR

The exploitation of horror tropes and moods in a noir narrative is neither unusual nor new, given that horror films definitely played a role in the development of film noir ambiance (Borde and Chaumeton 25). Navarro's work, though, blends in steadily the presence of the oneiric dimension, as well as supernatural elements that belong to the Mexican American cultural heritage, drawing on Mexican folktale and Pre-Hispanic myths.
Both horror and noir stem from German Expressionism—both stylistically and in the reconstruction of dark, doom-infused moods—and, especially in the 40s, in some films the two genres seemed to overlap quite easily and it has proven difficult for critics to define them accordingly (Hutchings 111-114). Furthermore, as Peter Hutchings has underlined, the 30s American horror can be viewed as an evolutionary link between pre-30s expressionist films and 40s film

noir. For his part, Marc Vernet has pointed out that many noir creators did not have connections with expressionist productions, and thus prefers to draw the link between American gothic film and film noir (Vernet 11-12). Aside from possible debates on the actual roots of the noir genre, it is safe to say that the upsetting, alienating, and psychologically induced sensationalism marking many a noir movie brings them close to horror renditions. The boundary between horror and noir blurs, in particular when elements perceived as supernatural or generally uncanny come into play and trouble the protagonists' lives. It is worth mentioning the existence of a few films in which noir and horror tropes and stylizations openly blend; among them, John Parker's *Dementia* (1955, later re-released as *Daughter of Horror*) also includes the theme of nightmares and delves into the protagonist's paranoia and troubled ambiguity.

Aside from the aforementioned Mexican production of film noir, the history of Mexican films inspired by supernatural themes is rather rich and often fueled by the reprise of supernatural folktales, tropes, myths, and superstitions. In the 30s, the horror genre began to develop and flourished throughout the 40s, usually exploiting well-known supernatural archetypes such as vampires and werewolves, as well as local legends such as La Llorona. Without delving into the Mexican folklore related to, or stemming from, its peculiar cultural and anthropological relation with death—on which it is worth recommending Matos Moctezuma, as well as the research and bibliographic work by Lomnitz—it is relevant to note that most folktale paradigms exploited by Mexican horror are crucially concerned with death, ghost-like entities, and afterlife curses. The *cine de luchadores* itself—especially in the 50s and 60s—intersected with horror and classic monster archetypes, although in a campier way, far from the oppressive, anguish-ridden moods delivered by film noir (for a study on the specific topic, see Cotter). *Lucha libre* tropes were pervasive across genres and would be exploited in many films in which some sort of powerful, fantastic hero was involved. Thus, the construction of antagonists would often verge toward exaggerated villain figures, whose evil doings involved meddling with monster creatures and unrealistic horrific plots.

Navarro's hybridized noir draws on these cinematic inspirations, delivering a peculiar blend of horror-noir moods. Entangled storylines and the strange, alienating unfolding of the action meet supernatural archetypes, at times verging on a campy atmosphere facilitated by Sonambulo's own disenchanted irony. Aside

from the evident influence of Mexican American cultural heritage in the shaping of the horrific components, the protagonist's encounters with supernatural beings are partially connected to the geographical setting, as his action physically oscillates between a more noir-infused Los Angeles urbanscape and horror-driven Mexican sceneries. In this regard, border-crossing acquires an additional significance, as it embodies the bridge between a reality anchored in the present—in which supernatural elements are strictly related to the oneiric dimension or to the doings of local cults—and a world of the origins, where supernatural elements seem to intersect with everyday life. The insertion of purely horror elements in Sonambulo's cross-border stints becomes representative of the transnational and transcultural boundary, as a diegetic embodiment of the problematic existence and dynamics of the US–Mexico border itself.

Killing cults, often dedicated to supernatural rites and human sacrifice, have been a staple subject for many a horror movie. Among films worth mentioning, in Lewton's *The Seventh Victim* (1943) horror and noir sensibilities and stylizations melt, delivering a story in which a cult is involved. Likewise, the main storyline in Sonambulo's *Sleep of the Just* arc is a crime case strictly related to a fictional satanic cult, inspired by the artist's own childhood memories of rumors about the existence of cult meetings on the Whittier hills in the 70s[6]. The narcissistic cult leader Eugene is an antagonistic character that will reappear later on at the beginning of the *Mexican Stand-Off* arc—again performing a satanic rite—as he repeatedly manages to escape Sonambulo's chase.

Drawing on the idea that the nocturnal urban noir setting can be interpreted as a representation of the masculine unconscious (Naremore 43), Sonambulo's night is often a moment in which the private eye delves into his memories, hallucinatory dreams, and fears. Outside of the oneiric dimension, his nights are populated by the protagonist's encounters with male real-life criminals and ghostly beautiful women. The collection of short stories *Sonambulo's Strange Tales* (2000) is characterized by phantasmal, nocturnal moods and it represents a dive straight into Mexican folktale. The volume starts with "The Old Country" (1-10), a story in which the protagonist has a brief encounter with La Llorona, a Latinx legendary figure who is believed to have drowned her own sons and therefore is forced to wander in desperation. In Mexico, the legend is rooted in Pre-Hispanic myths

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[6] Rafael Navarro. Personal conversation with the author, August 2, 2020.

often linked to female divinities such as Cihuacóatl—among which the version identifying the ghost with the *cihuateteo*, the Mexica spirits of women who died in childbirth—or Tenpecutli, whose diegetic background is very close to that of La Llorona especially in the Xochimilco area (Portal and Salles 63). The figure has also been intersected with the history of the conquest: the crying woman, mother of mestizo children, has metaphorically embodied the defeated indigenous people. Many authors have written comprehensively about it, but it is worth recalling Gloria Anzaldúa's Chicana perspective on the subject (1987, 35-38). La Llorona as horrific character and the variations of the related legend have been the subject of numerous movies. Notably, Ramón Peón's *La Llorona* (1933) is often considered as the first Mexican horror film; many have followed, including Rafael Baledón's gothic horror version *La Maldición de la Llorona* (1963), as well as a movie starring the aforementioned luchador El Santo, *La Venganza de la Llorona* (1974). The ghost appears at Sonambulo's office late at night as a fascinating client, apparently willing to hire the detective to find her missing children, whom, nonetheless, she assumes dead. Through a flashback—drawn in pencil, contrasting with the stark black inking characterizing the comic—Sonambulo recalls his brother's disappearance, which seemed connected to the presence of a mysterious woman. As the conversation between the two progresses, it turns out that the woman is, in fact, La Llorona. Her transformation—as well as her attack on Sonambulo (8-10) to strip him of his mask—is unexpected and shocking, as her true aspect is ghastly and horrific, thereby conveying the torment and pointless repentance she has been haunted by.

The second segment of the *Strange Tales* book is an illustrated short story set in Mexico, "A Family Matter" (11-26), in which Sonambulo is hired to solve a mystery surrounding yet another beautiful woman that leads him to cross the US–Mexico border. Once again, appearance is deceitful and the woman reveals herself as a monstrous being, possessed by desire. In the last story "En Calavera…" (27-42), Navarro introduces themes related to the Mexican celebration of the *Día de Muertos*, blending it with a classic exploitation of the zombie paradigm. In this case set in Norther Mexico—as he crossed the border to assist to the celebrations with his loyal assistant Xochi—the private eye faces the evil doings of a local *curandera*, who's trying to free her subordinate living dead. The c*urandera/o* is a central figure in Mexican—and thus, Mexican American—belief, as s/he is the beholder of botanical knowledge and related folkways, employed in

benefit of the community. The difference between *curanderos* and *brujos*—who allegedly exert black magic to harm—is relevant, although it can be blurry and often overlooked by observers external to the community itself[7]. In the comic book, the woman regrets having exploited her powers in her own interest, and she seeks redemption by breaking the bounds with the undead beings she created. The choice of articulating a zombie narrative is interesting, as at the time Navarro created it in the late 90s, the revival of the undead archetype in fiction had not yet developed. A keen fan of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and similar horror tropes, the artist intentionally brought into play the archetype[8] with an ironic element of surprise to it. The undead at first seem to be maliciously attacking people, but then it turns out that they have been freed from the magical yoke and they mean no harm to anyone. Despite being recurrent and successful in Western popular culture, the zombie genre had seen a decline in the late 80s, only to make an acclaimed comeback in the early 2000s across media—notably with the comic book series *The Walking Dead* (2003-2019). Right before the revival kicked in, another rare appearance of the undead in comic books could be represented by *The Goon*, which was constructed by its creator Eric Powell in the late 90s and regularly published by Dark Horse Comics since 2003. Powell's creation also deals with zombies and other supernatural entities, occasionally blending horror with crime and mystery-infused storylines; it is worth mentioning the special 3-issue miniseries *The Goon Noir* (2006), an anthology of noir short stories published in black and white in which various creators collaborated.

In Sonambulo's *Ghost of a Chance* (2002), the narrative arc ends with a long *lucha* sequence set within the oneiric dimension the private eye occasionally moves in (32-43). In this case, the supernatural pivot is embodied by a horrific Mictlantecuhtli—the main of the two deities governing over the Aztec underworld or Mictlán (Matos Moctezuma 72-82)—whose portrayal recalls indeed certain Mexica representations in particular. In his nightmare, Sonambulo finds himself in the land of the dead challenged by a jaguar warrior on behalf of the powerful god, outraged by the man's defiance. In the Aztec mythology, the feline is a symbol of power linked to the supreme

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[7] A rather good example of the fictional representation of this kind of practices and related dynamics can be found in the renowned novel *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) by Chicanx author Rudolfo Anaya, set in the US borderlands.

[8] Rafael Navarro. Personal conversation with the author, August 2, 2020.

god Tezcatlipoca as his *nahual*, or animal shape (Olivier 100). The jaguar myth of Tepeyóllotl (literally "heart of the mountain") is pervasive in codices, usually related to the night and the trope represented by the cave, in particular as way to access the underworld. In the period of flourishing shortly before the conquest, warriors wearing jaguar-stylized outfits formed a specific elite section of the Mexica army; in fact, Sonambulo and the warrior face one another wielding the combination of *chimalli* shield and *macuahuitl* (traditionally built as a wooden club with obsidian blades). As the protagonist wins the fight, Mictlantecuhtli is impressed by his courage and determination, sparing his life. The end of the supernatural wrestling sequence holds a hinted reference to legendary *luchador* El Santo as well.

The main storyline in the *Mexican Stand-off* arc (2004-2006) is set in Mexico and revolves around a supernatural plot, connecting with Mexican history as well. The story starts off right in the middle of the action: Sonambulo and his assistant Xochi are bound to face Eugene and his satanic cult again, given how they tracked him all the way to New Jersey. Unleashing a dragon-looking demon, their recurring antagonist manages to escape; nonetheless, a new character is introduced right away (13), bringing back Sonambulo's past life. The detective is bound to cross to Mexico in order to help an old friend of his, a professor in Pre-Hispanic history facing a distressing supernatural circumstance. In this case, Navarro plays with Mexican archeological history in order to serve the creation of a peculiar character, whose work is meant to be on a blurred line between facts and supernatural dimensions. Professor Girafales is presented as a genius mind, to the point he allegedly deciphered "the complete Aztec and Mayan alphabet in the 1940's" (19), an evident historical and linguistic fabrication supporting the reach of his fictional experience. The plot revolves around a legend of two conflictive brothers who are in love with the same woman, whom they killed by accident during a duel. Later on, they fought on antagonistic sides during the Revolution and killed each other on the battlefield. The story is enriched by long sequences of supernatural action, until the unresolved conflict between the two spirits eventually reaches an end, thanks to the intervention of the woman's ghost.

CONCLUSIONS

Supernatural entities strictly intertwined with Mexican traditional folklore, detailed noir ambiance, lucha tropes, all represent the distinctive elements that unfold and deepen throughout *Sonambulo*'s publication history. Navarro provides a complex, articulated expression of a Mexican American identity that comes across as unrestrained, unwilling to be confined in either stereotypes or related paradigms. The artist's take on his own cultural heritage challenges and at the same time draws on traditional Chicanx archetypes, creating a unique cross-genre narrative that reveals the multifaceted nature of Mexican American creation. The inherent transnational nature of *Sonambulo* reveals the inevitable connections to the "other side", whether as cross-border space, Latinx third space within the US dominant culture, or space of the subconscious. Its drift toward the oneiric dimension suggests, indeed, the existence of heterotopic spaces straddling the existing boundaries. In its own distinctive, highly hybridized way, *Sonambulo* creates a bridge across the US–Mexico border; a frontier that is, evidently, both material and metaphorical, representative of the social and ethnic boundaries internal to—and deeply rooted in—US society. Navarro's work represents and celebrates the diversity exiting within the Mexican American community, eluding predetermined categories and at the same time delivering a comic book that is profoundly connected to his Chicanx heritage.

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COSMOPOLITAN AND BORDER EXPERIENCES IN THE GLOBAL CITY OF *ZOOTOPIA*

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ABSTRACT
This paper analyses the Walt Disney's animation film *Zootopia* (2016) within the context of contemporary cinematic representations of global cities as borderlands but also as bordering, exclusive, diverse and cosmopolitan places. *Zootopia* is a film about the city space, in this case, about the global city of Zootopia. The film reflects contemporary global cities in which the negotiation of space is a constant issue. It portrays a modern metropolis formed by different neighbourhoods with contrasting habitats such as Sahara, Jungle or Tundra, all comprised in the same space and separated by physical walls. Animals from every environment, size and form cohabit together in the city, but physical and metaphorical borders are erected between them. The film brings an inclusive message breaking with borders inside the global city and portraying moments of openness between the protagonists; a bunny and a fox.

RESUMEN
Este artículo analiza la película de animación de Walt Disney *Zootopia* (2016) en el contexto de las representaciones cinematográficas contemporáneas de ciudades globales como zonas fronterizas, pero también como lugares limítrofes, excluyentes, diversos y cosmopolitas. *Zootopia* es una película sobre el espacio de la ciudad, en este caso, sobre la ciudad global llamada Zootopia. La película es un reflejo de las ciudades globales contemporáneas en las que la negociación del espacio es un tema recurrente. Retrata una moderna metrópolis

formada por diferentes barrios con entornos muy diferentes como el
desierto, la jungla o la tundra, todos comprendidos en un mismo
espacio y separados por fronteras físicas. Animales de todos los
entornos, tamaños y formas conviven en la ciudad, pero entre ellos se
erigen fronteras físicas y metafóricas. La película promueve un
mensaje inclusivo rompiendo fronteras en la ciudad global y
retratando momentos de apertura entre los protagonistas: una
conejita y un zorro.

INTRODUCTION

In the age of globalisation, some borders, rather than
disappearing, are becoming stronger than ever. Meanwhile, new
borders are being erected, sometimes in unexpected places. Global
cities are one of the places in which borders are starting to
proliferate, as has been claimed by authors such as Saskia Sassen
(2001), Doreen Massey (2007) and Manuel Castells (2010). Global
cities are contexts where cosmopolitan encounters and discords
take place and where different cultures may come together and
collaborate in the light of cosmopolitan aspirations. On the other
hand, they can be seen as places of exclusion where borders that
separate different minorities are established in multiple ways
(Bonal 4).
This article will look at the representation of borders and
cosmopolitanism in the global city of *Zootopia* that gives name to
Howard and Moore's Walt Disney animation film released in 2016.
Zootopia is home to animals of all shapes, colours, sizes, habitats
and dietary habits. The narrative deals with the urban structure
and the processes that take place within this constructed
environment. It portrays a modern metropolis formed by different
neighbourhoods with contrasting habitats such as Sahara, Jungle
or Tundra, all comprised in the same global city. The city is central
to the narrative as it gives meaning to all the actions carried out by
the different characters. The two protagonists, Juddy (a rabbit)
and Nick (a fox), negotiate the borders that are physically and
metaphorically established between different types of animals
(mainly between prey and predators). Zootopia contradicts the
perception of the city as a harmonious multicultural place where
various cultures coexist without any problems. It offers a sense of
the global city as a borderland of encounters and exclusions, as
spaces of globalisation and mobile borders where cosmopolitanism

exhibits its complexities and contradictions, but also its opportunities of collaboration and inclusion. Borderlands are defined by Gloria Anzaldúa as places in which "two or more cultures edge on each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (19). In this regard, this article will analyse *Zootopia* within the context of contemporary cinematic representations of global cities as borderlands but also as bordering, exclusive, diverse and cosmopolitan places.

THE GLOBAL CITY

According to Sassen, borders are gradually being established in cities due to the increasing flow of bordercrossers towards the metropolis. Thus, large cities become not only microcosms of a global world, but actual borderlands, which are constantly crossed by fluctuating borders and exchanges, as argued by Davis, Anderson, and Deleyto and López. Global cities are central to globalisation. Sassen argues that global cities are essential to some of the global economy's key functions and resources ("Global Cities and Survival Circuits" 255) and, therefore, have a direct impact on economic, social, cultural, and political affairs on a global scale. These cities involve "the territorial centralization of top-level management, control operations, and the most advanced specialized services" (256). Together with export processing zones, they constitute fundamental places for global economic activities (257). Sassen establishes a "global city model" in which she indicates the existence of transnational networks of cities that can be identified by the following events that take place in society: the financial growth of global markets and specialised services, the need for transnational servicing networks, the reduced role of the government in the regulation of international economic activity, and the corresponding ascendance of global markets and corporate headquarters ("The global City: Introducing a Concept" 29). While these transnational networks of cities are positioned in strategic static locations, they are also transterritorial spaces because they connect geographically distant places and populations. In light of the foregoing, cities have become "a strategic terrain for a whole series of conflicts and contradictions"

(39). Sassen classifies London, New York and Tokyo as leading transnational financial and business centres in today's global economy (*The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* 89).

Meanwhile, Castells classifies the global city phenomenon as a process that connects "advanced services, producer centers, and markets in a global network, with different intensity and at a different scale depending upon the relative importance of the activities located in each area vis-à-vis the global network" (411). Together with the three global cities mentioned by Sassen, Hong Kong, Paris, Frankfurt, and San Francisco can be considered major players in terms of finance and international business services. These global cities "are information-based, value-production complexes, where corporate headquarters and advanced financial firms can find both the suppliers and the highly skilled, specialized labor they require" (Castells 415). Moreover, Castells argues that global cities constitute flexible networks of production and management with access to workers and suppliers at any time and quantity required (415).

Another example of a global city proposed by Celestino Deleyto and Gemma López is the city of Barcelona. They argue that invisible borders are established in the city thanks to globalisation, gentrification, immigration, and tourism (Deleyto and López 159). The city has an extremely complex social structure and porosity in its borderlands (160). They point out how gentrification is a focal point in today's global cities. Through the example of Barcelona, the authors describe how the city has been transformed in recent decades due to playing host to two major events: the 1992 Olympic Games and the 2004 Universal Forum of Cultures. These events were the starting point for the redesign and modernisation of the city, which also involved a process of consumerism and speculation known as "'Barcelona Marca Registrada', the city as trade mark" (159). Similarly, the process of gentrification has led to the construction of exclusionary walls in the cities of London and New York, a practice whereby entire urban neighbourhoods are appropriated by real estate and business concerns, leading to the skyrocketing of housing prices and, as a consequence, the displacement of low-income families that once inhabited the affected neighbourhoods. Neil Smith describes gentrification as a socially organised "global urban strategy" in the twenty-first century, which portends a displacement of working-class residents from urban centres (440).

Overall, these cities have been object of research in many social areas. As will be argued in the following section, the cinematic field has taken advantage of these spaces to portray messages that mirror or distort social realities.

CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF GLOBAL CITIES

Films are cultural discourses that portray fictional global cities as real places while producing interesting dialogues that influence our perception of reality (Deleyto 6-63). Mark Shiel argues that cinema is more a spatial system rather than a textual system (6; 19). He points out that, due to its images and visual character, cinema provides an accurate representation of spaces and uses them to construct the social life that takes place in the city, in addition to relations of power and the current global systems that materialise in global cities (6). For Shiel, cinema is an appropriate means to understand the complexity of globalisation as modern cinema "exists as part of a much larger global entertainment industry and communications network, which includes older cultural forms such as music and television, and newer forms of techno-culture such as digital, the internet, and information technology" (10).

In *Cities and Cinema* (2008), Barbara Mennel claims that "like cities, films engage in processes of production and reproduction of social relations in spatial configurations" (15). While commenting on how global cities provide settings for narratives about migration, she also highlights a new global version of older analogies associated with the city, for example, the "alienation, now reflected in the representation of tourists, business travelers, and the displacement of migrants within global networks" (196). Mennel also asserts that films reflect urban patterns produced by social differences in class, gender, age, race, and ethnicity in how they code neighbourhoods as rich or poor, or landscapes as urban or rural (15). While some academics see the increase in the hegemony of Hollywood as an effect of globalisation, Mennel emphasises "the creative possibilities of cinematic exchange" generated by globalisation (197).

Deleyto highlights the fact that cinematic cities are not real cities because there is always a process of transformation in filmic narratives. He describes cities in films as artificial constructs that may (or may not) be based on the design of a real place (5).

Through a process of remodelling with new visual cinematic features, these cinematic spaces create discourses that have a significant impact on our perception of the real places and their history (7). Deleyto argues that Hollywood has never aimed to represent cities in a truthful way. Instead, producers prefer to use urban spaces to create amusing and captivating narratives and imaginary worlds. He points out the importance of cinematic urban fictions and claims that they "ought to be considered within the larger parameters of cultural, urban, and political discourse" (7). In order to define the global city as a basis for his analysis of the city of Los Angeles in different films, he draws attention to the economic character of these places. He identifies global cities as nodal centres of globalisation surrounded by the discourses of late capitalism (10).

Some Disney films create fictional cities, such as Monstropolis in *Monsters Inc.* (2001), the Land of the Dead in *Coco* (2017), and San Fransokyo in Big *Hero 6* (2014). These imagined spaces are constructed as global cities where different races, social classes, cultures, customs and forms of life are combined. What is more, in the same line as *Zootopia*, Rich Moore creates another imagined city in *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018), in which the internet itself is constructed as a city. The Company presents in this film an example of Janet Wasko's "Disney multiverse" overlapping films, different corporations and worlds. The internet is presented as a fascinating global city with multiple skyscrapers, technological screens with advertisements and where big companies such as Amazon and Google feature prominently together with popular social networks represented such as Facebook or Snapchat. The city is completely technological and represents a global economic centre of coordination like the ones theorized by Sassen (*The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* 89).

Out of all the Disney animation films that integrate real and fictional cities in their narratives, the case of *Zootopia* is unique in the fact that it is a about the city space, in this case, the global city of Zootopia. In the following sections, the different characters and their relationships, and the spaces that make up this film will be formally analysed with a focus on mise-en-scène, editing, framing, and sound. In particular, the article will explore the complexity of the borders established between the different neighbourhoods and characters in the global city of Zootopia.

FROM UTOPIA TO DYSTOPIA: CHARACTERS AND RELATIONSHIPS IN THE GLOBAL CITY

The 2017 Oscar-winning animated feature film, *Zootopia*, was a box office hit, grossing $341.3 million in the United States and over $1 billion worldwide. It is an example of a Hollywood global blockbuster that has been watched all over the world and which represents the power of globalisation on and off the screen. The *Variety* senior film critic, Peter Debruge affirms that *Zootopia* "turns real-world racial-sensitivity issues into something of a talk point" (67). Debruge uses as an example the moment when the main character, Judy, tells another animal that it is perfectly acceptable for a little bunny to call another bunny "cute" but not for other animals to use this term (67). Scout Tafoya points out that while *Zootopia* is a return to the traditional techniques employed by the Walt Disney Company because it features talking, anthropomorphic animals as its main characters, the characters are involved in a "very modern discussion of race and political corruption" (429). *Zootopia* has been explored from a racial perspective (Beaudine, Osibodu, and Beavers 227-34; Muljadi 236-46), a gender one (Debruge n.p.) and a political one (Hassler-Forest 356-78; Osmond 94; Sandlin and Snaza 1190-213). However, none of these works has space as their main focus.

In *Zootopia*, all types of animals live side by side but not without problems. Indeed, the plot includes a sense of tension between the carnivorous predators and herbivores. The city is governed by Mayor Lionheart, who is a predator, and his assistant Mayor Bellwether, who is a female sheep and, therefore, prey. The protagonist, Judy Hoops, a bunny from a rural town called Bunnyburrow, works hand-in-hand with a fox called Nick Wilde and establishes a fruitful relationship with him during the narrative, overcoming their differences, even though one of them is a police officer prey and the other a swindler predator. The city is transformed from a utopia (with a dreamy initial message) into a dystopia as it mirrors a real global society where diversity coexists with multiple borders between different races and cultures. *Zootopia* directly challenges the rhetoric of "us and them," good and evil, good guys and bad guys (Keeble 167) and narrativises some of the theories about the global city discussed above. The city that is initially presented as the place where "anyone can be anything" is in fact a border and exclusionary city. Zootopia is

presented in the opening scenes as a utopia where, regardless of who you are or what you look like, you are welcome and can become anything you want. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes increasingly apparent that this message is farfetched.

The opening scene sets the basis for the utopian Zootopia. Little Judy and some of her classmates take part in a school performance representing the grandiose and illusory ideas that they have (mainly Judy) about the global city. Judy gives the following speech:

> [...] (After performing a predator killing a prey). Back then, the world was divided in two. Vicious predator or meek prey. But over time, we evolved, and moved beyond our primitive savage ways. Now, predator and prey live in harmony, and every young mammal has multitudinous opportunities [...], and I can make the world a better place! I am going to be a police officer!

One of the spectators, a fox, says: "Bunny cop? That is the most stupidest thing I ever heard." But Judy pays no attention and proceeds to present Zootopia as a cosmopolitan city where this division between species--in other words, racial and ethnic segregation--is a thing of the past and everyone can coexist in harmony. The shortcomings of that utopian view of the global city have been brought to the fore by scholars such as Zlatko Skrbiš and Ian Woodward, who claim that the lofty aspirations of cosmopolitan utopias need to be brought down to the ground and replaced by simple day-to-day actions, such as changing attitudes towards difference, increasingly open-minded attitudes, contact with other cultures, and acceptance of different political opinions and religious beliefs. The narrative of *Zootopia* is developed in line with these new cosmopolitan aspirations, which, unlike cosmopolitan utopias, emphasise ordinary experiences, such as talking, eating, reading and even dreaming (Skrbiš and Woodward 106). In this line, Zootopia also puts forward a more realistic view of multicultural and interracial global societies today.

The message of the film develops primarily through the character of Judy. She is a small female rabbit fighting for a better world that is free from inequality. From the outset, Judy is advised against following her dream. In fact, Judy's parents encourage her to become a carrot farmer instead of a police officer since the idea of a rabbit becoming a police officer is unheard of. Nevertheless,

she fights for it and demonstrates that you can be whatever you want with effort and determination. Even though Judy maintains her positive attitude throughout the entire film, at the beginning of her trip to Zootopia, Judy is faced with a cruel reality. She arrives in the city with aspirations of being the first bunny in the police force. However, she is promptly rejected by her bigger and tougher colleagues, who doubt her potential because she is a small female rabbit and, by nature, prey. She has idealised Zootopia in her mind as a city of inclusion where discrimination and segregation between animals do not happen, and where all the animals interact and live together in harmony. Nevertheless, this idea is soon brought to a halt when she arrives in the city and sees the stereotypes attached to her wherever she goes, including the police station and even her own apartment. Judy becomes one of the stereotyped: "those who do not belong, who are outside of one's society," against the "social types," who are the ones that belong to society (Dyer 14). She starts to understand that Zootopia is a place where animals coexist, albeit with multiple borders dividing different species, classified by size, type and function, and that the city is compartmentalised by territorial borders and contains a total of twelve unique ecosystems.

The migrants in Zootopia (as in Judy's case) are challenged on a daily basis by the urban design and municipal policies of the global metropolis. Judy lives in a shabby apartment with unpleasant neighbours in a large building on the outskirts of the city, an area that seems to have been forgotten by the rest of the city. In the global city of Zootopia, she is segregated by what Mike Davis has called "the third border," that is the invisible line that foreigners come across every day in their interactions with other communities, a reminder that their lives are under constant scrutiny and that, in spite of the apparent freedom of movement, there are many barriers that are difficult, if not impossible, to negotiate (71). Judy is constantly undervalued and unappreciated by the citizens of Zootopia. When Judy joins the police department, which is dominated by predators, the main problem is due to her size and species. She is not even one fourth the size of anyone else in the department run by predators and powerful herbivores. Judy was hired as a part of a "Mammal Inclusion Initiative," but the reality is that she is marginalised and discriminated against. As a result, she is assigned to parking duty despite the fact that she was top of her class at the academy. Judy

needs to work long hours in the police department because she is female and, on top of this, a small herbivore (prey). The so-called third border follows her wherever she goes. She is constructed as a victim of society, struggling to make her way in a ruthless city, a position that is aggravated by her gender and species.

Zootopia also follows some of the conventions of the detective genre and, as such, Judy will play a key role in moving "the narrative forward to a resolution of the investigation" (Gates 6). As a female detective, Judy has an ability to move from one neighbourhood to another, crossing the physical borders established between districts, and having to adapt herself to each territory and climatic conditions, but doing it successfully, as is established in the detective genre. As argued by Philippa Gates "female detectives are exciting gender-benders that challenge the assumption that femininity and masculinity are fixed categories aligned with opposite sexes" (6), as the protagonist portrays in the film. Judy is a successful detective that tries to erase inequalities in the global city of Zootopia.

Determined to prove herself, Judy gets involved in a dangerous case and, breaking with stereotypes, starts collaborating with Nick, a fox, whom she initially blackmails for help as he is a professional swindler. Both protagonists find themselves navigating the huge city of Zootopia where multiple cultures, races and lifestyles coexist. This overwhelming city contrasts significantly with Judy's everyday life in a rural town. After settling in Zootopia, she carries around her fox-repellent, and despite establishing a fruitful relationship with Nick, at the beginning, she is suspicious of him. With some discrepancies, both characters get involved in a dangerous case in which predators, for no apparent reason, start to regain their wild ways of past generations and kill prey. Initially, their relationship is based on self-interest, but as Judy and Nick investigate the case together, they get to know each other very well, and "moments of openness" take place. A relationship that starts off with lies and insults blossoms into one of mutual empathy and trust. It is Nick who stands up for Judy when Chief Bogo wants her to quit the police force. Judy finds herself on the wrong side of an interrogation. Her face is illuminated by the light of a lamppost; she is framed standing in the middle of a circle of big, tough police officers—as if she were trapped in a cage. Chief Bogo's enormous stature is emphasised by the framing—part of his body is off the

screen while Judy is not even one quarter the size of the chief. She is utterly petrified and paralysed by fear and the darkness of the scene mirrors her vulnerability in this threatening situation.

The film uses a combination of low-angle shots focused on Chief Bogo, which assert his superiority, with high-angle shots, which highlight Judy's worried expression, to convey the anxiety and sense of inferiority experienced by Judy. The segregation of Zootopia is reflected in this scene. Judy is not a "social type" but rather a product of stereotypes (Dyer 14). She makes the invisible visible—rabbits (or small prey) can also be good police officers despite being totally discriminated against. In a moment of openness created by the tension of the scene, Nick tells Judy's boss that she is not going to quit because she was given an unreasonably short deadline (which has not yet arrived) to solve the case. Then, the protagonists walk away together from the other police officers and leave the place on a sky tram. For the first time, the two protagonists realise that they are both victims of discrimination, which leads them to join forces and look out for each other.

Yet, Judy is not only a victim of stereotypes. She also enforces them, as can be seen in a later scene. While thinking that they have solved the case, she takes part in a press conference in which she states that the recent return of savage predators "may have something to do with biology. A biological component. […] For whatever reason, they seem to be reverting back to their primitive, savage ways." Judy's use of the oppositions "us" (prey) versus "them" (predators) is noticed by Nick, who becomes angry with her. He tells her that he knows she has been carrying her "fox repellent" with her all along, showing that she cannot get rid of the stereotypes even when she has a fox as her best friend and work partner. Judy's statement at the press conference causes Zootopia to fall apart: in her words, she has managed to "tear it apart." As a result, the city is engulfed by chaos. The prey are scared of the predators and the predators are marginalised and belittled. Stereotypes are now turned against the predators. Eventually, Judy discovers that someone is targeting predators intentionally with poisonous flowers that bring out their savage side in order to separate society and diminish the population of predators. It has nothing to do with biology. She confesses to Nick that she was ignorant, irresponsible and small-minded, and they join forces again to solve the case once and for all. Their relationship is now

stronger than ever, and they rely on each other as they work side by side.

Throughout the narrative, the protagonists encounter multiple borders imposed by other animals. They constantly challenge these borders and fight against discrimination, while trying to prove their worth by solving the mystery of the savage predators. They work together to preserve the city's multiculturalism. The end of the film sees a moment of openness between all the inhabitants of Zootopia when Judy and Nick solve the case and restore the equilibrium between the citizens, which transmits a poignant message of inclusion. The differences between prey and predators are dissolved (at least momentarily), and the protagonists are truly accepted by their colleagues. Calm is restored in the city, and the fear of the Other is eradicated when the case is solved. In a final speech, Judy inspires Zootopia inhabitants to be more open to the Other and to understand each other's differences, claiming that "no matter what type of animal you are, from the biggest elephant to our first fox, I implore you…try, try to make the world a better place." This way, the film conveys a cosmopolitan message by dismantling borders inside a global city and portraying moments of openness between the protagonists, two natural enemies. Eventually, certain solutions are presented, such as becoming more open-minded and seeing difference as an opportunity and not as an obstacle.

THE USE OF SPACE IN *ZOOTOPIA*

This part of the analysis will explore the main cosmopolitan urban spaces of *Zootopia* where the encounters and discords of different species occur. It is worth highlighting how the mise-en-scène helps to portray the global city of Zootopia as a place formed by inner borders between different groups of society, but also as an environment of blossoming encounters, which, in some cases, are almost utopian. The use of space is key to understanding the dynamics of the film in which the aforementioned attitudes are perceived as a consequence of the construction of the global city. *Zootopia* is a reflection of contemporary global cities in which the negotiation of space is a constant issue.

After living all her life in a rural setting, Judy joins the police academy to carry out her training. She is the first bunny that has had the courage and initiative to enrol in this academy.

The police academy serves as an initial warning to what Judy is going to encounter in the city of Zootopia. It can be considered the first borderland in the film: one in which different animals, regardless of their dietary preferences and physical differences, work together and train as police officers. It is a microcosm of the global city, in which the different extreme weather systems that shape the city are recreated on a smaller scale. The diverse ecosystems give way to different challenges that the candidates need to overcome to become police officers in the global city, including: withstanding a scorching sandstorm, surviving a 1,000-foot fall, and climbing a freezing ice wall. While completing her apprenticeship, Judy is constantly despised by her peers. She is subjected to the exclusionary attitudes of her classmates and, even more so, of her trainer, a female bear who makes remarks such as, "You're dead, carrot face!," "You're dead, farm girl!," "You're dead, Fluff Butt!," and finally, "Just quit and go home, fuzzy bunny!" These comments do not make Judy feel bad or desperate. On the contrary, these insults make her stronger and more powerful, and after training so much harder than her peers, she becomes the best police officer in her year.

Borderlands are central to the understanding of the city of Zootopia. The city itself may be contextualised as a borderland. In general, borderlands acquire a new power within the context of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan theory. In *Zootopia*, the city is presented as a borderland where the action unfolds in several important spaces. It is a geography of power that produces an unequal geographic democracy (Massey 119). This geography of inequality is produced by the division of the city into different neighbourhoods that are classified by the species and biological needs of the animals that inhabit them. In the film, some spaces depict isolated neighbourhoods with no diversity at all, while others are public spaces where animals interact, work and establish social relationships (like Downtown). Zootopia is a space of Otherness where multiple cultures coexist, which gives rise to fruitful intercultural and interracial encounters.

The first glimpse of the global city of Zootopia is presented through the windows of a high-speed train, which is the means of transport that takes Judy to the city and, thereby, transforms her into a bordercrosser who migrates from her small carrot farming town to the huge metropolis. This journey changes Judy's way of seeing the world. She crosses the border from a rural setting to an

urban environment on a train, a vehicle that, according to Mennel, embodies "the changing perception of time and space in modernity–space as urban versus rural and time as modern versus premodern" (8). *Zootopia* portrays the train effect as it demonstrates the contrast between the rural area of Bunnyburrow and the urban metropolis. Extreme long shots are employed to depict the city as an enormous artificial modern city surrounded by water. As the train approaches the city centre the spectator is able to see the different districts of the city through Judy's eyes. Furthermore, there is a portrayal of the colossal borders erected between the districts to preserve one ecosystem from another. The end of the journey introduces the city centre, which can be considered the point of union between the different boroughs, where all types of animals interact and share the same space.

Judy's arrival to the city by train is one of the most powerful scenes in the film. The soundtrack reinforces this moment with a diegetic song that features the energetic lyrics "Try Everything" by Gazelle (voiced by Shakira). The song is about taking risks and exceeding oneself (exactly what Judy is about to do) with verses such as, "Birds don't just fly. They fall down and get up" and "Sometimes we come last but we did our best." Similarly, the chorus goes, "I won't give up, no I won't give in. Till I reach the end. And then I'll start again. Though I'm on the lead. I wanna try everything. I wanna try even though I could fail," which is a message of encouragement to try and experience new things. The song also anticipates the hardship to which Judy will be subjected in the global city. It is a song about personal growth and self-improvement in order to finally succeed.

During the journey, it is also possible to see the geographical borders that are established on the basis of the biological characteristics of the animals and their different habitats. Some examples of the different districts traversed by the train are Sahara Square, Tundratown and the Rainforest district, all of which are separated by huge walls that isolate each habitat from the climatic conditions on the other side. The border between the Sahara district and the Tundra district is formed by a wall with snow cannons on the one side and a wall with heaters on the other: a double wall that maintains each ecosystem isolated from the other. When the train passes through the Rainforest district, there is a border formed by a waterfall and a mass of trees. There is a lot of rain, which is artificially produced by a sprinkler system

installed in the branches of the numerous trees located in this ecosystem. Ironically, the animals are holding umbrellas, and there is a luxury hotel in this part of the city. Likewise, each district has all the basic amenities for the inhabitants. For example, Tundratown has a fish market, a chill-out zone, and a restaurant called Blubber Chef. Later on in the film, we see a nudist resort called "The mystic spring oasis," where naked animals practice yoga, play volleyball, roll in mud, and swim in a natural swimming pool, in a return to their biological origins.

The entrance to the city centre, a place shared by all types of animals, highlights the enormous buildings with extravagant shapes that make up Zootopia's downtown area. The natural sunlight reflects and draws attention to the modern buildings of the city, replicating the reality of global cities and a sense of freedom, which will be disputed in due course. After alighting from the train, Judy finds herself at the train station, which looks like a jungle with multiple natural spaces and animals. The figure of the singer Gazelle, and the empowering lyrics just heard on the scene's soundtrack, seems to welcome her from a big screen on a building opposite the train station. The shot contrasts with the following one in which Judy is seen in her new apartment: an old, dirty and desolate dwelling with unwelcoming neighbours who tell her that they are loud and do not expect to apologise for that. The lighting pattern changes, and everything becomes darker when Judy is inside the building. Nevertheless, she remains cheerful about being in the city of her dreams. These are two continuous scenes that unmask the reality of Zootopia. Despite its idyllic external image, the reality inside is somehow rotten and not as perfect as it seems.

The next significant space that reappears several times throughout the narrative and that is conscientiously constructed as a border place, is the police station. It is situated in precinct one of Zootopia. It is a centre of coordination for the city, and everything in the narrative revolves around this site. The first time that it appears is when Judy enters the building for the first time to become the first rabbit police officer. The entrance to this place is constructed as a broad and illuminated space with a reception in the middle operated by a non-scary predator: a fat cheetah. Judy attracts surprised, disappointed and even annoyed looks from the police officers as she walks towards the police station. Once inside the classroom, not even the chairs are adapted to

Judy's size: she needs to stand on her chair to see above the table. Lions, bears, elephants, hippopotami, and rhinos are the types of animals that Judy has for colleagues. The chief of Zootopia's Police Department is a male cape buffalo called Bogo, a stern and inflexible character who intimidates Judy from the beginning. The police department is also shown in different exclusionary scenes; for instance, in the press conference in which Judy accuses the predators of being biologically predisposed to become savage. It is a space that gives way to problems and clannish attitudes, such as when Judy is subjected to discrimination in the classroom. On the contrary, when the police officers give good news, they are always in an open space in a green courtyard. It can be concluded that open spaces in *Zootopia* facilitate positive attitudes towards the other, which in some cases are close to utopian. On the other hand, enclosed spaces, like the police station where Judy is belittled, give rise to a dystopian society where there is a need for a more inclusive and respectful attitude towards the Other.

Even if she is not welcomed, Judy is not willing to give up her dream so easily. She is well-prepared and will cross the metaphorical and physical borders of the city. She gets used to moving from one district to another without any apparent effort. Nick is also a bordercrosser. He was brought up as a swindler, which forces him to travel throughout the entire city, interacting with different people and borders in order to be successful. The first time the two protagonists meet is marked by the "third border," the invisible line that exists in a place mostly inhabited by foreigners reminding them of the multiple barriers that cities arise towards them (Davis 71). A third border has arisen to restrict the use of public space for certain citizens, namely, building boundaries in the inner city between neighbourhoods based on racial segregation. Nick tries to buy a "Jumbo pop" (giant ice-cream) in a different neighbourhood from his own and is rejected by the shopkeeper, who says "There aren't any fox ice cream joints in your part of town?" and "You probably can't read, fox, but the sign says 'We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone' So, beat it." This scene portrays how discrimination and stereotypes are present in the city, and that not everything is as it seems; borders exist between the inhabitants. The ideal of citizenship, in this case, the utopian Zootopia, is challenged by spatial divisions and mechanisms of exclusion that restrict the opportunities in life for the least well-off (Allen, Massey and Pryke 124). Later, Judy and

the spectator learn that the initial intentions of the fox are not reliable. Judy, due to her initial ignorance of the fox's real intentions, helps him to get the ice-cream, as she tries to fight against these discriminatory attitudes from the beginning.

When Nick and Judy start collaborating, this third border of exclusionary and racist attitudes shown at the beginning is counterpoised with the presence of instances of what Michel Foucault calls a "heterotopic place," a space of Otherness that only lasts a moment, in which the protagonists open up to each other, and share their concerns about their marginalised position in society. This space in the film corresponds to a sky tram which the protagonists ride after walking away from Judy's colleagues. For the first time in the film, Judy leaves her colleagues mid-sentence. In the tram, Nick opens up to Judy and tells his own story: when he was little, he wanted to be part of the "Zootopia Junior Rangers," even if he was the only predator. He was rejected and expelled from the community for no other reason than for being a fox. After being humiliated, he decides to assume his preordained role as a shifty and untrustworthy animal. The light changes at this moment; it is the crack of dawn, and the protagonists now have a clearer picture of each other on the inside and outside. It is at this moment that Judy and the viewer realise that predators are not the only cruel characters as they are also victims of exclusion. Judy tells him that he is much more than that. This constructed space has enabled Judy to understand Nick's identity—he is a stereotyped animal. This place is a point of union between them. Later in the narrative, she even encourages him to join the police force. The sky tram helps the protagonists to establish a fruitful relationship. Stereotypes are tangible in Zootopia's society, and the positive relationship between Judy and Nick paves the way for a new dynamic, in which both types of animals (predators and preys) can interact successfully.

Judy and Nick make the perfect team thanks to their blend of cultural, street and detective knowledge. Together, they explore the different parts of the city to solve the case, crossing the borders established by the city between the different species. In accordance with the conventions of the detective genre, each clue leads to a different part of the city and to encounters with inhabitants from each district. The first clue takes them to the naturist centre. From there, they head to the department of mammal vehicles, the Tundratown Limo Service, and the

rainforest District before ending up in Cliffside. Essentially, their investigation provides the viewer with a comprehensive tour of the city. By means of the investigation, the film provides a spatial map of the city and generates moments of openness and knowledge towards different cultures, races and types of animals. During their investigation, the protagonists meet a variety of animals, and fruitful encounters take place. For instance, on one occasion, Judy and Nick are captured and brought to the lair of Mr Big (ironically a small mouse), who resembles Marlon Brando in the opening scene of *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola 1972). After almost being killed by Mr Big, due to Nick's past insults towards him, Mr Big's beloved daughter, who is getting married that day, asks her father for a dance. In an unexpected twist, Judy had saved the life of the bride that very morning and, therefore, her father now is in her debt. Judy and Nick stay for the entire wedding and later resort to Mr Big for help at least twice during their investigation. They have created an unbreakable bond with this family despite their initial differences.

The narrative conscientiously unfolds in these blossoming encounters and creates fruitful spaces for its appearance, not only as environments where different animals (i.e., prey and predators) meet but also spaces where they search for each other's presence, such as the city centre. In the words of Elijah Anderson, this would be a "cosmopolitan canopy" or, in other words, an urban site that offers a special environment that is conducive to interethnic dialogue and communication (xiv), where all the animals come together in spite of their biological differences. Therefore, the city centre is a unique place for otherness. On it, Gazelle organises a "peace rally" when all the animals are fighting among each other due to their fear of the predators reverting to their ancient savage ways, so due to their fear caused by stereotypes. The singer and role model for the city argues that "Zootopia is a unique place. It's a crazy, beautiful, diverse city where we celebrate our differences. This is not the Zootopia I know. The Zootopia I know is better than this." As Judy, she encourages the understanding between species and the fight against fear and stereotypes.

The city of Zootopia can be seen as a product of globalisation; a global city in which convergence and divergence between animals from every type of environment take place. Sassen points out that "[g]lobalization is a process that generates

contradictory spaces, characterized by contestation, internal differentiation, and continuous border crossings. The global city is emblematic of this condition" ("Whose City in It? Globalization and the Formation of New Claims" 43). *Zootopia* constructs a cosmopolitan world in which collisions and conflicts between cultures are an everyday occurrence, and everybody collaborates and disagrees, and shares the ins and outs of their cultures. Zootopia is a place where different races, cultures and ethnicities coexist and where stereotypes and inclusion are depicted simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

This article analyses *Zootopia* within the context of contemporary cinematic representations of the global city as bordering, diverse and cosmopolitan places. *Zootopia* is a film about the city space, in particular, about the global city. Global cities become places of cross-cultural collaboration or places of exclusion and division, as argued by Bonal (4). In the same vein, Allen, Massey and Pryke support the idea of a paradoxical duality of cities, implying that the mixture of different cultures, races, ethnicities, and classes in the same urban setting can bring about conflict and intolerance, while also creating opportunities for mutual recognition and respect (3-4). *Zootopia* reproduces common problems caused by globalisation, including distrust, fear and prejudice, while also attempting to break with stereotypes and to portray an incredibly fruitful relationship between a rabbit and a fox. During the film, Judy tries to fight against the discrimination from which she and other animals suffer by constantly refusing to let anyone else dictate who she is or what she can or cannot do. Nick joins forces with Judy in her mission to create a more inclusive global city. They open each other's eyes and realise that not everybody is the same and that you cannot judge someone by their species or physical features. The film addresses certain stereotypes and prejudices that exist in global cities: difference, preconceived notions of the Other, fear of the Other, and racial profiling. Racial segregation is one of the main topics in the film, in which, despite the wide variety of animal species, they have found a way to live together in the same place. However, the borders that are established between the different species at the start of the film are only transgressed at the very end.

Zootopia dwells on the inclusion and exclusion processes at the heart of the global city of the title, and, ultimately, ends up solving some of the problems created by the westernised version of diversity the film presents. The different spaces displayed in *Zootopia* help to highlight the exclusionary attitudes like the "third border" that take place in global cities, in this case, between preys and predators, but also shows constructed cosmopolitan spaces, such as "borderlands," "cosmopolitan canopies" or "heterotopic places" that provide moments of openness between very different animals/citizens. Therefore, *Zootopia* portrays on the one hand, the borders and the processes of exclusion that occur inside the city, and on the other, the processes of collaboration between different inhabitants, regardless of their race, ethnicity, culture or gender. Despite all the differences and borders established in the global city, this space is ultimately characterised by otherness and understanding.

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SLAVERY AS NATIONAL TRAUMA IN RICHARD FORD'S "EVERYTHING COULD BE WORSE"

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ABSTRACT:
This article explores slavery as a national trauma in Richard Ford's 2014 novella "Everything Could Be Worse." First, slavery is conceptualized as trauma, emphasizing its role in the formation of contemporary Black identity in the United States. The categories of 'postmemory' (Marianne Hirsch), 'phantom' and 'crypt' (Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok) are presented, as they facilitate the study of multigenerational oppression and the transmission of trauma. Then, a brief discussion of the race question in Ford's fiction and nonfiction contextualizes the analysis of the novella. In "Everything Could Be Worse," which resembles a ghost story as well as a session of psychoanalysis, the intergenerational effects of trauma affect the descendants of both victims and perpetrators of slavery. Finally, it is concluded that, despite certain shortcomings, Ford's approach to racial difference is becoming increasingly sophisticated.

Este artículo explora la esclavitud como trauma nacional en "Everything Could Be Worse" (2014), de Richard Ford. En primer lugar, se lleva a cabo la conceptualización de la esclavitud como trauma, prestando atención a su papel en la formación de la identidad negra estadounidense contemporánea. Las categorías de 'posmemoria' (Marianne Hirsch), 'fantasma' y 'cripta' (Nicolas Abraham y Maria Torok) se presentan para facilitar el estudio de la

opresión multigeneracional y la trasmisión del trauma. A continuación, una breve discusión de la cuestión racial en la ficción y no ficción de Ford contextualiza el análisis de "Everything Could Be Worse." En esta novela corta, los efectos del trauma intergeneracional se perciben en los descendientes tanto de las víctimas como de los perpetradores de la esclavitud. Por último, se concluye que, a pesar de ciertas limitaciones, resulta evidente la creciente sofisticación con la que Ford trata la diferencia racial.

Every nation has its own ghosts. Britain's is the Great War—in Ted Hughes's famous formulation. Spain's is the Civil War—or so its ubiquity in artistic and political discourse seems to suggest. In the United States, there are reasons to label slavery and its legacy as the number one national ghost. Within the last few years, the Black Lives Matter movement has kept the momentum going in response to police brutality and racial profiling regularly hitting the headlines. Meanwhile, journalistic initiatives such as the *New York Times* 1619 Project and the *Atlantic* Inheritance Project are born with ambitious goals: "to place the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country" (Silverstein 5) and "to fill in the blank pages of Black history" (Goldberg), respectively. Unsurprisingly, literature in the new millennium has actively contributed to this reappraisal of national identity. In the 2010s, authors as different as Claudia Rankine, Colson Whitehead, Ta-Nehisi Coates, or Jesmyn Ward have been the recipients of a number of prestigious awards for their exploration of the Black experience in the United States and their celebration of African American culture. However, as the rotten fruits of slavery still determine the way US citizens function and interact with one another in the present, both Black and White writers struggle with racial difference and its consequences in their fiction and nonfiction.

This article aims to analyze the ghost of slavery as cultural trauma in the novella of an author who, for almost half a century, has relentlessly explored what it means to be American. Richard Ford's "Everything Could Be Worse," included in the last Frank Bascombe book to date, *Let Me Be Frank with You* (2014), centers on the typical Fordian Black-White encounter in order to turn racial tension into a productive force for national reconciliation. Although both the author and the first-person narrator of "Everything Could Be Worse" are White, it is by no means the intention of this article to

exclusively focus on the effects of slavery on White America or to conflate the suffering of the descendants of victims and perpetrators; quite the contrary, it attempts to explore a work of fiction where "both victims and perpetrators pass on the ineradicable legacies of violent histories" (Graff, "Aftermath" 193) without erasing the fundamental differences in suffering and responsibilities. Two preliminary steps will lead to the close reading of Ford's novella: the conceptualization of slavery as trauma and the overview of the race question in Ford's fiction and nonfiction.

SLAVERY AS CULTURAL TRAUMA

The end of legally sanctioned, race-based human chattel slavery in the United States in the aftermath of the Civil War was followed by another process of disenfranchisement of Black Americans. As the title of Douglas Blackmon's 2008 Pulitzer Prize-winning book suggests, *Slavery by Another Name* continued to prevent African American people from becoming full citizens. A similar approach urges Sabine Broeck to coin 'enslavism' in order to highlight the ongoing legacy of slavery. According to her, this term better conveys what is "a structure-generative systematic practice" (114) that explains the current subjugation of Black people, from the discrimination of African Americans to the massive deaths of African migrants trying to reach the Southern coasts of Europe—instead of simply a circumscribed event in a certain time and place. In an analysis restricted to the US context, we see that in recent years a number of researchers and therapists have convincingly argued for the dramatic importance of slavery in the formation of contemporary African American identity from the point of view of psychoanalysis and trauma studies.

Janice P. Gump explores the intergenerational transmission of trauma that determines African American subjectivity ("Reality" 42). Drawing upon the influential work of Ira Berlin, Gump claims that, in the United States, the slave-master relation—with its cycle of resistance and subjugation—offered the template for all social relations ("Reality" 47). Trauma marks African American subjectivity due to slavery's dependence on subjugation as a means to annihilate the self ("Reality" 48). Rather than producing traumatic events, "the state of slavery in and of itself was traumatic," based as it was on "the contention that blacks were inferior to whites, inadequate, and defective" ("Presence" 162). Her work is devoted to an examination of

the principles of subjectivity of slaves—i.e. the principles defining who they are in a world that negates their selfhood—and how "such principles have been transmitted to descendants," all the while crucially acknowledging that Whites have also been determined by "culture's treatment of African Americans" ("Presence" 161). In the clinical cases she discusses, Gump establishes "links between slavery and familial patterns of behavior" ("Reality" 52), before concluding that the effects of slavery persist, that subjectivity presents "an historical and cultural determinacy," and that the past will be manifest in the future ("Reality" 52).

In a similar vein, Gilda Graff, in a series of articles over the last years, has conscientiously traced social and psychological maladies affecting Black America back to the time of chattel slavery. Criticizing that only recently has psychoanalysis started to pay attention to slavery and racism as trauma, and insistently making the case for reparations ("Reparations"), she focuses on the transgenerational haunting of slavery. Her analysis covers a wide range of topics and phenomena, including the unawareness of White privilege; the disproportionate incidence of unemployment, imprisonment, chronic stress and infant mortality in African American communities ("Aftermath"; "Shame" 156), and the individual and collective shame weaponized by Donald Trump in the 2016 election ("Shame").

Meanwhile, with an eye to improving the practice of marriage and family therapists, Erica Wilkins et al. discuss the residual effects of slavery (RES), i.e. "the ways in which the racist treatment of African Americans, during and after slavery, has impacted multiple generations of African Americans" (15). The authors review the literature on the term, comment on the incidence of RES in both African American and non-African American communities, and highlight the resilience of African American families, before concluding with a case vignette aimed at convincing modern-day therapists of the need to enhance their knowledge of historical traumas and multigenerational oppression.

The collective psychology implied by this last notion urges us to establish an important distinction for the discussion of race and trauma—that between psychic trauma, which affects the individual, and cultural trauma, which marks the memories and changes the future identity of a collectivity (Alexander 1). No character from the novella to be analyzed has directly experienced the evils of slavery. Rather, they experience slavery as a cultural trauma. As Ron

Eyerman puts it, "slavery is traumatic for those who share a common fate, not necessarily a common experience" (14-5). Eyerman approaches slavery as the primal scene that unites all African Americans, a "collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people" (1). The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s marks the entrance of slavery into the national collective memory—the moment when the cultural trauma of a group becomes a national trauma, the impact of which reaches across time and country, as Ford's text will aptly prove.

Although not directly concerned with slavery, the work of Marianne Hirsch and Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok proves invaluable for understanding the intricacies of the intergenerational transmission of trauma in Ford's novella. Hirsch coined "postmemory" to define "the familial inheritance and transmission of cultural trauma" ("Surviving" 9); this term conveys "its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, its secondary, or second-generation memory quality, its basis in displacement, its vicariousness and belatedness" ("Surviving" 9). Rather than strictly an identity position, Hirsch prefers to see postmemory "as an intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, linked specifically to cultural or collective trauma" ("Surviving" 10). Although originally used to address the plight of children of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch contends that "it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or traumatic events and experiences" (*Family* 22), such as chattel slavery.

For their part, Abraham and Torok approach the intergenerational effects of trauma through the notions of the "phantom" and the "crypt." The former is a gap, "a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious—for good reason" (Abraham 173), and its haunting originates from the secrets of others. The latter is the sealed-off psychic place where the unspeakable memory is entombed (Abraham and Torok 141). Both phantom and crypt represent two obstacles to introjection, i.e. the process that allows us "to remember the past, recall what was taken from us, understand and grieve over what we have lost to trauma, and so find and renew ourselves" (Rand, "Introduction" 13). In this model, repressed memories of violence inevitably return to later generations in the form of ghostly presences, giving way to a tension between revealing and concealing. In Jacques Derrida's formulation, the key to resolve this tension is offered by cryptographic language: a set of "words buried alive" that provide access to the crypt within the

self (Derrida, "*Fors*" xxxv). The fact that Abraham and Torok's "phantom" and the idea of the dead's unfinished business being handed down to their descendants derive from folklore (Rand, "Editor's Note" 166-7) is particularly fitting for our analysis, as Ford's novella resorts to the conventions of gothic fiction.

Needless to say, the study of slavery as trauma has not been limited to the fields of clinical psychology, psychiatry, sociology, or criminal justice; scholars such as Vivien Green Fryd utilize the categories of trauma, slavery, and haunting to examine artistic creation. Fryd relies both on Hirsch's "postmemory" and Joy DeGruy's "post-traumatic slave syndrome" (PTSS) in order to explore "the 'intergenerational transmission of trauma' as postmemory" in the art of Kara Walker (146). Dominated by ghostly presences, Walker's installations force the viewer to perceive trauma "as relentlessly and continuously invading upon the present as PTSS, disturbing the process of recovery, healing, or closure" (156). The present article will follow a similar path, applying the key concepts advanced in this literature review to the analysis of Richard Ford's "Everything Could Be Worse," for which the following brief discussion of the race question in Ford provides the necessary context.

RICHARD FORD AND THE RACE QUESTION

A key text to understand race as a source of anxiety in Ford's writing is his 1999 essay for the *New York Times*, "In the Same Boat." The complexity of race relations, guilt, and responsibility permeate this essay, where Ford acknowledges how difficult he finds it "to have a genuine conversation about race." On the one hand, he has no qualms about admitting the wrongs caused by Whites, the consequences of which still determine the worth of Black lives in the United States. On the other hand, he also establishes a clear distinction between individual and social responsibility: "I don't understand why anybody might think I would personally apologize for the abomination of slavery when I never caused it." Ford makes a case for his right to explore race in his writing: "Most of us still act as if race is 'a black issue,' that in essence blacks own race, and we decidedly don't own it." Not only is this a veiled criticism on certain White *and* Black attitudes, but also the basis for Ford's rejection of race as a binary opposition: "[Race] may be the most important public issue I've faced in my personal life, but as a drama of opposites, it poses a dulling, unresolvable dilemma" ("Boat").

"In the Same Boat" becomes an act of confession in which Ford discusses his careless use of 'the N-word'[1]–a term he surprised himself having used in letters to friends even as a well-established writer in his thirties. He defends, nonetheless, his innocence when charged with racism, which brings to mind Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's notion of "racism without racists" as the key for maintaining the contemporary racial order. Contentious as it is, Ford's essay helps us understand the current value of the race question both in his fiction and in American social relationships. What is more, a reading of "In the Same Boat" *vis-à-vis* his latest fiction—of which "Everything Could Be Worse" is a prime example—exemplifies the increasing sophistication of Ford's approach to racial difference.

Ford's arguably most accomplished body of work to date—the Frank Bascombe saga: *The Sportswriter* (1986), *Independence Day* (1995), *The Lay of the Land* (2006) and *Let Me Be Frank with You*— encompasses three decades of middle-class, male, White life in the United States while intimating the need to reassess certain national values, with every succeeding book revealing a growing preoccupation with racial interactions and processes. *The Sportswriter*, which barely addresses the obvious implications of narrating from the point of view of a White male, portrayed a homogenous society in which only a small number of apparently innocent details and slips of the tongue threatened to expose hidden racial dynamics and the resulting power imbalance in the fictional New Jersey suburb of Haddam. Black and White relations became central to its sequel, to the extent that Ford "wanted *Independence Day* to be about race" (Duffy 68). At this stage of his work, a conversation about race largely meant an exploration of Black-White relationships, and race became a relevant topic in the few episodes where Black characters were introduced, which fits the common belief to which Whiteness Studies has given the lie: "Other people are raced, we are just people" (Dyer 1). The second Bascombe novel shows that, in a heavily racialized nation, White and Black individuals "are condemned to function within their oppositional historical identities" even if they belong to the same country, society and generation (Duffy 69). In other words, social functions are defined in racial terms. The unsurpassable divide that hinders Black and White relations in *Independence Day* is identified in Bascombe's

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[1] For the avoidance of doubt, Ford uses the actual slur but I have opted for the euphemism 'the N-word.'

vividly described chance meeting with an African American removal man, Mr. Tanks, embodiment of a Black masculinity historically constructed as subordinate. As the episode suggests, this fact alone proves stronger than any common ground or similar life experiences between men about the same age, divorced, and with children.

The impossibility of a significant exchange across racial boundaries informs later non-Bascombe stories such as "Leaving for Kenosha," included in *Sorry for Your Trouble* (2020), where a crucial distinction is introduced. Now, the younger generations—exemplified by the story's narrator's daughter, Louise, and her friend, Ginny—seem to be oblivious to the gulf preventing their parents from any meaningful relationship, thus projecting an auspicious image of understanding and communion that points to Ford's statement: "Only actual interracial contact can hope to bring about a bettering of our shared lives" ("Boat"). Ginny herself, the child of a mixed-race relationship, provides a rare instance of the female body as a site for national reconciliation—all the more unusual for a literary production such as Ford's, largely characterized by male focal characters and narrators. With its depiction of New Orleans after Katrina, "Leaving for Kenosha" is paradigmatic of Ford's interest in the social geographies of race, as are the discussions of gentrification as a new form of segregation that enrich the last two Bascombe books.

Both *The Lay of the Land* and *Let Me Be Frank with You* address the displacement of racialized communities and the deterritorialization of African American residents. The wider scope of the former, as well as its attention to the role and plight of Asian American and Latino characters in the endless process of national formation, facilitates the portrayal of a multicultural America that transcends the binary opposition of some of Ford's other narratives. Particular attention is paid to the narrator's Tibetan American sidekick and business partner, Mike Mahoney, a cultural hybrid whose process of Americanization brings forth a redefinition of mainstream notions of Americanness while challenging the "perpetual foreigner" mythology faced by Asian Americans. The last installment of the saga to date, the collection of four novellas *Let Me Be Frank with You*, set in New Jersey in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, is paradigmatic of the Bascombe books' ambivalent racial politics. As in the three previous novels, the central character is presented as the quintessential White liberal, less progressive than he would like to admit. Almost in the same breath, he is able to

present himself as a staunch supporter of Obama who disdains Republican bigots and to describe the dwindling African American population of Haddam as "vestigial Negroes" ("Everything" 66).

Taken as a whole, the Bascombe quartet projects the vision of a country where its idiosyncratic optimism and faith in progress are constantly challenged by racial disharmony. Like his signature character, Ford grew up in the Mississippi of the 1950s and 1960s, and therefore his approach to race reflects the ambiguities, contradictions, and struggles of the national experience before and after the Civil Rights movement. In a 2017 interview, Ford denounces the toxic, "apartheid environment" of his formative years in Jackson: "I felt lucky to be able to get out of Mississippi in 1962 and most of what I have done with myself intellectually since then has been to try to cure myself of that" ("New America"). The novella "Everything Could Be Worse"—where he subtly addresses the ongoing legacy of slavery, perceived to be a national trauma within the collective memory of the United States—represents a significant step in Ford's attempt to come to terms with his—and his nation's—past.

"EVERYTHING COULD BE WORSE"

As in most Bascombe stories, the setting is Haddam, New Jersey. The date: ten days before Christmas 2012. Within the last two months, Superstorm Sandy has become one of the deadliest hurricanes to hit the United States and Obama has been re-elected to a second term. In Haddam, the racial divide remains present. For one thing, certain residential practices still suggest the newest incarnations of segregation are at full throttle. As Bascombe, the autodiegetic narrator, explains, racialized communities that could not afford sky-rocketing taxes have been displaced by "white young-marrieds who work two jobs, are never home, wouldn't think of having children, and pride themselves on living in a 'heritage' neighborhood instead of in a dreary townhouse where everything works but isn't 'historic'" ("Everything" 66). Issues of cultural appropriation materialize in a demographic change that erodes the neighborhood's sense of community and turns Black history into a commodity for the pleasure of White America.

This is the setting for "Everything Could Be Worse," whose plot can be summarized as follows: Bascombe is unexpectedly visited by Ms. Pines, a Black woman in her fifties who had lived as a teenager in the house now owned by him. She last entered the place

in 1969, when it became the site of a terrible deed: her dissatisfied father, a rare example of a brilliant African American engineer living in Haddam, had killed his Italian-born wife and their son before taking his own life, while Ms. Pines was out in debate club practice. The climax of the story is the unfolding of the phantasmatic family secret. This tragically unsuccessful "mixed-race family unit" ("Everything" 103), as the narrator describes it, may read as a metaphor for the failed melting-pot society of the United States. Unlike many other female figures in Ford's fiction, Ms. Pines— despite the bewildering experience—is an articulate character with a voice of her own. Although the narrative is filtered through Bascombe's consciousness, Ms. Pines is given the opportunity to tell her own story, which in Ford's narrative signifies an act of consolation. Discussing his novel *Wildlife*, Ford explains: "If loneliness is the disease, then the story is the cure" (Walker 143). In the case of Ms. Pines, her malady has wider historical and personal implications than mere loneliness. Her trauma resists narrative, and she struggles for closure after decades of repressed silence. It remains to be seen whether story will also be the cure for her.

In order to properly apply the concepts of postmemory, intergenerational trauma, the phantom and the crypt to the study of this novella, it is necessary to account for the ways in which narratives of the nation and the family work as secrets in the text. In Ms. Pines's story, Ford rewrites what Ashraf Rushdy labels as the "family secret of America" (2): slavery and, particularly, mixed genealogies. In "Everything Could Be Worse," it is the father of Ms. Pines who was a Black man married to a White woman. Of course, the configuration of Ms. Pines's family is no secret to her, but it is worth remembering that Rushdy does not define a secret exclusively in the sense of unknown information. To explain why slavery represents a national secret, he resorts to the work of W. J. T. Mitchell, for whom the position occupied by slavery in the imaginary of the United States is akin to that of the Holocaust in Germany: "that which we think we know about, what we can never forget, and which seems continually to elude our understanding" (Mitchell 184).

Mitchell's discussion of memory as a mixed blessing sheds light on Bascombe and Ms. Pines's experience at the former's house, which she has felt impelled to visit four decades later. Mitchell articulates the need to forget while remembering:

> What if the materials of memory are overwhelming, so traumatic
> that the remembering of them threatens identity rather than
> reconstituting it? What if identity had to be constituted out of a
> strategic amnesia, a selective remembering, and thus a selective
> *dis*(re)membering of experience? What if the technology of memory,
> the composite visual-verbal architecture of the memory palace
> becomes a haunted house? (Mitchell 200)

For obvious reasons, this last image—a memory palace becoming a
haunted house—is of particular relevance for us. In the novella, the
house becomes a metaphor for the whole edifice of American society,
built upon African American blood, much like the Indian burial
ground trope in horror film and television. More tellingly, the crime
takes place in the basement, which, similar to the actual crypt in
Poe's House of Usher, represents the tomb where the unspeakable
remains hidden—one of those "cultural and national crypts [that]
harbor the repressed or denied memories of violence" (Schwab 84).
With such a reading, the image of the cracks of the American
edifice—recurring throughout the collection as a reflection of
Bascombe's long experience as a realtor—gains new meaning.

When Rushdy evokes James Baldwin's description of "the
blacks [as] the despised and slaughtered children of the great
western house—nameless and unnamable bastards," he shows that
this is "a family secret in every sense of that term—a secret within a
family, a secret about family, and a secret denying the possibility of
family" (Rushdy 29). With this in mind, it is possible to understand
Mr. Pines's crime as a family secret for Bascombe too, since they are
members of the same family: the American nation, haunted by the
trauma of slavery. Textual clues support this interpretation: for
instance, upon first catching sight of her, Bascombe thinks for a
moment the woman might be the daughter of his former house-
keeper, who recently ran into him and "threw her arms around [him]
like a lost relation" ("Everything" 69-70). What the story tries to do is
what, according to Hans Loewald (29), the therapeutic work of
psychoanalysis intends to achieve: to turn ghosts into ancestors—a
metaphor that reinforces the notion of the US as a family. Instead of
a bastard child or an incestuous relationship, the secret that is
transmitted in "Everything Could Be Worse," the one buried within
the text, is the (national) sin of slavery (and the subsequent racial
inequality not yet overcome).

Ford adds an extra layer to the transgenerational trauma—which is the trauma of racism or, more broadly, of being Black in America—embodied by Ms. Pines: the trauma of the perpetrators and their descendants. To begin with, Bascombe is the narrator and focal character of the story and, consequently, the reader experiences Ms. Pines's suffering through his perception. An unidentified power makes her "shudder" ("Everything" 99), but when confronted with the legacy of slavery, we may ask, with Derrida, how not to tremble? ("Temblar"). In one of his last lectures, Derrida claims: "A secret always *makes* one tremble" ("Temblar" 28, my translation), and indeed, Bascombe also feels "breathless" ("Everything" 71) and experiences "a sudden, *ghostly* whoosh of vertigo" before Ms. Pines has even entered the house ("Everything" 75, my italics). Nevertheless, the different epistemological and ontological dimensions inhabited by Bascombe and Ms. Pines—who, in fact, first communicate "as if [...] out of separate life realms" ("Everything" 86)—allow us to understand their radically different unspeakable experiences. The former, who as a young man renounced his southern "privileges to treat [a Black person] as a subhuman" ("Everything" 69), is haunted by the complicity of White America; the latter, by the racial inequality made concrete in the tragedy of her family. Mitchell's metaphor of the haunted house is relevant again, as in Ford's story "the phantom figures in the landscape or memory palace threaten to come alive, to be re-membered and resurrected from the dead as ghosts who act upon the material world and the body of the narrator" (Mitchell 202). To Bascombe's vertigo and Ms. Pines's shudder can be added the "distant murmur" and "creaking noise" emitted by the house itself ("Everything" 81, 99)—all of it, as Bascombe realizes, as a consequence of "the brief séance she'd induced in herself, in my house, in me" ("Everything" 108).

The characters are confronted with the violent past entombed in Bascombe's basement, where the event perceived as traumatic took place. Down there is "black as coal" and "full of spooks" ("Everything" 87), warns Bascombe. Such an unfortunate turn of phrase represents only one of several linguistic traces that can be carried back to the central enigma—in other words, instances of the 'cryptonymic' or secret-bearing language examined by Derrida in his foreword to Abraham and Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* (1986). If looking for cryptonyms and other examples of what Gabriele Schwab calls 'haunted language'—a combination of "concealment and revelation" (54)—is the work of both the therapist and the

literary scholar, a close reading of the text forces us to ponder the meaning of the "pair of enormous, self-important crows" ("Everything" 91)—black animals par excellence—witnessing from the back yard the exchange taking place in the house. Or whether the O. J. ("Everything" 81) offered by the host to his visitor stands only for innocuous orange juice or is a veiled reference to O. J. Simpson—not for nothing is Ms. Pines about to tell the story of a White woman murdered by her Black husband.

　　　Her speech thinly veils the phantasmatic nature of the experience when she mentions "how *ghastly* it all was" ("Everything" 105, my italics). The etymological connection with 'ghost' conveys in the reader one of several processes of haunting taking place in the text. The most obvious is related to the effect of the crime on Ms. Pines. She is haunted by the returning event she has not been able to process—at least, until this visit. In Bascombe's house, she is "light-headed," "transfixed," enters "a dream state," and behaves "as if she'd heard something—her name spoken, someone entering the room" ("Everything" 80, 81, 86, 102). As Ms. Pines gathers her courage to confront her past, Bascombe bears witness to her testimony. Lauren Berlant points to "an impersonal intimate letter to a stranger" as the quintessential testimonial form (46); and that is, to a significant extent, what "Everything Could Be Worse" offers. It is tempting to read the whole text as a session of psychoanalysis, which in the words of Nicholas Rand, "converts silence into speech, displaying the secret in its initial openness, conjuring up the concealed lives of the dead whose undetected machinations unhinge the mind of the living" ("Introduction" 22). Within this interpretation of the novella, countertransferential responses can be identified. Ms. Pines's/The analysand's vivid recollection has so strong an impact on her host/analyst that he can

> feature the lot of them—all four Pines—breathing in these rooms, climbing the stairs, trading in and out the single humid bathroom, congregating in what was then the "dining room," talking over school matters, eating PB&J's, all of them satellites of one another in empty space, trying, trying, trying to portray a cohesive, prototype, mixed-race family unit, and not succeeding. (Ford, "Everything" 103)

The paratactic juxtaposition of gerund phrases evoking the everyday actions of these specters, as well as the obsessive repetition of "trying"—half plea, half lament—hint at Bascombe's emotional

entanglement with the woman. It is little wonder that the session leaves him feeling "muted, grief counselor-ish" ("Everything" 107).

At the same time, Ms. Pines herself is depicted as a ghostly vision. She unexpectedly interrupts Bascombe's quiet life—she "simply *appeared*," as he puts it ("Everything" 71)—as the uncanny reminder of conflicting racial relations. Once inside the house, she is repeatedly perceived by Bascombe as an apparition, an entity that pinches her cheeks "as if her presence needed certifying," with a "body [that] seemed to be about to rise" ("Everything" 101, 102). At some point, Bascombe wonders whether "in fact she wasn't a *figment*—my personal-private phantasm for wrongs I'd committed, never atoned for, and now had to pay off" ("Everything" 104). An inevitable question—the one that brings this analysis to its final stage—ensues: are those wrongs the horror of slavery and racism?

FROM INNOCENCE TO RESPONSIBILITY

While the Richard Ford who wrote "In the Same Boat" in 1999 would probably reject any notion of personal responsibility—"I don't understand why anybody might think I would personally apologize for the abomination of slavery when I never caused it" was, as already stated, his main argument back then ("Boat")—, there is ample evidence of the narrative voice in "Everything Could Be Worse" being aware not only of lingering racial injustice—"Black people bear a heavy burden trying to be normal. It's no wonder they hate us. I'd hate us, too" ("Everything" 69)—but also of the fact that we are not "really the same under the skin" ("Everything" 66), and that claiming the contrary is just "phony, race-neutral natter" ("Everything" 86).[2] In his old age, Bascombe fully understands the words of Rushdy, who claims that individual innocence and refusing to accept responsibility are

> symptoms of a malaise, if not an actual illness, that comes of an inability to comprehend the function of the past. What does the past mean in the formation of what we call the present? What can the past mean for a contemporary society founded upon or the product

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[2] Although one could rightly argue that the essay as a form conveys the writer's opinions and worldview in a way narrative fiction does not—should not—have to, the fact remains that Bascombe's increasing sensibility towards racial difference as a social issue is nowhere as explicit as in the last book of the saga—regardless of his status as Ford's mouthpiece.

> of the horrors of slaughter and dehumanization in the effort to
> exploit labor, torture people, and recreate race? [...] What is this past
> that made possible the present, that gave form and structure to the
> society we live in, that produced the inequities we either recreate or
> try to amend, that, in fact, created our sensibility to be alert to a
> past and our epistemology to understand it *as* past? (Rushdy 3)

Even if he does not have a simple answer to them, Bascombe—
relentless scrutinizer of self and others—seems to have addressed
these questions.

Reading "Everything Could Be Worse" can be a disconcerting
experience. The underlying sense of a haunted national memory,
surprisingly materialized in the unpleasant "cloudy little gut
bubbles" against which Bascombe fights throughout the story
("Everything" 95), contrasts with a rather optimistic ending. As the
story comes to a close, characters sense something has changed for
the best. They are closer to Ford's ideal for White-Black relations, to
the interracial contact that "can hope to bring about a bettering of
our shared lives" ("Boat"). To a certain extent, mutual profit and
reconciliation have been achieved. At the very least, the visit has
managed to neutralize "the murderous basement" ("Everything" 109).
The story invites us to accept that this call for hope is triggered by
the historic election of Barack Obama as president of the United
States, which took place before the publication of *Let Me Be Frank
with You*. For Bascombe, a staunch Democrat, Obama's election
prefigures a crucial step towards racial understanding. In fact, after
certain significant exchange has been achieved between the only two
characters of the story, he says: "This was the grainy, human, non-
race based contact our President has in mind for us" ("Everything"
104), fulfilling a possibility of communication, "our perplexing races
notwithstanding" ("Everything" 92). However, the optimism of such
an encounter contrasts with Ford's acknowledgement that,

> when you have as many decades as we had in the United States in
> which again human beings were imported against their will as
> chattels and then an enormous civil war was fought to keep them as
> chattel, that just doesn't heal up. Certainly not in my lifetime—
> probably not in anybody's foreseeable lifetime—is the issue of race
> going to be solved in the United States. Even with as wonderful a
> man as Obama has been... ("New America")

Bascombe's final ruminations point to that long process of national reconciliation. When on the very last page of the novella he contends that at the heart of his encounter with Ms. Pines was "a family tragedy of epic proportion, requiring years to face, impossible to reconcile, with much left to accomplish and not much time to do it" ("Everything" 111), it is difficult not to hear in his words the reverberation of a larger story—one that goes beyond the four members of a family to reach millions of Americans over 400 years. After all, the history of the United States proves that, as Janice Gump puts it, "no single event can alter a construct as elemental as race, not even one as momentous as the election of an African American President. Race permeates the culture too much and too unconsciously to so readily yield" ("Reality" 45).

In any case, it is no surprise that Trump's election lies between Bascombe's optimism in 2015 and Ford's pessimism in 2017. Some would reject such a notion as too simplistic, arguing that Obama did not (could not?) deliver what he promised. This is the bone of contention between notable public intellectuals such as Ta-Nehisi Coates and Cornell West (West, "Neoliberal Face"; Sharma, "One-Sided War"). Interestingly, "Everything Could Be Worse" plays with the idea of Obama as arbiter of racism, much to the ease of mind of his White voters, when Bascombe worries about projecting an image of himself as a racist: "It wouldn't have been racist, would it, to let Ms. Pines leave [before she discloses the climax of the story]? President Obama would've understood" ("Everything" 103). The reader may wonder whether Bascombe's yearning for a "non-race based contact" and the subsequent advocacy of the blurring of racial lines project a well-intentioned, White-liberal agenda which is in fact devoid of political substance. Nevertheless, the older Bascombe gets, the more he is willing to confront what Eve Sedgwick would describe as his 'privilege of unknowing'—the White entitlement that minimizes the effects of the US racial hierarchy, in contrast with the burden of knowledge born by the structural subordinate. Without doubt, in a society where racism keeps staining the socio-political landscape, more African American voices are needed. However, along with this necessity comes the one expressed by Schwab: "both the descendants of victims and the descendants of perpetrators need to break the silence. They also need to escape their mutual isolation and begin talking about their different traumatic histories together" (82). Indeed, Richard Ford's fiction could be read as a valuable

attempt, from the descendants of perpetrators, to advance such a dialogue.

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IDENTITY AS A CONSTRUCT: READING BLACKNESS IN EUGENE O'NEILL'S *THE EMPEROR JONES*

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ABSTRACT
This paper aims to explore how racialized identities are typified as a modernist construct in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920). To this end, the notion of whiteness is identified as a mediated construct and contextualized in the proliferation of American minstrel shows. This popular entertainment projected to white audiences the racial means of differentiation from black caricatures and clichés at the time of segregation. The echoes of minstrel shows and modernists' instrumentalization of 1920s primitivism serve to initially address the characterization of blackness in Brutus Jones' identity. Assessed through this in-between construction of symbolic borderlands in which the protagonist is both colonizer and colonized, his blackness becomes a metaphorical mask of otherness while his whiteness shapes the colonial performance of material whiteness. Although he envisions the white ideal in his systematic practices in the Caribbean island, his fragmented identity and his hybridity subject him to a primeval racialized past, to primitivism and atavism.

RESUMEN
Este artículo tiene como objetivo examinar la medida en que las identidades racializadas son tipificadas como un constructo modernista en *El Emperador Jones* (1920) de Eugene O'Neill. Para tal fin, la noción de blanquitud es identificada como un constructo mediado y contextualizado en la proliferación de los *minstrel shows*

americanos. Esta forma de entretenimiento popular proyectó a las audiencias blancas los medios raciales de diferenciación frente a las caricaturas negras y clichés durante la segregación. Los ecos de los *minstrel shows* y la instrumentalización modernista del primitivismo de la década de 1920 sirven para inicialmente abordar la caracterización de la negritud en la identidad de Brutus Jones. Evaluado a través de esta construcción intermedia de los márgenes simbólicos en los que el protagonista es tanto, colonizador como colonizado, su negritud se convierte en una máscara metafórica de otredad mientras que su blanquitud moldea la interpretación colonial de la blanquitud material. Aunque él aspira al ideal blanco en sus prácticas sistemáticas en la isla caribeña, su identidad fragmentada e híbrida lo somete a un pasado primigenio y racializado, al primitivismo y atavismo.

INTRODUCTION

Eugene O'Neill's theater was influenced by modernists' search for aesthetics, innovation and experimentation, and by the tensions and ambivalences of dramatic literary modernism (Cunningham 12, 15; Ellmann and Feidelson vi).[1] In 1920 he staged *The Emperor Jones* at the Broadway Theater as an expressionistic exploration of identity. For the first time in American history, a black actor was featured for a leading role in O'Neill's play, and on the Broadway stage. The dramatist's choice for Brutus Jones' role was Charles Gilpin, an actor who was familiarized with the acting in popular minstrel shows (Monroe 139). Gilpin's membership in The Provincetown Players came at the time when Jim Crow Laws legalized racial segregation.[2] Before the 1920s, black actors almost exclusively participated in minstrelsy. These stereotyped shows drew on comedic distortions of African American culture and history to white audiences (Jouve 4; Bloomquist 412-414). The "representation of blackness" was also entrusted to "whites in blackface," although African Americans became part of minstrelsy entertainment in the 1840s (Monks 540).

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[1] O'Neill's departure from sentimental melodrama and moralism in *The Emperor Jones* and *The Touch of the Poet* (1942) came to fashion the discourse of American modernity (Fiet, "O'Neill's Modification of Traditional American Themes" 514).
[2] The era of Gilpin's success "was characterized by a serious revival of the Ku Klux Klan, rampant anti-black violence across the U.S., Jim Crowism, legislative efforts to negate the Constitutional rights of blacks, disfranchisement, and other forms of racial discrimination" (Monroe 141).

This explains Gilpin's controversy with the Drama League. He was very conscious of the difficulties for African Americans in theater; however, this did not prevent him from receiving the recognition of the Drama League of New York for his performance as Brutus Jones. The success of *The Emperor Jones* on stage is well documented in modernist theater (Folino-White 98).

Critical accounts of O'Neill's work reaffirm its novelty, as well as the controversies in staging this play throughout decades. Harlem audiences urged Brutus Jones to come out of the fallacy of the African jungle and to go back to his original Harlem (Pfister 130). For Harlem audiences, Jones' depiction was a distorted reflection of blackness. In 1992, The Wooster Group staged their adaptation of O'Neill's play by exposing the characters' whiteness and deconstructing their identities as fictional constructs (Jouve 14). The portrayal of Jones' otherness and identity in the context of modernism has been mainly approached from the field of psychoanalysis, which combines the relationship between trauma and expressionism with Freudian and Jungian views of the unconscious and Nietzschean aesthetics (Nethercot 2013; Wenquian Zhang 2014). A major limitation of this approach to the study of the collective unconscious is that it "cannot entirely account for the centrality of race in the play," or account for the fact that "what is really lacking is a justification of the tribe's ancestral past being meaningful" to the individual experience of Jones (Nolan §3).[3] The dissolution of his colonized identity in a "symbolic oneness" reshapes his identity as a silent referent from an "absent origin that is never a presence" (Steen 607, 610). In other words, the protagonist's blackness is an artificial one, a symbol of otherness. As a fictional construct, the social alienation of the Other is possibly an echo of O'Neill's own identity. The ultimate collective trauma is shared by Jones and the natives of the island. The exotic and primitive setting of the play is a reminder of the racial anxieties held by white audiences (Smith 2009) and their "yearning for historical amnesia" (Beyad and Roshnavand 32). O'Neill's play has come to dramatically represent "what white society has done to black culture" in "his personification of African-American [recorded] history" (Diggins 147).

This brief introduction to the critical accounts of *The Emperor Jones,* and of Charles Gilpin as its leading actor serve to

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[3] For further reference to online literature without page numbers, the following symbol "§" is used to indicate the numbered paragraphs in which citations can be located.

contextualize the dramatic use of racialized identity as a construct in O'Neill's play. Primarily influenced by the primitivistic vogue of the 1920s, modernists' experimentation and aestheticized ethnicities shape the identity of its protagonist, namely, Brutus Jones, as a construct, an identity that is in the process of differentiation. In order to explore the portrayal of whiteness and blackness in Brutus Jones, this paper is organized as follows. Firstly, an overview of the minstrel shows in the American theater is given in relation to Jones' characterization. Secondly, the notion of blackness is presented as a construct based on modernists' fascination with the African continent, and furthermore, delineated on the physical and metaphorical borders of both difference and belonging. Thirdly, Jones' resourceful blackness is metaphorically regarded as a representation of O'Neill's otherness as an Irish-American. To the understanding of these complex processes of embodiment and disembodiment, fourthly, the journey trope is discussed as a cluster of narratives that problematize Jones' fragmented identity. Additionally, his hybridity is juxtaposed to his strategic control of the truth in the Caribbean while he maintains his dominion over the colonial enterprise. Outlined as a construct, the Emperor's hybrid and irreconcilable identity verifies the permeability of colonial whiteness and of atavism in *The Emperor Jones.*

WHITENESS AS A CONSTRUCT: THE MINSTREL SHOWS IN AMERICAN THEATER

The construction of African American identities in modernist theater was grounded in American minstrel shows of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Minstrelsy entertainment in America gave evidence of the fascination of national audiences with black culture since the late 1820s, at the same time that it had served as a justification for slavery before the Emancipation Proclamation (Bloomquist 411). Blackface comedies in the minstrel shows had let white audiences watch from a safe distance their own "fascination with blackness" (Ellison 79). Complex feelings and attitudes towards African Americans emerged from minstrelsy, which produced stereotyped images of both blackness and whiteness (Monks 544).[4]

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[4] Blackness was produced "through the grotesque caricatures in the images created by the minstrel stage, which subsequently mediated how black people themselves were

These shows, according to William J. Mahar (242) and Jacob Levine (13), performed a social function that allowed audiences to experiment a symbolic release of aggressiveness. Black caricatures from the minstrel shows reflected the effect of stereotyping originated from the plantation myth on the racial anxieties of Americans (Saxton 8).

Status-reversal comedies and minstrel shows reproduced comic characteristics in the construction of black characters. Characters usually in blackface were sometimes presented in positions of power and were allowed temporarily to dominate other characters, although they could not sustain their authority for long. As in the case of Brutus Jones, they were not entitled to possess power (Mahar 259). Jones occupies an intermediate position in the social structure of the Caribbean that not only stems from minstrelsy echoes, but also amplifies the abilities of his characterization to intervene in more than brief occasions or, "in farcical situations" (Mahar 259). Audiences understood O'Neill's Jones as a "construction mediated through minstrelsy" (Monks 555). But the play, as *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924), also legitimized the leading presence of black actors on stage, and, therefore "invited [audiences used to minstrelsy] to reevaluate their former perceptions of blackness and of the black character" (Le Bastard §1). However, the modernist exploration of Jones' African American identity was primarily shaped by modernists' celebration of the primitivist vogue of the 1920s and the Harlem Renaissance.

BLACKNESS AS A CONSTRUCT

Brutus Jones' portrait is constructed through O'Neill's one-act and eight-scene expressionist play. His non-fixed identity is one of the images of the "primitive, exotic and hedonistic black" of modernist literature (Beyad and Roshnavand 19). His blackness is "fit to galvanize a moribund civilization", in post-war America (Feuser 291). Modernists' search for innovation and their disillusionment with Western civilization led artists to explore other alternative cultures. The 1920s of modernism and of the Lost Generation were symbolically referred to as the Jazz Age, the era that witnessed the emergence of primitivism, the West's "remedy for its sterility and

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seen, and whiteness through the homogenizing effects of the burnt cork mask" (Monks 544).

bleakness," the "hedonism and exoticism" during the interwar period (Roshnavand 38, 41). Brought on by cubist painters and the avant-gardists in general, and the rediscovery of African paintings, the primitive vogue became a decade that brought attention on Africa as a paradigm of primitive life, the "notorious and frightening Dark Continent" (Beyad and Roshnavand 23). This "shapeless and demonic" continent eventually represented the trope of the primitive unconscious and the jungle as a reservoir of universal fear as in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) (Saiz 32). Through modernists' exploration, the primitive other was constructed as a mirroring site to escape history and to reiterate the nostalgia for the past.

Even though Charles Gilpin performed the leading role in *The Emperor Jones,* modernist primitivism problematizes Jones' blackness. Jones is introduced as a hybridized character from the moment he enters the stage. His liminal identity enforces a "racial masquerade" of whiteness, which is mediated by the "vogue of racial ventriloquism" in O'Neill's creation and in Gilpin's acting (Beyad and Roshnavand 28).[5] The notorious and irreconcilable description of his clothing and appearance foreshadows the tragedy.

> JONES enters from the right. He is a tall, powerfully-built, full-blooded Negro of middle age. His features are typically negroid, yet there is something decidedly distinctive about his face—an underlying strength of will, a hardy, self-reliant confidence in himself that inspires respect. His eyes are alive with a keen, cunning intelligence. In manner he is shrewd, suspicious, evasive. He wears a light blue uniform coat, sprayed with brass buttons, heavy gold chevrons on his shoulders, gold braid on the collar, cuffs, etc. His pants are bright red with a light blue stripe down the side. Patent-leather laced boots with brass spurs, and a belt with a long-barreled, pearlhandled revolver in a holster complete his make up. Yet there is something not altogether ridiculous about his grandeur. He has a way of carrying it off (O'Neill 269).

Jones is initially characterized as an intruder, a man out of his element. He displays a proud countenance and wears elegant clothes, but he is carrying out a performance. In fact, the 1920 production was designed to expose the fetishizing effect of Gilpin's

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[5] The racial construction of O'Neill's character was renegotiated by Gilpin, who rejected the repetitive use of the word *nigger* in the screenplay (Krasner 190).

skin in contrast with the white cyclorama (Steen 348). Jones' identity is strategically positioned between the masters' dialectics of whiteness and the indigenous peoples' blackness. Jones the emperor was Jones the Pullman porter and former racialized slave.

Nevertheless, like secondary characters who finally outwit their antagonists, Brutus Jones is willing to control the colonized, enslaved and oppressed peoples. One of his strategies is to take advantage of the masters' language by putting into practice the knowledge he has gathered in ages of servitude: "If dey's one thing I learns in ten years on de Pullman ca's listenin' to de white quality talk, it's dat same fact. And when I gits a chance to use it I winds up Emperor in two years" (O'Neill 271). The rhetoric of whiteness enables Jones to seize power by alienating the natives' lexicon as inferior. Life experience has taught Jones to gain leverage in the mechanisms of colonization, which are precisely the same strategies that had been tyrannically caricaturizing his whiteness. As in Shakespeare's *The Tempest,* language becomes a prominent force between civilization and primitivism. Jones' words echo Caliban's speech when he says to Miranda and Prospero, "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!" (1.2. 362-4). By the same token, Jones sees the profit in cursing, in other words, in using the masters' language to access the masters' privileges. But Jones' English is "distinctive for its rolling patois" (Steen 347). Jones shares partial features of both Prospero and Caliban, the domineering and the dominated. Indeed, "Jones has been intellectually colonized" (Mendelssohn 20). His bilingualism confirms his desire for whiteness, while it coerces him into bearing a volatile double self (Mendelssohn 22). His "identity talk" is directed to what he envisions as his identity, a collective identity that is shared by the masters of colonial rule (Rohlinger, et al. 180). Additionally, this racial ventriloquism conceived by language presents a clash between the influence of standardized linguistics and the freedom of non-standardized dialects that were being used after the advent of the primitivist vogue in the United States (Beyad and Roshnavand 29; North 26).

Dialect literature and comedy, such as minstrel shows, became popular in the Abolition Movement, the Emancipation, the Reconstruction and the Jim Crow period. Black culture and language have been the object of modernists' fascination and a valid source of exploitation for entertainment (Bloomquist 422). As an aftermath of the American Civil War, and the later Reconstruction, O'Neill's drama

results in a culturally unified white-American narrative. *The Emperor Jones* is part of an era in which social, cultural and political distress guaranteed audiences the continuation of widespread stereotypes of black American peoples. In Smith's words (61), America still held a national trauma that "sought to erase painful divisive memories and construct a conciliatory nationalist narrative," even at the expense of racialized de-colonization at the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the First World War. The collective memories of American whiteness created the symbolic borders that "delineate systems of difference and belonging" (Mendez and Naples 2). Based on systematic difference, the press refined and distributed part of the large propagandistic agenda that was dealing with racial issues. The struggle between white and black cultures at the time O'Neill's play was acted coalesces around the dialogue of border politics, the "figurative borders of inclusion and exclusion" during segregation; they are border politics that "destabilize constructions of agency and belonging as linked to formal legal categories of political membership" (Mendez and Naples 2). In this light, O'Neill's Jones is metaphorically transformed into a source of historical politics, identities and cultural memories. He has to embody part of the "American allegory" and, by extension, of the "traumatized American" individual (Smith 62).[6]

Regarding the cultural meanings and identities demarcated by border politics, Jones' fictional figure acquires the stereotyped clichés and caricature of the borderlands.[7] As African American, his identity is characterized by "in-betweenness" (Mendez and Naples 3), by the "open wound" of "the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture," a border identity (Anzaldúa 2, 3). This political conflict alienates Jones' storyline by forcing him to lurk in the discourse of trauma. As a result, his in-betweenness additionally draws on the ambiguous relocation and

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[6] Smith spots (62-64) three popular examples relevant to the background of O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*. Firstly, the 1834 song "Zip Coon," secondly, George Kibble Turner's short story "The Cannibal King" (1910), and thirdly, Thomas Dixon's play *The Clansman* (1905), based on D.W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)—which was "instrumental in creating the mythology and ideology of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK)—."
[7] John R. Cooley (76) elaborates on the relationship between the Harlem Renaissance and Brutus Jones' stereotypes on stage performance as an antagonist element, which was part of "O'Neill's racial ambivalence" in criticising and perpetuating at the same time racial generalisations.

reconceptualization led by modernists' representations. By seizing systematic structures of colonial power, he introduces "the destruction of a 'white' [racial] Utopia," while his black identity disturbs "the master narrative of 'naturalized' racism and national amnesia" (Smith 64, 66). Jones' identity is presented as being in the process, that is, under construction. When his collective identity manifests itself in the form of atavism,[8] Jones turns into a commodity, a mere tradeable body in a fictionalized landscape set after the Civil War and the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, yet contextualized far from the abolition of slavery. The unsettling colonial past extracts the genealogy of oppression fragmentarily. The trespassing of these boundaries, both geographic and metaphorical, disarticulates the wholeness of the group identity and of its racialized collective memory (Rohlinger, et al. 177; Taylor and Whittier 176). Nevertheless, by presenting him as standing on a tree stump, Jones is exposed to the dynamics of the boundaries he attempted to escape. In the fifth scene, the protagonist is sold to a slave owner and the highest bidder. He is therefore commodified, subjected to the laws of the colonial market: "Is dis a auction? Is you sellin' me like dey uster befo' de war? [...] And you sells me? And you buys me? I shows you I'se a free nigger, damn yo' souls!" (O'Neill 286). In the context of pre-abolitionist America, he is perceived as raw material, a work tool for slave traders and plantation owners.

At the crossroads of freedom and captivity, the Emperor tracks the footsteps of his own double self and distorted identity. His final return to the West Indies, to "the diaspora of Africa", conveniently reveals the "cultural estrangement" held by modernists (Saiz 32). Their views on characters such as Jones, or the cockney trader Smithers show the unsolved historical tensions of Reconstruction. Alienated and an outsider, Jones is depicted as a free citizen, yet, still as "a bewildered, frightened Negro," a victim of his lifetime, "of his past, both racial and personal" (Whitman 148). To some extent, he has to renegotiate the boundaries of his identity. He is exposed to the idea of materialism, and sees a common aim to both races, black and white, in Patrick J. Nolan's words, "a participation in power and harmony with the laws of the universe"

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[8] Cooley (78) defines atavism in relation to collective cultural identity, as stemming from two premises, "that some individuals exhibit traits and characters of ancestors, absent in intervening generations, and that individuals occasionally revert to the features and life styles of their ancestors."

(§13). Jones appropriates the colonizing rhetoric of the oppressor by centralizing the power of a Caribbean island, and of its native peoples.

BLACKNESS AS A METAPHOR OF O'NEILL'S IRISHNESS

Son of an Irish immigrant and actor, the Irish-American Eugene O'Neill himself represents an image of otherness that permeates his theatrical characters and texts. O'Neill's sympathy for the Other and his fascination with primitivism relate to characters who "disavow their own community and fail to join another," as it is the case with Brutus Jones (Le Bastard §32). He cannot disengage himself from the cultural baggage he carries, which includes the collective memories of British colonialism and the stigmatized categorization of Irishness as a synonym of barbarism and blackness.[9] Criminal activity was commonly treated as an "ethnic succession" that began with the "intemperate disposition of the Irish race" in the 1860s and continued with the association of African Americans with violence (Steinberg 117-118). When Irish immigrants were introduced to minstrelsy, stereotyping was applied to them, and thus, Irish blackface came to exemplify racial duplicity (Mahar 245, 251).[10] The blackened faces of these Irish performers created a paradoxical effect that had been initiated in Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) (Curtis 29-114). Rapid growth of immigration to the United States translated into satirized descriptions of the Irish in both Britain and the States. Alienating images pictured Irish identity as stigmatized, dehumanized, and ultimately animalized, ape-like. Propaganda joined together Irishness with an emphatic portrayal of inferiority.[11] Irish physiognomy—of darkened and simianized peoples—was targeted for hyperbole, caricature and distortion. Despite the fact that phrenology was discredited as a

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[9] O'Neill's entangled relation with otherness, despite his American born origin, can establish a dialogue between nostalgia, historicity and biography—crossing the borders of the States—in contemporary chronicles at the time in Ireland: covering the Easter Rising and the Irish War of Independence.

[10] According to Aoife Monks (545), Irish participation in minstrel shows exacerbated the stigmatized caricatures of blackness by means of racial differentiation.

[11] Irish otherness and the Celtic Revival have been major topics in contemporary literature of British Colonial rule, in which Elizabeth Cullingford's (99-131) tropes of Romans and Carthaginians parallel the British and the Irish arenas.

scientific theory, "cranial measurement [was used] as an indicator of intelligence" (Mahar 268). The 1910s, 1920s and 1930s propaganda definitively had an impact on the understanding and misconception of race and ethnicity.

Assessed through the discourse of melancholic embodiment, O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* locates both Irish and African American narratives at a problematic meeting point. They are displaced from a common homogeneous past. Jones is "unhomed" because he cannot identify neither with an African self, or with an American one, he is lost in an "oxymoronic African-American identity" that leaves him as "literally homeless" (Mendelssohn 26). Within global modernity, and in an intermediate racialized position, he cannot identify with a country, nor can he settle in the island for long.[12] In Jones' narrative, "O'Neill maps onto a black body desperately trying to flee the phantoms of its personal and racial past," and furthermore, stresses his mapping ambiguously in an already "socially marginalized figure" (Steen 342, 352). Similarly, Jones belongs to this ambivalent semiotic of whiteness in which he is "*both* white (in relation to non-European peoples) *and* black (in relation to the British Anglo-Americans" (Steen 352). Like his main character, O'Neill ultimately draws on the tragic mulatto motif. His cultural identity may have enabled him to embrace a dual view of Jones' blackness at a time when Social Darwinism was prevalent. It reconnects the idea of the survival of the fittest with the belief that affective relationships with "dark peoples compromised white selfhood and threatened race purity" (Boehmer 65).

The historically alienated position of black and Irish peoples must have influenced the construction of O'Neill's characters. And in the dual alienation of O'Neill, the collective memories of migration may be exposed in Jones' blackness. Jones' tragedy is framed in the liminal and marginalized status of Irish and black peoples (Steen 356). Certainly, there is an interplay between the "primitive African mask," that shows blackness through "a white prism," and "the white mask, which is forced upon black men in a still segregated society" (Le Bastard §26). Brutus Jones is too black to escape his past as a Pullman porter, though he is not white enough to trespass the boundaries of colonial rule and colonial ambition at the same time that O'Neill's melancholic embodiment becomes "a projection of

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[12] Vandana Shiva (98) points to "homelessness [as] a cultural characteristic of the late twentieth century," which originated in the colonial and capitalist enterprise.

the white O'Neill in racial drag, a fantasy of both his blackness and his own whiteness" (Steen 353).[13]

THE JOURNEY TROPE AND JONES' HYBRIDIZED IDENTITY

Brutus Jones the Pullman porter is transformed into emperor, commodified as merchandise, treated as an employee, and regarded as a slave at different points in time. He is repeatedly at a crossroads of spatio-temporal clustering and the geographical borders that deconstruct Jones' discourse. He is at the crossroads of his individual migratory movement and the collective displacement of former plantation slaves from the Caribbean to New Orleans (Otero Garabís 970, Benítez Rojo 115-130). Initially, Jones was granted manual labor, "dirty work," but also, he is asked to do "brain work" based on calculation and mediation (O'Neill 270). He is able to perform both of these tasks, and in order to fulfill his desire for white embodiment, he devotes himself to the Caribbean performance by wearing the colonial mask of whiteness and therefore, by placing out of view the narratives of the natives of the island (Benítez Rojo 127). By performing the role of a colonial authority, his identity and sense of belonging disintegrate in a nation-state community that cannot validate his masquerade. The city of New York and the idealized nation that he sees as paradigms of safety, were still governed by racial segregation. If there is any possibility that he reconstructs his nation-based identity, it its annihilated as he becomes vulnerable to the effects of homelessness (Edwards and Graulund 7).

The protagonist's journey is circular and symbolic. His circular movement through the island echoes forced migratory movements and matches the sailor motif while he is moving "to and fro between nations," across continental borders in "micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity" (Gilroy 12). When Jones arrives for the first time at the Caribbean, he immediately envisions his expedition into the hinterland as an opportunity. By making profit of the natural resources of the island's ecosystem, such as its soil, minerals or vegetation he draws the labyrinth of the colonial enterprise. Since the 1500s to nearly the 1700s, the Caribbean was chosen as one of the golden areas of commercial interest, in which

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[13] It is "the ghosts of the artist's mind, so insistently real that they threaten to enter the corporeal world, [and] are banished finally into the plane of representation," into O'Neill's text (Dawes 59).

colonialism appropriated lands and peoples worldwide by means of military fleets, armament and scientific theories (Hulme and Youngs 124, 258). In this scenario, Jones' aims to seize colonial power are in reality an irreconcilable performance. His "journey-to-the-crossroads" ends dramatically as he is forced to move in circles, "from clearing to forest clearing until he reaches the Africa conjured by the hallucinatory state produced by his fear, anguish, and guilt" (Fiet, "Walcott's Way" 104, 105). And thus, the final descent into the dark jungle instills the collective sense of strangeness, death, danger and disenchantment in the story.

O'Neill's opening stage directions outline an ominously striking official residence. Jones' imperial throne is not lavishly ornamented, yet its flashy red predictably must call the attention of the audience:

> *The room is bare of furniture with the exception of one huge chair made of uncut wood which stands at center, its back to rear. This is very apparently the Emperor's throne. It is painted a dazzling, eye-smiting scarlet. There is a brilliant orange cushion on the seat and another smaller one is placed on the floor to serve as a footstool. Strips of matting, dyed scarlet, lead from the foot of the throne to the two entrances* (O'Neill 267).

The palace of the Emperor Jones is almost unfurnished, with the exception of its wooden throne. The singularity of the emperor's chair adds to the "*dazzling, eye-smiting scarlet*" of the scene and to the white of the walls and floor (O'Neill 267). Scarlet and white tinged, this place draws on the colonial imaginary of the audience by showing the link between the color of blood and the racial whiteness of the colonial enterprise. The old woman who enters stage, the matting and cushions of the room reinforce the references to servitude. Here, Jones is presented as white and powerful as the representatives of colonial rule. His rule "in a forest setting manifests the first, necessary step in creating civilization, and by extension, his whiteness" (Folino-White 105). Though soon his emperor role is revealed to be a mask, there is something that belongs to his own identity, "*yet there is something not altogether ridiculous about his grandeur. He has a way of carrying it off*" (O'Neill 269). His emperor clothes loosely fit him, but he can easily accommodate to them. For Shannon Steen (347), he is the wealthy man whose clothes "signify power, but in a grotesque parody of that sign." He is described in a

clothing metaphor that resembles the loose robes of the corrupt king in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: "Now does he feel his title / hang loose about him, like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief" (V, ii, 20-22). It is the colonial performance of Jones that paradoxically strips him of his imperial clothes, his privileges and his title. And as a result, he is ultimately abandoned to the policies of the borderland, of exclusion from the social structures that demarcate whiteness, and of inclusion of the defining atavism of blackness. His identity is being constructed through social and symbolic "border politics as struggles that challenge, transcend, or reinforce" geographical borders (Mendez and Naples 4).

Nevertheless, profit maximization is the prime goal of masters in modernity, and Jones is aware of the social structure of capitalism.[14] Indeed, "the capitalist appeal mesmerizes with its power and its prospect of self-sufficiency" (Nolan §14). Jones is mesmerized by money-making; he becomes part of the modern materialist ideal. Most likely, he travelled as a stowaway to the Caribbean, and, in order to make his fortune, he started working in Smithers' business and ended up establishing himself as emperor of the island. As emperor, he is in possession of the natives' riches, and of money, which "is the ultimate power that sinews the earth; its possession makes one master of life and, therefore, master over fear" (Nolan §9). In order to keep this ultimate capitalist power, he has planned to sail to Martinique, where he can transfer all his money to a bank account without paying taxes: "Dawn tomorrow I'll be out at de oder side and on de coast whar dat French gunboat is stayin'. She picks me up, take me to Martinique when she go dar, and dere I is safe wid a mighty big bankroll in my jeans" (O'Neill 275). His planned journey invokes a "central organising symbol," "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" (Gilroy 4). The sailing motif is ostensibly tied to the borderland rhetoric that links together cultural and historical meanings. However, the ship metaphor conveys the idea that the homeland has a redeeming potential for Jones' crimes at the end, whereas in the beginning, it is a device that facilitates the flow of transcontinental ideas (Gilroy 4). But Jones's movements are erratic and as for other representatives of the "so-called Western

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[14] In O'Neill's explanatory notes of "Billionaire (1927)," he juxtaposes Brutus Jones' financial interest and obsessions in letting "his accumulated gold" possess him by taking hold of his own being (Floyd 168).

civilization," his "crime is whiteness" (Fiet, "Walcott's Way" 109). His sentence is atavism, he is driven to the past as

> *two rows of seated figures can be seen behind JONES. They are sitting in crumpled, despairing attitudes, hunched, facing one another with their backs touching the forest walls as if they were shackled to them. All are negroes, naked save for loin cloths. At first they are silent and motionless. Then they begin to sway slowly forward toward each and back again in unison, as if they were laxly letting themselves follow the long roll of a ship at sea* (O'Neill 287).

Jones' constructed identity has fragmented into pieces and his hybridized self has been lost in retrospect. He is pictured in relation to the primitive-nature relational pair, and represented in the logic of the discourse of colonization. The initial distance between the beliefs and motivations of Jones and the identities and culture of the natives is no longer necessary when his dictatorship ends (Steen 351). To a certain extent, the proximity of Jones' identification with a racialized conception of the Caribbean natives and with Africa gives audiences the image of the needed "Other," the "uncivilized," the cliché of the "tom-tom still in their blood and an indelible happy-go-lucky spirit in their hearts" (Roshnavand 41). In embracing his new identity, Jones feels a mystifying sense of familiar primitivism and of self-recognition when he sees a series of symbolic natural elements. He seems to know where he is standing: "What is"—dis place? Seems like—seems like I know dat tree—an' de river. I remember—seems like I been heah befo'" (O'Neill 288). To all intents and purposes, Jones crosses the forest as the ethnographer, by trespassing temporal boundaries and by framing the image of natives as ancient specimens "frozen in time" (Hulme and Youngs 134). His journey is "a journey through history," through his common past as a masquerade performer and bearer of whiteness (Monks 547). For Jones, the Caribbean is incorporated into the territorial crossroads of his homeland and the hinterland, both port, residence and landscape (Otero Garabís 970).

HYBRIDITY AND THE CONTROL OF TRUTH

The Emperor's rule over the Caribbean seas requires him to take control of the production of truth. By creating an alternative truth, he becomes a mythical presence, the white god that is both

feared and venerated. He boasts of being almost immortal, a man who can only be neutralized by a magic silver bullet: "You said yer'd got a charm so's no lead bullet'd kill yer. You was so strong only a silver bullet could kill yer, you told 'em. Blimey, wasn't that swank for yer—and plain fat—'eaded luck?" (O'Neill 271).[15] Like a reference to lycanthropy and shamanism, the silver bullet will eventually prove to be his ultimate weakness against the shadows of the phantasmagoria that keeps tormenting his consciousness. The natives' superstitions subordinate Jones to primitive nature, and, therefore, "the black man becomes dependent upon the vagaries of nature" (Nolan §11). This association with the uncivilized and untamed unconscious reinforces the symbols of colonialism. As a by-product of the ideal of a white Utopia, Jones' exploitative regime is characterized by "all vestiges of criminal purpose," the slave trade, penal labor and the use of weapons (Nolan §16). During his reverse journey, his dictatorship leads to his own fatal death, to the "astheticization and worship of violence and death" (Feuser 298).

Finally, the natives' rebellious counter-reaction destabilizes the complex hybrid identity of Jones, his acquired social status, and his superiority. With their ominous throb sound, the natives guide the steps of Jones through the forest at 3:30 in the afternoon. He has to venture through the impenetrable vegetation where he gradually loses the control of truth. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri claim (156), "truth will not make us free, but taking control of the production of truth will. Mobility and hybridity are not liberatory, but taking control of the production of mobility and stasis, purities and mixtures is." At this point, Jones' control of the truth, of what he sees and believes is in the hands of the natives. The natives' truth and Jones' previous past are now Jones' truth. By reclaiming and taking control of this production from Jones, the natives will turn ritual and magic into life and history. However, there is no certainty that another colonial representative will not aspire to the dominion over the Caribbean lands, peoples and resources when Jones is absent.[16]

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[15] Cooley (75) confirms the origin of O'Neill's idea of the silver bullet from "a black circus employee. He told O'Neill the story of Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, who became dictator of Haiti and held onto his position for about six months."
[16] As Hardt and Negri ask themselves: "What if a new paradigm of power, a postmodern sovereignty, has come to replace the modern paradigm and rule through differential hierarchies of the hybrid and fragmentary subjectivities […]?" (138).

Economic interest lies at the heart of the Emperor's colonial enterprise. He is not exclusively trading material goods or a façade, but he is also exporting colonial legacies of knowledge by means of imitation and epistemic friction. He is conveniently integrating his hybridized identity into the master's logic; he is not "holdin' down dis Emperor job for de glory in it," he openly declares that "Dey wants de big circus show for deir money. I gives it to 'em an' I gits de money" (O'Neill 270). He is acknowledging the performativity of whiteness to instrumentalize the Other. Willing to interpret his layered role, his hybridity assists him in seeing the various angles of colonialism. O'Neill's modernist drama articulates a critique of the racialized constructs of identity, and of the exploitation of colonial whiteness in the control and appropriation of the truth in *The Emperor Jones.*

CONCLUSION

O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* presents a complex character whose operating identity has served to analyze the complexities of colonialism. Whiteness and blackness are introduced as constructs of the 1920s modernist fascination with primitivism, a symbol "cherished by Bohemian white intellectuals both in Europe and the U.S.A" (Feuser 294). Primitivism is part of the characterization of the protagonist, who manages to ascend the imperial throne, but who is also led to the fragmentation of his identity. His self in the process of construction explores how slavery, segregation and racialized amnesia have an effect on the representation of black Americans. His hybrid self cannot be reconciled with the whiteness he desires to attain. Jones is at the crossroads of individual and collective identities, and of the cultural meanings embedded in his atavistic return to Africa.

Subservient to the discourse of trauma and otherness, Brutus Jones encounters both the archetypes and stereotypes of Irishness and blackness. The racial construction of O'Neill's character points to his own Irishness as a symbolic literary black mask of identification (Steen 351-352). This cultural exploration came at a time when Celtic ancestry was depicted as blackness (Steen 352). Even though O'Neill's main character initially succeeds in his performance of whiteness, his oxymoronic self-positioning as

emperor cannot maintain his social position for a considerable time. By partaking in the cultural reproduction of sameness and difference, his hybridity places Jones closer to nature, anchored in a collective past which is mythical and primitive. Nevertheless, his strategic use of the masters' language in the West Indies and, ultimately, of his money would not grant him the control of the production of truth indefinitely.

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ANTHOLOGIZING POE. EDITIONS, TRANSLATIONS, AND (TRANS)NATIONAL CANONS
EMRON ESPLIN AND MARGARIDA VALE DE GATO, EDITORS
Lehigh University Press, 2020, pp. 401. ISBN: 9781611462586.

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Anthologizing Poe. Editions, Translations, and (Trans)National Canons is the last addition to the vast Poe scholarship developed and published by Lehigh University Press (within their collection Perspectives on Edgar Allan Poe). After other similar titles such as *Translated Poe* (edited by Emron Esplin and Margarida Vale de Gato) or *Poe's Pervasive Influence* (edited by Barbara Cantalupo), among others, this volume comes to complete the comprehension of the global impact of Edgar Allan Poe and his works.

The volume we are reviewing here is divided into four different sections, covering respectively the earlier anthologies of Poe's works during the 1840s, the collections that have been produced in the US, the UK, and the Anglophone context in general, specific anthologies based on genre and format, and how Poe has been anthologized in foreign contexts. By choosing such a division, the editors have been capable of collecting and addressing the most relevant perspectives considered by contemporary Poe scholars from different points of the planet.

Within the first mentioned section of the book, three chapters are included. The first of them (by Jana L. Argersinger) opens, as probably could not be done otherwise, with the labor Poe developed as editor of anthologies when working in different literary magazines, but also on how Griswold and Osgood contributed to coin a

(distorted) vision of Poe through their own anthologies. From there we move to the importance Poe himself placed on the editions of his own works during his lifetime. The chapter signed by Harry Lee Poe explores the different Poe collections published before 1849, how they contributed to assemble the first image of the author in America, and to what extent he was involved in the process. From the earliest moments of Poe's poetic production, the author of the chapter analyzes the different stories that appeared in the subsequent years, categorizing them, and contrasting them with the other texts that were included in the same volumes. By doing so, Harry Lee Poe adapts Poe's unity of effect to his own literary criticism. Finally, the section closes with Alexandra Urakova's chapter. As an acclaimed Russian scholar of Poe, the expectancy for her chapter is high, and accomplished. Her approach to how "Eleonora" has been anthologized probably lies among the most original ones included in the volume. Urakova's analysis does not only perform a philological approach but can also be inserted within an exercise of literary history. Her chapter explores the tradition of the "gift books" in Britain and the United States and how "Eleonora," due to the idyllic-like characteristics of its plot, was usually included in these collections during the first half of the 19th century.

As previously mentioned, the second part of the book is devoted to anthologies and editions in English, and it opens with a chapter by Jeffrey A. Savoye. Savoye's arguments soon change to the depiction of the "race" that took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to offer the best possible version of Poe's texts. This first chapter of the section closes at the mid-twentieth century, when Mabbott's edition started to be framed. Savoye's vision is completed with the chapter of another independent scholar, Bonnie Shannon McMullen. While the previous chapter mostly focused on American editions, McMullen's assessments cross the Atlantic and explores how a similar "race" was taking place in Britain. The main difference would be that British editors did not want a definitive edition, but to offer a general view of the author, usually "polluted" by the local imagination. The baton is there received by Travis Montgomery, who journeys through the most relevant scholarly editions produced during the past century. Names such as Ostrom, Pollin, Quinn, Mabbott, and Thomson, are familiar to those who have ever approached the historical fortune of Poe's production. As these critics almost coincided in time, their editions are a constant update of how Poe's tales, poems, and other pieces should be addressed. The

chapter closes with a commentary of the editions of Poe's texts published by The Library of America. Although lacking the critical apparatus the other volumes had, they still stand as a primary source when dealing with Poe and his works. This vision is completed by Scott Peeples's chapter, which focuses on the Poe texts usually included in university textbooks. Confronting the view of the scholar with the reception of the student is an interesting exercise, for through this exercise we get a whole vision of how Poe has lived (and still lives) in colleges. Perhaps, the most independent chapter of the section is that written by J. Gerald Kennedy, in which a critical approach to the Penguin *Portable Edgar Allan Poe* is included. Although this anthology has been transcendental to get new readers involved in a certain connoisseurship of Poe, we cannot forget it responds to a particular view published in a particular context, as Kennedy assesses.

The next section within *Anthologizing Poe* includes chapters focused on genre and format. Probably, the only thing-that-could-have-been-done-otherwise in the volume relates to the inclusion of this section. Perhaps, confronting English anthologies with foreign editions would have contributed to give the reader a clearer scope of Poe's influence both at home and worldwide. As known, Poe has widely contributed to the modern evolution of science-fiction, and that is acknowledged in Stephen Rachman's chapter, which discusses anthologies focused on this genre and under the title of Bradbury's "Usher II." The 20th century has been a domain for science-fiction, and Poe has taken advantage of this circumstance, being included in most of the volumes (at least in English) produced during those years. Modern detective fiction is also said to be a "creation" of Edgar Allan Poe, so anthologies focused on this genre, almost invariably, need to include the Bostonian, as John Gruesser argues. The most interesting idea offered by Gruesser is that not only Dupin's stories are considered, but also those in which detection and ratiocination are frequently included. Probably, the most original contribution of this section is Michelle Kay Hansen's, for her chapter explores not a textual anthology of Poe's text, but Doug Bradley's recordings or "Spinechillers." Subverting the printed "boundary" is a remarkable exercise, and it allows the reader to approach a similar idea as that of the unity of effect conceived by Poe. Finally, the section closes with Philip Edward Phillips's chapter on Poe's poetry. When discussing how Poe had anthologized himself, poetry is also mentioned, for these were the first texts produced by the Bostonian.

However, Phillips's perspective goes deeper (including key editions and editors) into the issue, enlarging the scope of the reader and the scholar.

The fourth and last part of the book leaves the Anglophone world behind to explore the global recognition of Poe and his works. Structurally, the section can be divided into three different parts, focused on the French, Hispanic, and Japanese contexts. Chapters 13 and 14 (by Margarida Vale de Gato and Christopher Rollason, respectively) address the French face of Edgar Poe's anthologies, how this country contributed to shape current European visions on the author, being Baudelaire, undoubtedly, a milestone in this process. On its part, Rollason's chapter adds a new piece of information, for it explores how popular editions made Poe a widely read author on both sides of the English Channel, in Britain and France. After that, we have a chapter by Fernando González-Moreno and Margarita Rigal-Aragón and another by Emron Esplin, both focused on the reception and edition of Poe on both sides of the Atlantic, in Spain and Argentina. González-Moreno and Rigal-Aragón, two highly acclaimed international Poe voices, explore how illustrations have also aided to create a comprehensive vision of Poe in Spain, taking advantage of the "visuality" Poe included in many of his stories. On the other hand, Borges and Cortázar count among the most influential twentieth-century Poe "thinkers" and translators, but they are not the only ones Argentina has given. Esplin, continuing with his ongoing extensive research on Poe in Latin America, offers here how the last century has been a melting pot for the editions and translations of the Bostonian around the Río de la Plata. Finally, this anthology closes with Takayuki Tatsumi's chapter, in which the history of Poe anthologies in Japan is explained. Out of the Eurocentric context, Japan has always been a paradise for Poe's reception, since the times of Lafcadio Hearn and Edogawa Rampo. In consequence, what Tatsumi offers in his chapter is especially relevant, for it links both worlds across the Pacific, bringing American literature to Japan, a journey also frequently traversed due to the influx of popular culture.

In conclusion, as seen in the previous paragraphs, *Anthologizing Poe* constitutes a landmark in the appreciation of how thousands of readers across generations have approached Poe: anthologies. The subject of this book has not always been the target of academic debate, so Esplin and Vale de Gato have come to offset that by gathering some of the most influential voices on Poe today.

The result, as explained, is an outstanding collection, with its gaps (as any collection), that the trajectory of the editors shows as easily fixable in a near future.

THE HIPSTER SUBCULTURE AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN LENA DUNHAM'S TV SERIES *GIRLS*

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ABSTRACT
Hipsters are considered as one of the most relevant American subcultures at present. However, the term *hipster* is notoriously difficult to define and has not received sufficient academic attention, especially when referring to women. Thus, one of the main objectives of this interdisciplinary study is to reverse this situation by bringing to light information and bibliography about this prominent cultural phenomenon in the US context. To prove its importance, this theoretical aspect will be complemented by its practical implementation, as this essay includes the evaluation of the representation of the hipster in one of the main cultural products which have reflected it, television and, more concretely, in Lena Dunham's TV series, *Girls.* This analysis responds to the aim of discerning if *Girls*'s alleged hipsterism can be considered authentic and of elucidating the reasons that may have led Dunham to this choice for the creation of her characters and, also, for her self-branding.

RESUMEN
Los *hípsters* son la subcultura norteamericana más relevante de nuestros días. Sin embargo, el término *hípster* es muy difícil de definir y no ha recibido suficiente atención académica, especialmente en relación a las mujeres. De ahí que uno de los principales objetivos de este este estudio multidisciplinar sea revertir esta situación sacando a la luz información y bibliografía sobre este prominente fenómeno

cultural en el contexto estadounidense. Para demostrar su importancia, este aspecto teórico se complementará con su implementación práctica, ya que este ensayo incluye la evaluación de la subcultura *hípster* en uno de los productos culturales que lo ha reflejado, la televisión y, más concretamente, la serie de Lena Dunham, *Girls*. Este análisis responde al propósito de discernir si el supuesto *hipsterismo* de *Girls* se puede considerar auténtico y el de dilucidar las razones que han podido llevar a Dunham a elegirlo para la creación de sus personajes e incluso para la de su propia marca personal.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Lena Dunham's TV series *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017) appeared as both a successor and a counterpoint to its amazingly successful predecessor, *Sex in the City* (1998-2004) (McRobbie 2015, 13; Grant and Nash 61; Lehman 10; McCann 93; Stuever). Popular media communicators and specialized scholars coincide in the recognition that, no matter the parallelisms between these two shows, contrary to the four overtly snob protagonists and environment of *Sex in the City*, those of *Girls* possess most of the characteristics that are traditionally considered essential to the generation which suffered the consequences of the Great Recession[1] that it was representing, which is commonly known as "millennial" and which shares many features with hipsters (Genz 2017, 18). Added to this, a number of critics have fostered the relation between *Girls* and this subculture, describing the series as "the hipster-fied *Sex in the City*" (Winchell), "the *Sex in the City* of the hipster generation" (Ruíz) or "a hipster iteration of *Sex and the City*" (Miller). Hank Stuever considers that *Girls* has even been endowed with the responsibility of portraying— almost as if it was a documentary rather than a dramedy—"all overeducated, underemployed, mostly white urban hipsters in their 20s." In fact, this is the impression that *Girls*'s creators have been giving even before its premiere, with a casting call literally "Seeking Hipster Types" ("HBO's *Girls*"). Notice that, even if this casting call looked literally for "hipster types of all ethnicities," *Girls* has almost exclusively portrayed white characters. This is a very interesting subject because—as will be shown later—hipsterism is heavily rooted in Black culture, and it deserves further study in the future.

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[1] Maryann Erigha situates this recession from 2008 to 2011 (140).

As Michael Scott clearly asserts—in line with other salient researchers such as Wes Hill, Janna Michael, Mark Greif, René Bogović or Bjørn Schiermer—"'hipster' and 'hipsterism' are notoriously difficult to define" (63). Although the existence and relevance of hipsters in our society is inarguable, experts coincide in recognising that there are very few solid studies on them and that there is "a neglect of the hipster phenomenon on the part of academic sociology,"[2] as professor Schiermer explains. She has declared that her article "Late-modern Hipsters: New Tendencies in Popular Culture" (2014) "presents a first attempt to overcome this lacuna" (168). To Schiermer this disregard contrasts glaringly with the amazing amount of attention that hipsters arouse outside academia, as the millions of opinions given by journalists, bloggers and layman experts of all categories have demonstrated (168). Consequently, this study is going to consider not only the academic works on the subject that exist, but also other different types of sources because, as professor Shane Blackman defends, the complex origin and development of subcultural theory has been shaped by both academic and popular usage (496). Besides, following contemporary audience research by experts such as Stuart Hall, David Morley or Henry Jenkins, I will also consider the active role of TV viewers, who are perfectly able to critically analyse and engage with media products (Saisi 64), especially in our examination of the reaction of *Girls*'s audience to its portrayal of hipsters contained in their own reviews or those of critics.

Besides, experts coincide in highlighting the fact that most definitions of hipsters are centred on male cases, but little attention is given to female hipsters (Greif xiii; Baumgardner 95; Tortorici 122). This scarcity of academic research on the study of women in subcultures and countercultures in general has been documented and analysed in depth by salient scholars such as Angela McRobbie (1991) and Wivian Weller (2006), among others. The latter, who analyses this subject in "The Feminine Presence in Youth Subcultures: The Art of Becoming Visible," concludes that there have been few references or none at all regarding female participation in these groups. Lena Dunham has contributed to the subversion of this situation in the particular field of mass media, in which the

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[2] The present study may also contribute to the amelioration of this situation by offering an extensive bibliographical section that can be useful for future academic studies on this subject.

almost absence of active or insubordinate feminine roles has also been recognised by experts such as Laura Mulvey and Tania Modleski. Subsequently—even if we are going to refer to male hipsters, too—, Lena Dunham and her unconventional female characters become especially interesting in this innovative research field.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned complications in relation to the definition of the term "hipster" and in connection with the methodology that informs this investigation, it is my aim to depict the main features of hipsterism also with the objective of analysing to what extent they can actually be recognised in *Girls*. In my study, I will follow Douglas Keller's "multiperspectival" proposal (43), which can be connected to Horace Newcomb's interdisciplinary and plural methodological recommendations, which he considers necessary for the study of television, given its multifaceted nature (24-25). However, this essay will also be particularly influenced, for example, by social theorists, who, as Kellner explains, highlight that the role of mass media and communications in the reproduction of contemporary societies is so important, that we should consider them as their major institutions, given also their wide range of effects: economic, political, cultural and social (30). Consequently, I will consider socio-cultural works which include the study of subcultures with the intention of discerning the elements that are associated to hipsterism. Once they have been identified, a qualitative analysis of the content of *Girls* will follow. It will portray a comparative study of the main features of its characters with those proper of hipsters, with special focus on its female personae, and we will try to discern to what extent it is accurate to apply them the hipster label that they have been popularly assigned.

These observations are going to be used as a route to a broader cultural diagnosis. It includes reflections on how those characteristics have been used by its creator, and on the reasons which might have motivated Dunham's apparent distancing from generally accepted social conventions. Thus, the present research will also contribute to answering Meredith Nash and Imelda Wheleham's query about Dunham's challenging representations of millennials when they wonder if they simply incarnate "unlikable hipster slackers" or if there is "a cogent socio-political argument underpinning this 'dramedy'" (1).

In this vein and parting from the importance of appearances in hipsterism, structuralist studies related to the sociology of fashion,

such as those of Georg Simmel, will be very illuminating. Considering Dunham's recurrent insistence on her irrevocable feminist positioning, underlined with assertions such as "I just think feminism *is* my work [...] It is everything to me because it sort of is everything" (Dunham quoted in Gay), this article will also contemplate the possibility that her characters' deviations may respond to the feminist intention of subverting certain feminine oppressive stereotypes. For this purpose, it is going to be also necessary to base our inferences on relevant feminist works, among which those of Angela McRobbie, Wallis Seaton, Stéphanie Genz, Hannah McCann and Akane Kanai, dealing with post-feminism in our neoliberal social context, stand out. In this line, I have also applied a biographical critical perspective—traditionally used in literary criticism—to the analysis of *Girls*, a practice that is justified by the strong association that Dunham herself makes between her real life and that of her fictional character, Hannah Horvath.

Related to this is the influence of reception theory on this work, as it does not only pay attention exclusively to textual elements proper of the series, because, as McRobbie explains, it is "accompanied and even supplanted by many other forms of social media" (2015, 14). In effect, as McRobbie notes, the series itself becomes just one element of the whole narrative landscape created by Dunham (14),[3] which includes supposedly authentic elements from her own life. This practice leads to the consideration of the process of construction of identity (or self-branding) as a product to be consumed by others (Genz 2015, 546). It also blurs the boundaries between producers and products, which is a very common practice in neoliberal marketing strategies that appeal to affects, (commodified) authenticity and personal narrativization (Genz 2015, D. Murray 2013). Another aspect related to this reception theory critical perspective is our consideration of viewers' opinions—as mentioned before—, and broader socio-historical and political issues.

The content of the ensuing sections follows the order previously described, beginning by the illustration of the state of the art, with the objective of contributing to the clarification of the term "hipster," a core concept for this study.

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[3] Seaton analyses other intertextual elements of self-promotion and self-representation used by Dunham that lead to access and consumption of her work, such as her prolific activity on platforms such as Instagram (156).

ORIGINS AND STUDY OF HIPSTERS

Mark Greif has studied in depth this cultural phenomenon in *What Was the Hipster?* (2010), whose title seems to imply that hipsters only existed in the past. In effect, Greif dates their "death" in 2003 (60), but Sophie Bot affirms that she started to notice their increasing relevance in 2006 (20), Kinzey considers that this subculture is among the most important ones of our time (2), and Robert Lanham affirms that "hipsters are everywhere" (1). Nevertheless, Schiermer concludes that Greif might be right in the sense that the original hipsters have disappeared, but he has ignored the fact that "the hipster *ethos* is more alive than ever" (178), as we will also demonstrate with the analysis of its presence in *Girls*. However, the importance of Greif's book is unquestionable and here he also laments that "the study of the hipster, as opposed to the punk, hippie, raver, goth, cyber-utopian or b-boy, has not yet drawn its scholars" (xix).

The state of the art has not varied considerably with the passing of time, even if more recent studies by experts such as Ico Maly and Piia Varis demonstrate that the term "hipster" not only has become very popular all over the world, but it has also attracted academic attention (637). Nevertheless, Maly and Varis only mention five authors to support this assertion and limit their references basically to essays. More recently—in 2020—professor Margaret Anne Murray complained that most academic research on hipsters is limited to either focusing on them as a mere consumer segment (e.g. Arsel and Thompson, and Rademacher and Casey) and are, consequently, basically centred on the analysis of their style; or to the examination of how they are discussed online (e.g. Maly and Varis), or to their analysis by journalists and the popular press (e.g. Schiermer) (457).

With regards to the etymology of the term "hipster"—which may also throw some light in the present study—there is a great deal of controversy because the word "hip" is an example of lexical polygenesis (Jackson).[4] However, in order to understand the contemporary hipster, we should bear in mind—though very concisely—its origins. These are rooted in Afro-American culture, as they were connected to the particular language that slaves used in

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[4] Jackson explains the complexity of the actual meaning of the word "hip" by adding that it not only has multiple proposed etymologies but it also may have multiple, confluent origins, which we are briefly exposing in this section.

the seventeenth century (Leland), to the distinct lifestyle of Harlem artists (Arsel and Thompson 795), and to the subsequent black subcultural figure of the late 1940s (Broyard). Norman Mailer, in his influential essay of 1957, highlighted that hipsters shared with "the Negro" their rebelliousness (278), their "courage to be individual" (277). From these notions derives one the most significant characteristics of hipsters that have remained in the collective notion of what they are: nonconformity with respect to what is socially or mass accepted. As Charles Petersen points out, even if modern hipsters have taken this term from the 1940s-50s, the vast majority of people who used it later forgot its history and connection to these previous connotations (qtd. in Greif 61), which have mostly turned into mere simulation (Lorentzen) and even "a marketable good" (Bogović 5).[5]

The complications involved in the definition of the hipster are, also, connected to how complex it is to circumscribe the wider term "subculture" in which the former is inserted, because it possesses a dynamic (Jenks 2-3, 6) and ambiguous nature (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 95). According to Mike Brake, "subcultures exist where there is some form of organized and recognized constellation of values, behaviour and action which are responded to as different from the prevailing set of norms" (8-9). But, in most contemporary hipsters, it is problematic to recognize this profundity because the set of values that are supposed to lead their behaviours is not so evident, as we are going to debate later, in the particular case of Lena Dunham.

In this context, it is not surprising to realise how experts such as Jackson and Greif have concluded that the definition of "hipster" is an almost impossible task. Even if Lanham's *The Hipster Handbook* might have provided some consensus on its modern meaning (Jackson), as Bot argues, there is not "any single definition ever agreed upon" (23). Kinzey agrees with her when he asserts that the term "hipster" has been defined in many different ways, but most of its descriptions have been false, misleading or just part of a much more complex reality (1). According to Bot, what is evident is that the popular imaginary of the hipster concentrates on negative traits which she associates with its venomous representation on the popular media (22). In effect, this term is also used derogatively in

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[5] This is also connected to the appropriation of hipsterism by whiteness, a subject that deserves further discussion in future work in this field.

other contexts (Greif 8, Clayton 24, Maly and Varis 628), which might explain the fact that few seem to be willing to self-identify with the hipster marker.[6]

Furthermore, it is not easy to distinguish the authentic[7] hipster identity from the fake one nowadays. Thus, Maly and Varis's description of these two groups is very useful: "A 'real' hipster is someone who rejects being part of a social group and thus also rejects the hipster label which is reserved for people who desperately want to be 'hip' and are thus not 'real' or authentic. Nor are they true innovators or trendsetters, which the individualistic, authentic hipsters are" (646). This distinction is even more complicated nowadays because our present neoliberal economic context, after realizing the importance of this global tendency, has commodified the hipster style—this being the case of prominent brands like *American Apparel* or *Urban Outfitters.*[8] Priya Elan connects this idea to the evolution of the hipster in these terms: "[The hipster] began as a run-on from (anti-consumerist) slacker culture [...], [and it] has morphed into a multimillion-dollar industry trying to sell a mythical, neo-bohemian lifestyle." This, again, makes things hard for hipsters, who, as Deborah Cowen states, "by unspoken but practiced degree [...] must all be individual, different or else membership may be revoked" (22). In this context, it is easier to understand the assertion—à la Dolly Parton—of the supposedly hipster protagonist of *Girls* admitting that "it costs a lot of money to look this cheap" (Peitzman). From this declaration it can be inferred that Hannah, who is busy trying to become who she is (as she declares in the pilot episode), has chosen this "identity" that is related to hipsterism; this type of decision-taking being one of the most worrying concerns of modern citizens (Bauman 126). In this article, we will go further in our attempt to elucidate the possible reasons that may have motivated Hannah's—and/or Dunham's—selection of this particular (life)style, a choice which, following Genz, forms part of the process of self-

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[6] Consider the number of blogs and books that poke fun at them, such as *Look at This Fucking Hipster* (by Joe Mande), *Stuff Hipsters Hate* (by Brena Ehrlich) or *Hipster Hitler* (by James Carr and Archara Kumar).

[7] See Sarah Thornton for more information about the importance of authenticity for subcultures.

[8] Many scholars have analysed the profitable marketing strategy of adopting elements from the hipster subculture, e.g.: Maly and Varis, and Bogović.

branding[9] in the neoliberal "business context and market rationale that valorise both the subject and the merchandising of it, highlighting the blurring of the individual and commodity aspects of selfhood" (2017, 25).[10]

Related to this commodification of the hipster aesthetics emerges another complication in the attempt to define hipsters politically. This derives from the fact that—as previously hinted—they are traditionally supposed to be countercultural and leftist rebels who go against the establishment and inherited restrictions (Alfrey 28) and represent an alternative to neoliberalism and mass-produced consumption. But, the fact that relevant brands are integrating and utilising the hipster style to sell their products distorts what might have been a more evident political hipster tendency in the past. However, Maly and Varis conclude that the authenticity of a "real" hipster is not degraded by this marketing practice as far as he can offer an authentic justification for it (650). Hebdige seems to highlight a similar idea when he declares that "It is basically *how* commodities are used in subculture which marks the subculture off from more orthodox cultural formations" (103; my emphasis). This goes in line with the aim of this study, which is, not only to detect hipster characteristics in *Girls*—as other academic works criticised as superficial do (M. A. Murray 457)—but also to reflect on the possible socio-political intentions that may have motivated their use.

In connection with the close relation between hipsters and style is their preference for jobs related to the world of art and creativity, which is another popular characteristic of this subculture. In this respect, research about millennials shows that there are many coincidences in the professional characteristics of both groups, maybe because they both include people of similar ages.[11] Hipsters, like millennials, tend to choose "making a life" over "making a living" (Ng. 282). However, this post-recession generation suffers the consequences of this crisis and experiences very high unemployment rates, which leads them to require the financial help of relatives and friends. Hipsters' preference for artistic jobs substantiates their

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[9] McRobbie connects this neoliberal idea of "self-branding" to the Foucauldian concept of "human capital" (2015, 10).

[10] This is evidently portrayed in the series when Hannah's publishers of her memoir propose her these questions: "What's your brand?", "Who are we selling?" (season 3, episode 5).

[11] Erigha considers that the members of the millennial generation were "born anywhere from 1979 to 2004" (140).

predilection for particularly creative cities such as Los Angeles or New York City (Menger; Florida), which, consequently, reflect what has been called "hipster urbanism" (Cowen 22). Subsequently, what were originally alternative areas have also become commodified—as has happened to the hipster clothing style— or, to be more precise, gentrified. This has led to the transformation of these places into fashionable neighbourhoods to live or visit, thus causing the loss of the essential originality or authenticity of the hipster's choice.

As previously hinted, we encounter another obstacle in the attempt to apply the already problematic concept of hipsterism to women. In effect, googling "hipster," 99% of the results refer to men. And, if we do the same with the term "female hipster," almost all the references are to fashion and superficial lists about how to fit in "the look." In the academic field, specialists recognise this same limitation and confirm that too little attention is given to female hipsters (Greif xiii; Baumgardner 95; Tortorici 122). Writer and journalist Dayna Tortorici expounds that the attempts to define this concept are unsatisfactory and mostly connected to artists—e.g.: Elizabeth Peyton, Chloe Sevigny, Kim Gordon—and "crowd-pleasers"—Zooey Deschanel, Diablo Cody and MIA—who appeal to hipster taste rather than to what she considers as authentic hipster features (122-24). This leads Tortorici to infer that "the female hipster's privileged knowledge is not subcultural, intellectual or even pseudo-intellectual, but the familiar 'female' knowledge of how to look" (123). Besides, focusing on this external appearance, Tortorici points out certain outstanding and mostly negative elements of the typical pose of female hipsters (130-31), which remind us of the impression of disaffection and chillness given by *Girls*'s female characters.

This section has offered a base and a brief summary of some of the most outstanding features related to hipsters, in order to facilitate our following reflections on, and analysis of, the representation of this subculture in the TV series *Girls*, to which the ensuing segment is dedicated.

ANALYSIS OF HIPSTERISM IN LENA DUNHAM'S *GIRLS*

Due to the fact that hipsters have become so popular, television—a sagacious detector of trends—has introduced them in its programmes (Lorentzen 68). In effect, in the particular field of sitcoms, hipsters appear in a number of shows, among which are: *New Girl* (Fox, 2011-18), *Portlandia* (IFC, 2011-18), *Bored to Death*

(HBO, 2009-11), *Nathan Barley* (Channel 4, 2005), *Flight of the Conchords* (HBO, 2007-9), *How to Make It in America* (HBO, 2010-11)*, 2 Broke Girls* (CBS, 2011-17), *Flaked* (Netflix, 2016-17), *Hipsterhood* (YouTube and Blip, 2012-13)*, Bondi Hipsters* (YouTube, 2011-) and *Sunnyside* (City, 2015). In this essay, attention is particularly paid to *Girls* (HBO, 2012-17), a comedy starring Lena Dunham, who has also created, written and frequently directed the show.

If we trust most of its reviews and advertising, we might feel tempted to label *Girls* as a hipster programme even before watching it. Besides, its creator incarnates many of the characteristics commonly attributed to hipsters and, not only scholars (e.g.: McRobbie 2015, 9, 13; Nash and Wheleham 3; Seaton 150), but also she herself, have repeatedly recognised that she reflects her own life and experiences in her works and characters (Poniewozik; Danes). Concretely referring to the protagonist of *Girls*, she has declared: "She's mine and she's me" (Nussabaum). Dunham has been connected to the world of art and culture—something proper of hipsters—from her very childhood, her father being Carroll Dunham, a painter; and her mother, Laurie Simmons, an artist and photographer. This situates her, also, in the allegedly privileged background that is commonly associated to hipsters, and involves her with their sense of narcissism and entitlement—a characteristic that is also normally associated to millennials (Park 310-11; Quenqua; Stein; Malone). Besides, Dunham has studied—like the main characters of *Girls*—at Oberlin College (Ohio), a small elite and alternative college (Kaklamanidou and Tally 3) with a student body that is, according to Lanham (95), 94.6% hipster. Her creations have been criticised for their lack of ethnic diversity (Erigha 152) and, more particularly, she has been accused of "hipster racism."[12] Nevertheless, specialists such as Lehman have interpreted this lack of racial diversity in *Girls* as a veiled criticism of the short-sighted vision common in the type of girls—either privileged hipsters or millennials—the series ironically portrays.

It is pertinent to analyse if, added to these connections of Dunham with hipsterism, some of its characteristics can actually be recognised in her TV series *Girls*. To begin with, a number of critics

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[12] For a definition of "hipster racism," see Mahdawi, West, or Lim. Other accusations of Dunham's hipster racism appear in the writings of Nash and Wheleham, Jenna Worthan, Makarechi, Dodai Stewart and Kendra James, to cite but a few.

have considered that its target audience are mainly hipsters (Suebsaeng) and, as hinted before, many others have directly considered *Girls* as a hipster TV series (Hoare). In effect, the show seems to possess many features that go in line with the notion of the contemporary hipster that has been sketched out in the previous section, as we will detail.

In the first place, spectators can immediately associate the setting of *Girls* with hipsterdom, as the series is shot, not only in one the "creative cities" formerly mentioned, New York, but particularly in one of the most identifiable hipster urban areas in the world: Brooklyn. This neighbourhood was not a hipster area in the past and, as McRobbie declares, if hipsters can live there now, it is only thanks to the support of well-off parents (2015, 15), as happens to the protagonists of *Girls* (Erigha 149; Lehman 13). We would not be far from the truth if we affirmed that the places where *Girls* has been shot have become gentrified (Mallonee), which strengthens the series's links with hipsterism. In this sense, it should be noticed how the series portrays this ironically—thus following again this hipster feature—in the eighth episode of season 6. Here, Shoshana—one of Hannah's best friends— tries to help her friend Ray with a campaign against the hipster coffee shop that appears in front of his. She wants to distinguish Ray's place from the new one by insisting on the former's appropriateness for grown-ups. This also reinforces the idea that the expiry date of the hipster marker is the 30s, in which most experts coincide (Greif 159, Lanham 152, Schiermer 170). In effect, when *Girls*'s characters turn around thirty, the series finishes, which also responds to HBO's industrial strategy to appeal to the millennial generation (Seaton 152). This might also occur because the protagonist eventually has a baby and this condition automatically depreciates the hipster status (Lanham 157).

Still, as the six seasons of *Girls* are mainly focused on the preceding years, most critics have maintained the consideration of *Girls* as hipster basing their inferences on the analysis of its characters, who are described as "overeducated, underemployed, mostly white urban hipsters in their 20s" (Stuever). They share typical hipster characteristics in relation to their education and occupations. Most of them are graduate students who rely on familial economic help to different degrees and share the same educational background: "the elite liberal arts" (Lehman 13) Oberlin College, which is known to encourage counter-cultural and artistic students (Erigha 144). Maybe as a consequence, most of these youngsters are

connected to creative activities that are commonly associated to hipsters: Hanna—who is said from the beginning not to be "meant for a job in the traditional sense" (season 1, episode 5)—begins as an unpaid intern who tries to make a living out of her writing (added by her temporary position as a coffee barista at Café Grumpy); Jessa fluctuates among diverse jobs while being attracted to painting; and Marnie moves in the art circles of curating and singing. Their male counterparts are in the worlds of bartending (Ray), multimedia, music and architecture (Charlie), carpentry and acting (Adam), and show business (Elijah). The realism of the precariousness and instability of their respective jobs—proper of the post-recession era—responds also to the search for authenticity that characterises the hipster subculture and which the creator of the series and many of its critics continuously defend (Johnson 186; Genz 26).[13] However, their relatives' financial support favours their approximation to the hipsters' ideals, making it possible for them to "imagine themselves as artists, outside of the mainstream" (Erigha 150).

Concerning the social relations of *Girls*'s main characters and, in particular, its female characters, Genz, who sees in them the prototypical incarnation of "recessionary neoliberal girls," highlights also how, instead of forging the affective bonds promoted by postfeminism, they are "trying to undo one another in their search for the most meaningful (i.e. valuable) identity" (22). In this vein, the case of Hannah is the most outstanding, because, as Genz explains, her professional obsession with narrativising her self (to make profit of it) has provoked an intense disconnection and "egotistic lack of interest in others" (2017, 24). Added to this, all *Girls* characters illustrate the typical hipster distancing from familial conventions and follow very relaxed sexual conducts, being open to new experiences and free love.

In connection to what has been exposed about hipsters' fashion and habits, most critics coincide in considering them just the opposite to the fashionistas of *Sex in the City* and in highlighting their lack of involvement in consumer culture (e.g.: Hamilton 47, and Genz 2017, 18). For example, according to Johnson, the selection of music in the series—which she analyses in her article—goes beyond commercial themes, thus revealing, again, the hipster's search for

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[13] In effect, most of the characteristics of the working life of *Girls*'s characters respond to those reflected by academic studies of American people their same age. See, for example De Hawu and De Vos's article.

originality. Besides, all these twenty-somethings are frequently portrayed wearing unconventional clothing and tattoos, slacking, riding bicycles, listening to indie music and participating in cultural and artistic activities and events. Their conversations not only reflect the tipically hipster unconventionality but also border the frontiers of political correctness, especially when dealing with delicate themes like euthanasia, abortion or homosexuality, which has caused ardent critical reactions (Suebsaeng).

The analysis of hipsterism in the programme's female characters in particular is especially interesting, as hinted before. In effect, Tous Ruvirosa, following Elena Galán, considers fiction series as the ideal vehicle for the portrayal of the current diversity of women and gender relations, thus facilitating a distancing from previous dominant traditional stereotypes (72). This is evident in Dunham's representation of a "femininity that breaks down at least some of the norms we have come to expect in mainstream viewing" (McCann 94). In effect, even if Dunham has kept on focusing mainly on white female characters, her depiction of "flawed women" (McCann 95) diverges from traditional female film and TV representations, as her shows portray types of women who, like hipsters, reject conventions. Alan Sepinwall supported this vision when he also recognised that Dunham's series stood out because it showed on the screen imperfect[14] female characters, which were then very infrequent. We have to admit that this situation has changed—maybe ignited by *Girls*' innovations—and contemporary TV screens show more original female characters in series such as *Enlightened* (HBO, 2011-13), *Homeland* (Fox 21, 2011-15), *Veep* (HBO, 2012-15), *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-18), *Bunheads* (ABC, Family 2012-13) and *The Mindy Project* (Fox and Hulu, 2012-17) (Worthan).

Nevertheless, as we affirmed previously, we still encounter the complexity underlying a proper definition of the concept "female hipster" when trying to discern if the protagonists of *Girls* can be particularly categorised as "hipsters." However, in the preceding section, we have highlighted some of its characteristics, many of which are present in Dunham's girls. For example, we can affirm that the female-hipster's impression of dissatisfaction and disillusionment described by Tortorici (130-31) can be noticed in its protagonists, who rarely show any enthusiasm towards what

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[14] In her choice of the imperfect, Dunham portrays the rejection of the neoliberal (self-) impositions on "the perfect woman," that McRobbie criticises (2015).

surrounds them. Instead, these girls seem to wander in their "chaotic unscripted lives" (Bell 364) without a clear track, in an "endless state of becoming" (Genz 2017, 21). Their external aspect matches their behaviour, which is also unconventional and distances itself from the mainstream,[15] especially in the case of Hannah. According to Jennifer Rogien—her costume designer—this is justified by the fact that Hannah "doesn't really know that much about clothing" (qtd. in Rosenberg). These commentaries revolve around the idea that the style of *Girls*' characters looks for realism (Johnson 187, Schwart). Even Hannah's non-slender body "can be read as a symptom of her self-assumed authenticity and criticality" (Genz 2017, 26).[16] Thus, Hannah's physique also represents her rejection of the aesthetic feminine impositions derived from neoliberal society's requirements which promote "a pleasing and approachable femininity" (Kanai 60) and try to maintain existing power relations (McRobbie 2015, 3, 10).[17] Besides, the protagonist's outfits are sometimes so original and odd because they have been arranged in order to make them fit wrong and tug, as Dunham and her costume designer have admitted (Mau; Schwart). Consequently, it seems that Dunham wants to distance Hannah from dominant trends—as hipsters do—and from fashion, which seems to emphasise her freedom and rebellion against the subjugation that it normally conveys, as Simmel explains (541). But Dunham goes further still in wanting her character to look even more original than the stereotypical female hipsters that Tortorici—for example—described. Accordingly, it might also be inferred that, at least in her intention of being different from conventional appearances, Hannah is portrayed as an "authentic hipster," a "true innovator," in Maly and Varis's terminology. Hannah's oddness might also respond to her artistic nature—proper of hipsters—because, according to Mark Banks, many artists promote an eclectic and eccentric appearance that the rest of society

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[15] The controversial term "mainstream," analysed and criticised in detail by scholars like Thornton, Hebdige or Huber, is used in this study referring basically to what subcultures try to subvert, to mass culture, to what is socially accepted by the majority.

[16] In this sense, it must be recognised that Hannah is not characterised precisely by hipsters' supposed love for homemade, vegan, organic and healthy eating (Spiegel) as she is rather portrayed compulsively eating unhealthy food quite frequently.

[17] However, Hannah's body contrasts with the conventionally attractive bodies of the rest of the female cast, as Genz also highlights (26), which complicates the interpretation of *Girls* as a genuine attempt to break with traditional female representations.

might interpret as a consequence of their experimental life and creative activities, which Simmel also associates to the "teleological individual" (543) who does not passively imitate dominant fashions. Consequently, they cannot be considered as mere "creatures of the group" or "a vessel of the social contents" (Simmel 543).

Therefore, due to Hannah's unconventional aspect and behaviour,[18] among the female characters that inhabit *Girls*, she is one of the most appropriate candidates for being considered a hipster. She is a post-collegian moving to a big city looking for a job, possessing enormous reserves of what Pierre Bourdieu termed "cultural capital" waiting to be activated. She shares other traits of Greif's hipsters: she is income-poor temporarily but she is likely to possess the security derived from previous, parental class status and she expects to succeed at classing up. By the end of the show, Hannah, also like the older hipsters described by Greif, approaches her thirties and gives the impression of being about to fall out of subculture and fall upward into the mainstream (163). Thus, at that moment, we see how the protagonist of *Girls* starts to settle down: she has a baby and moves upstate to a very comfortable house, close to the place where she has found a stable job as a professor to teach something as vague and implausible as "the internet" (Vanarendonk). She leaves the city and seems to relinquish her idea of being a writer: she renounces the dream of living an unstable but more creative (hipster-like) life.

The association of Dunham's protagonist with hipsters resides also in her sharing their lack of serious and solid commitment to any social cause. Although they have traditionally represented rebelliousness against conventions, which is normally associated to leftist tendencies, contemporary hipsters are not exactly defined by their boasting of being leaders of any type of societal change, as illustrated in the previous section. Instead, after having lost their genuine radicalism, they simply "create a fashionably rebellious image" (Kelsey). This is evident, for example, in the final season of *Girls*, where Hannah reflects her lack of real active involvement when

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[18] These are some examples from the many that might be mentioned here: she plays ping-pong naked (in season 2, episode 1); in the very funeral of her husband—who was Hannah's publisher—, she asks a grieving widow to find her a new one (in season 3, episode 5); she pulls Jessa —one of her friends—out of rehab (in season 3, episode 2); she goes to her parents' hotel room under the effects of drugs (in the "Pilot"); and in a fit of anxiety, she sticks a *Q-tip* in her ear and harms herself (in season 2, episode 9).

she describes to a magazine editor what she considers one of her strengths: "I have a strong opinion about everything, even topics I'm not informed on."

This section has analysed the content of *Girls* that is popularly supposed to reflect many of the characteristics of hipsterism that had been presented in the previous section, in an attempt to apply the theory that exists about this subculture to the study of this particular case. This leads to the final section, containing the inferences that we can make from this research and the reflection on the possible reasons that may have led Dunham to choose this particular life-style or subculture for her most famous creation to this day.

CONCLUSIONS

The limited number of academic studies concerning the hipster phenomenon and their limitations has been portrayed. However, parting from them and with the help of other resources, it has been possible to trace some of its main characteristics, even with respect to its almost ignored female members. This has facilitated the attainment of another objective of this study, which was to check if some of the main features of hipsterism were actually present in the TV series *Girls.* Our affirmative conclusions—even if with some specifications to be taken into account—have validated its creators' considerations about the show, as well as those of many television critics, journalist, reviewers and members of the audience. In this process, we have encountered and exposed other obstacles for the detection of hipster features in this programme. Among them are the similarities between some of the characteristics proper of contemporary hipsters and those of millennials, due to the fact that the former constitute less a counter-culture than what might be called a mere life-style or even a way of representing identity in the post-recession era, a period that both groups share. This study, with its attempts at offering a proper description of the hipster and the analysis of its portrayal in *Girls*, has also managed to palliate this confusion.

Added to this, it has been demonstrated that Dunham shares with hipsters their thirst for authenticity, which leads to an evident distancing of *Girls* from previous idealised TV series about women. In effect, as Genz explains, in the case of *Girls*, authenticity is promoted as an affective commodity which is crucial in the self-branding

process that the neoliberal logic insistently encourages (2017, 18). However, this search for realism has not been completely successful, as many voices from the audience complain (McCann 95-96; Vanarendonk), and some of its exaggerations—such as those affecting their physical appearance or actions—have led Nash and Wheleham to label its characters as "unlikeable hipster slackers" (1). This representation has led to very negative reactions on the part of hipster viewers (Weese), which can be detected in critical reviews that accuse *Girls* of having portrayed the worst kind of hipsters that exist (Norton) and which complain that the show gives the impression that hipsters are the least likable people in the world (Elan). In effect, from this study, it can be inferred that Dunham is not certainly favouring a positive image of hipsterism, thus confirming Bot's theory that popular media have fostered the negative vision of this subculture (22).

Considering our previous exposition, we can reflect on the reasons that might explain this unfavourable portrayal, which constitutes one of the objectives of this essay. The first one can find its roots precisely in one of the main characteristics of hipsterism, which is irony.[19] Lena Dunham's weird representation of her characters can respond to her ironic vision of this subculture, which might motivate her "poking fun at its characters' race and class priviledge" (Lehman 13) and turns her into their "sharpest and ultimate critic" (Bell 363). In view of professor Wampole's thoughts, this justification merely based on irony gives the impression of rather constituting an excuse, because, in her own words, "the ironic frame functions as a shield against criticism" which "allows a person to dodge responsibility for his or her choices, aesthetic and otherwise." What is evident is that, no matter whether Dunham portrays hipsterism in her TV series authentically or ironically—as reflected before—, in the end, she has obtained a lot of benefits from her initiative, which has allowed her to progress—speaking in Bourdieu's terms—in her cultural, social and economic capitals ("Lena Dunham Cashes in"; C. Danes; Weissman). Maintaining the coincidences between herself and her famous Hannah, Dunham, in her thirties, moved from the hipster

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[19] Most experts consider that irony is one of the main characteristics of hipsters. For example, professor Christy Wampole describes the hipster as "merely a symptom and the most extreme manifestation of ironic living." Connected to this ironic explanation of the weird portrayal of hipsters in *Girls* is its interpretation as attempts to create humour (Bell 366, Nash and Wheleham 5). But this would also convey socio-political implications that would deserve further attention.

neigbourhood of Williamsburg to the posh West Village "to liberate her from the pressures of her uber-trendy peers" and she literally thanks God because she is now back amongst her tribe (Pluralist). Inevitably, these assertions do not facilitate our consideration of her hipsterism as very genuine or authentic, but rather connected to the fake one previously described by Maly and Varis.

Another possible motivation for the above-mentioned bizarre and exaggerated features of *Girls*'s hipster characters might be the hipster's requirement to be creators, originators, and not mere followers of others' trends. The analysis of *Girls* leads us to recognise that it actually follows what Greif marks about hipsterism when he describes it as "the mechanism of the assertion of distinction" (47). This originality has provided Dunham the opprotunity to introduce a very profitable product in the market of mass media: the female hipster, a type of character who—as previously portrayed—by the time of its premiere was almost absent from TV shows. However, in the same way as many of the traits of hipsters have been commodified and have become mainstream, other TV programmes have adopted some of the unconventional characteristics of this type of original women, as we have also demonstrated before. Consequently, as Bot elucidates referring to the hipsters' yearning for originality, "people are no longer shocked as easily" (54) and "early adopters have had to go further and further into obscure fashions in search of something new" (48). In this context, Dunham gives the impression of being one of these "early adopters" who struggles to distinguish—and selfbrand—herself and her creations by using shocking elements that attract the spectators' attention. Because, as Simmel explains, "Whatever is exceptional, bizarre, or conspicuous […] exercises a peculiar charm" (546).

In effect, Simmel has been illuminating for my attempt to understand Dunham's motivations which, after this analysis, I find connected to her personal thirst for notoriety rather than to genuine socio-political purposes. Simmel makes it clear that those who live up to the social forms prescribed by their class gain no conspicuousness or notoriety, whereas infractions and oppositions are immediately noticed and place "the individual in an exceptional position by calling the attention of the public to his action" (548). In this same line, Akanae Kanai, following Alice E. Marwick, explains how in what the latter calls "attention economy," the value of items depends on the attention they can attract in an environment of media saturation (64). Consequently, we can infer, at least, that

Hannah and Dunham herself are increasing their values by adopting the hipster aesthetics that distances them from conventionalities, which is also in line with the brand requirements of HBO, mainly based on pushing boundaries (Genz 27) and promoting controversy (Nash and Whelehan 3).[20]

Finally, Dunham's choice of the hipster non-conventional aesthetics and lifestyle for her and her characters—especially Hannah—might also be related to their alledged feminist interests. We might infer that Dunham, with Hannah's rejection of what is fashionable and socially accepted, is subverting the historically weak social positon of women that doomed them to adher to the generally accepted and what is proper (Simmel 550). However, bearing in mind Dunham's evident interest in self-branding—which could be analysed in more detail in future research work—it is inevitable to have the impression that, for her, feminism appears as one of the chosen constituents of this narrativity of the self, as a mere "commercialised, branded form" (Seaton 159).[21] This would constitute one example of Dara Persis Murray's assertion that in the utilitarian embracing of feminism for self-branding it is made evident how, in our neoliberal context, social issues are used as a means of generating sales (86).

From all these reflections, I conclude that Dunham gives the impression of having chosen hipsterism and feminism—both originally characterised by their subversive nature—as the core constituents of the self-identity not only of her fictional *Girls* characters—especially that of Hannah—but also of her own self. In this process of creation, authenticity is commodified, as it is a required component for the successful marketing of one's own brand. In the same way, when realism is surpassed in *Girls*, it shows the intention of gaining notoriety, which, even if considered proper of hipsterism and artists in general, also responds again to the commercial objectives of selling Dunham's brand and product. This attitude reminds us of the hipsters' morphism into rich industries that sell a mythical, neo-bohemian lifestyle that Elan describes.

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[20] The blurred distinction between Hannah and Dunham herself is also related to the typically neoliberal (auto)imposition of a self-branding based on authenticity—also a commercial appeal and tactic—, which is a very interesting subject to be analysed in the future.

[21] Nash and Whelehan coincide with this interpretation when they refer to "Lena Dunham's outspoken brand of social-media friendly feminism" (1) and "her own brand of popular cultural feminism" (5).

Consequently, we can conclude that Dunham fits in with Scott's consideration of hipsters as a subgroup within the petite bourgeoisie that "shifts from the world of consumption to the sphere of production" (62). Besides, following Genz's inferences, she can be said to correspond with the neoliberal self that Michel Foucault termed "homo oeconomicus," "a self-governing and autonomous entrepreneur who invests in their own human capital in order to realise their potential without the unnecessary intervention of an oppressive government" (2017, 19). But, as the latter warns, we have to be conscious of the distorted notion of freedom and individualisation that this practice conveys (Genz 2017, 19), because genuinely praiseworthy and communal goals—such as the original hipster rebelliousness against social impositions and those proper of feminism—are being used by producers in order to sell their self-brands and their products merely in their own individual interests.

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RACE CONSCIOUSNESS, THE AUDACITY OF EQUALITY, AND TRANSCULTURAL CRITICISM IN HASAN MINHAJ'S *HOMECOMING KING*

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the role of the diasporic stand-up comic as a transcultural critic and the comedy set as an act of transcultural criticism of contemporary American culture. I use the framework of transcultural criticism developed by Lewis[1] (2002) for the purpose of cultural investigation in Hasan Minhaj's stand-up comedy *Homecoming King* (2017). Through the amalgamation of political aesthetics and cultural civics, Lewis' theorization of transculturalism offers an interesting approach for critical discourse analysis of racial injustice and inequality in Muslim American stand-up comedy. Minhaj uses persuasion games and language wars to highlight the dissonance in the dominant discourse about Islam. His goal is not to be a spokesperson for Muslim Americans but to provide new imaginings to the discussion of race, religion, and belonging in the context of Brown Americans in the post 9/11 era both within and outside the community.
RESUMEN

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[1] Jeff Lewis is a professor of media and cultural studies at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia. His major contributions to the field of cultural studies are the conceptualization of "transculturalism" and his work on the analysis of political violence and the Western world's response to Islamist militant terrorism. For a more detailed discussion, see the following publications by Lewis: *Language Wars: The Role of Media and Culture in Global Terror and Political Violence* (2005), *Cultural Studies* (2008), *Crisis in the Global Mediasphere: Desire, Displeasure and Cultural Transformation* (2011), and *Global Media Apocalypse* (2013).

Este artículo examina la función del comediante diaspórico como crítico transcultural y la comedia establecida como acto de crítica transcultural de la cultura estadounidense contemporánea. Utilizo el marco de la crítica transcultural desarrollado por Lewis (2002) con el propósito de la investigación cultural en la comedia de Hasan Minhaj, *Homecoming King* (2017). A través de la fusión de la estética política y la cívica cultural, la teorización del transculturalismo de Lewis ofrece un enfoque interesante para el análisis crítico del discurso de la injusticia racial y la desigualdad en la comedia *stand-up* estadounidense musulmana. Minhaj utiliza juegos de persuasión y guerras de idiomas para resaltar la disonancia en el discurso dominante sobre el Islam. Su objetivo no es solo ser el portavoz de los musulmanes estadounidenses, sino proporcionar nuevas imaginaciones a la discusión sobre raza, religión y pertenencia en el contexto de los estadounidenses no blancos en la era posterior al 11 de septiembre, tanto dentro como fuera de la comunidad.

INTRODUCTION

Race and racism continue to be problematic in the U.S. even today despite popular belief in the prevalent political discourse that America is evolving into a colorblind society (Brown et al. 2003; Vincenty 2020; Wingfield 2015). At the same time, the strategies to engage in the study and analysis of these concepts are changing in accordance with the continuous growth of immigrant and diasporic communities (Omi and Winant 2015). Stand-up comedy as a genre for exploring intersectionality in race and ethnicity and their effect on the performance of personhood has gained prominence in the last two decades (Daube 2010). Racial humor has been a characteristic of American stand-up comedy in its early days through blackface performances in minstrel shows in the nineteenth century (Kippola 2012; Parker 2008). It continues to be a part of performing marginality and cultural critique by stand-up comedians in the twenty-first century (Gilbert 2004). While traditionally dominated by Jewish stand-up comics in the 1960s (Limon 2000), this popular cultural phenomenon has had a powerful impact on American audiences influencing and changing worldviews, transforming culture while giving birth to its modern form towards the end of the millennium (Zoglin 2008). The shows have moved from comedy clubs in Los Angeles and New York to international blockbuster productions on global streaming media platforms (M. Johnson 2020). Like their spectators, the performers are diverse and intersectional, including people from different races and ethnicities as well as the diasporic communities with a history of immigration from nontraditional countries. Stand-up has evolved from a simplistic comedy show to a genre of observational comedy that uses the Bordieuan habitus and prevailing social norms as a fulcrum to draw global

audiences (Borns 1987; Quirk 2015). In their role as cultural critics, diasporic stand-up comedians provide observations that are relatable to minorities as well as dominant groups. They make observations "from the backwaters of life, an everyday phenomenon that is rarely noticed or discussed" by mainstream society (Double 208). Building on the work of cultural analysis undertaken by researchers in the field of stand-up comedy and using Lewis' (2002) theorization of transculturalism, I propose in this article an analysis of the unique response of one diasporic stand-up comic, Hasan Minhaj, to notions of being Muslim, Brown, and American in post 9/11 U.S.

Hasan Minhaj is an American comedian, political commentator, actor, and television host with two successful shows on Netflix. Born to parents of Indian heritage in the U.S., he graduated in political science from the University of California, Davis. Unlike his parents, Minhaj is not willing to compromise his Muslim identity and actively seeks to fit in the mainstream culture by expanding the perimeter of the very forces that seek to exclude his generation. He is an embodiment of the struggles and dilemmas faced by new citizens of the Western world and has successfully used the medium of stand-up comedy and other new media platforms to represent American Muslims. In conversation with Sam Jones (2018), Minhaj describes how *Homecoming King* was born from an incident when he was not allowed to take a white girl to prom. His encounters with racism throughout his childhood and adult years encouraged him to envision a "New Brown America" that distills the essence of all South Asian American immigrants who feel like insiders and outsiders at the same time. The show is a new form of stand-up comedy; part storytelling and part autobiography, which incorporates structured accounts of past traumas and future hopes (Ludwig 2018). Through tales of personal memories depicting the ubiquitous American immigrant experience, the show is relatable to both mainstream audiences and other subordinate groups due to its universality.

STAND-UP COMEDY, SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN DIASPORA, AND NEW BROWN AMERICA

Most stand-up comedy performances include semi-autobiographical and fictionalized narrations from the artist's real-life experiences (Ajaye 2002). This means that "stand-up comedians (often) appear 'as themselves' […] stand-up comedy is a form of theater; it is not life […] stand-up is about the re-presentation of self as if it were everyday life" (Smith 77). In the shows performed by diasporic individuals this is often not the case, as seen in the comedy sets of South Asian American comedians who are blurring the boundaries

between their lived and imagined realities (Maheshwari 2017). They tell their own stories about growing up in the U.S. from the perspective of the "other" Asian and Brown minority. In turn, they are redefining the notion of "belonging" and what it means to be American for the second-generation diaspora. Unlike postcolonial migrants or those who entered the U.S. as indentured labor, the present members of South Asian diaspora have arrived in the U.S. predominantly as highly skilled migrants after the immigration reforms introduced in the late 1960s. Initially attracted to the U.S. for opportunities in the fields of higher education and scientific research, these diasporic individuals have eventually ended up living in metropolitan centers and working in global multinational organizations (Mishra 2016). For example, the CEOs of leading global American companies like Sundar Pichai of Google, Satya Nadella of Microsoft, Arvind Krishna of IBM, Shantanu Narayen of Adobe, among others, trace their origins to India. Further, Indians from the subcontinent are the fastest growing demographic in the U.S., almost doubling in number from 2.2 million in 2000 to 4.9 million in 2015. The median annual household income of the Indian diaspora is almost double the median for all U.S. households (Bhattacharjee 2018). However, they are also different from their Far East Asian counterparts, not brown in the same way as their Mexican peers, and in the case of the Muslim diaspora, although they share their religion with their Middle Eastern compeers, they are not Arabs.

Shortly after becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1988, the renowned American-Canadian diasporic writer Bharati Mukherjee posed some pertinent rhetorical questions.

> All around me I see the face of America changing. So do you, if you live in cities, teach in universities, ride public transport. But where, in fiction, do you read of it? Who, in other words, speaks for us, the new Americans from nontraditional immigrant countries? Which is another way of saying, in this altered America, who speaks for you?

These sentiments are beginning to change, albeit very slowly, in the literary and cultural landscape of the U.S. Apu from *The Simpsons* is no longer the sole voice that represents the Indian diaspora on mainstream U.S. television shows. In Hari Kondabolu's documentary film *The Problem with Apu* (2017), we see new vocabularies of self-expression and resistance. Kondabolu asserts that "[w]e're a generation that grew up with that character, and now we're old enough to say something about it. Now we have the power" (Rao). Today, there is a proliferation of new media platforms for disseminating South Asian cultural narratives including stand-up comedy performances. Muslim American-born comedians and actors of Indian descent like Asif Mandvi, Aman Ali,

Azhar Usman, Aziz Ansari, and Hasan Minhaj have produced and hosted award-winning stand-up comedy shows in mainstream American media. However, a recent study has revealed that 90.5% of the English language films produced globally does not include a Muslim character. There is also widespread misrepresentation in films of Muslims, who are often stereotyped as either perpetrators or targets of violence. More than half of the films analyzed in the study portrayed Muslim characters either as immigrants or located outside the country of origin where the films were produced (Khan et al. 2021). Academy award-nominated actor Riz Ahmed who is part of the campaign to address this misalignment argues that considering 62% of the American population has not encountered a Muslim person in their daily lives, "[t]he representation of Muslims on screen feeds the policies that get enacted, the people that get killed, the countries that get invaded." Ahmed further contests, "[t]his study shows us the scale of the problem in film, and its cost is measured in lost potential and lost lives." In the field of Muslim stand-up comedy in the U.S. there is an increased consciousness about race and religion in the comedy-sets of the second-generation diaspora.

> Although Muslims were participating in public humor prior to the terrorist attacks in 2001, the negative social consequences of that event led to a very public response in the form of stand-up comedy. In the United States, Muslim stand-up comedy seeks to challenge negative social discrimination that judges all Muslims to be threats to public safety, and that concludes that Islam is not an American religion. (Michael, "Contemporary Muslim Comedy").

Therefore, the observations made in these performances compel us to acknowledge the parallel lives across multiple cultural and belief systems of their protagonists and their unwillingness to compromise the coexistence of these pluralities (Kay 2018). Fully aware of the inequalities imposed by the dominant group, these diasporic stand-up comics exhibit an interplay of complex identities steeped in ambivalence and hybridity (Bhabha 1990). These identities are surfaced according to the contextual and communication needs demanded by the specific cultural encounter. Their shows not only feature the nostalgic tales of displacement through stories of their first-generation parents but also deal with contemporary issues of identity politics, religion, and economic inequalities and representation in the U.S.

There is an increased consciousness of brownness amongst the South Asian American diaspora in the twenty-first century which is in alignment with the demographic changes in the U.S. Whether the U.S. is becoming more accepting of its "brown" citizens or whether the "brown" diaspora will eventually align with the mainstream "white" notions of

American identity, mirroring the experience of earlier European settlers is yet to be seen. The category of "South Asian" itself is relatively new in the U.S. in comparison to other panethnic identifiers like "Asian American" and "Latinx". Many "desis" from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh find this category useful since it captures their "racial positioning as brown Asians with shared cultural backgrounds, who were racialized and faced discrimination" and could not easily become a part of the mainstream (Mishra 79). However, the term "desi" as an ethnic marker or the denomination of "South Asian" as a racial categorization in the highly racialized context such as the U.S. does not have the same traction as "brown". Brownness is not used to create solidarity with other members of the subcontinental diaspora; rather, it is employed as a construct to gain visibility and raise a voice about the absurdities of American racism. This new generation of stand-up comics vocally and unreservedly use their racial positioning as "Brown Americans" to poetically and morally question the cultural, political, and financial hegemony of modern America. They reject the melting pot and salad bowl approaches to social integration and far from blending in they want to carve their own unique niches in the U.S. "South Asians in America face racism. Unlike Whiteness, the relative 'value' of a Brown identity, which has never overcome the stigma of 'foreigner,' has gone down in stock following 2001" (Sharma 21). Despite these racial, religious, and communal exclusions, Muslim American comedians of Indian origin provide a role model and help to situate the brown diaspora in the American ethnoracial and political landscape by negotiating "in-betweenness" and crafting political solidarities (Mishra 2016). They represent the aspirations of the second-generation who want to change the idea of what it means to be American and to embrace the true meaning of the equality granted to all its citizens by the U.S. constitution. They reject the submissiveness of their parents and take matters into their own hands to carve their own American dream. The members of this brown diaspora are therefore claiming their space and creating their own racial identities in the U.S. They are opting for new alternatives by rejecting the White assimilationist approaches to cultural belonging, and at the same time, are also adopting non-insular ethnic identities (Sharma 2010).

CULTURAL INVESTIGATION AND ANALYSIS IN STAND-UP COMEDY THROUGH TRANSCULTURAL CRITICISM

Several theoretical approaches have been used to analyze stand-up comedy performances in recent years. Limon has used Kristeva's conceptualization of abjection in the sense that "what is stood up in

stand-up comedy is abjection" (4). Limon argues that the transformation of the genre from the domain of Jewish male comedians in the 1960s to a stage where "all of America is the pool for national stand-up comedy" (3) cannot be solely attributed to the success of multiculturalism. He contends that because the Jewish comedians "stood up precisely at the place where body was idealized and materially abstracted" (8), they paved the way for stand-up comics who were not white Christian heterosexual male performers. Vigouroux has applied Bakhtin's idea of the contribution of genre such that the sociolinguistic aspect of stand-up comedy helps us to gain access to the sociopolitical dynamics in contemporary times. Vigouroux argues that the stand-up comics' use of heteroglossic linguistic resources reveals a new identity "which both encompasses and transcends racial and ethnic categories" (243) and that this identity "is constructed through and received by the non-ratified audience with ambivalence" (243). Thomas (2015) has used Deleuze's notion of affective-cultural assemblage to assert the genre's role as both a contributor to and constrainer of racial and heteronormative discourse. Quirk (2018) has studied the sociological aspects of class and politics in stand-up comedy. Gilbert (2004) has analyzed feminist stand-up comedy, the relationship between humor and power, and the performance of marginality by female comedians as a means to understand power relations in a broader cultural context. Antoine has offered the concept of "the edge" in stand-up comedy "as an unfixed fluctuating affective perimeter that floats at the outer limits of hegemonic discourses. The edge serves as the outer rim of what we often refer to as 'the mainstream'" (39). Extending the concept to diasporic stand-up comedians, it can be argued that in pushing the edge of racial and ethnic hegemonies, they "exploit incongruences in dominant discourses and challenge unequal power relationships. They also position themselves as outside the mainstream in some way. Their alignment itself is part of pushing the edge." (Antoine 40). Like other Muslim stand-up comedians, Minhaj uses his "performances to argue what American Muslims should be saying and doing in order to advance their cause for social justice" (Michael, "American Muslims Stand up and Speak Out" 129). I argue that Minhaj is a transcultural critic, and his comedy set is a transcultural criticism of present-day sociocultural and political realities in the U.S. as seen by second-generation Americans of color whom Minhaj refers to as the cultural misfits that make up a "New Brown America."

With a view to re-evaluating the role of digital media and culture in its response to 9/11, cultural studies scholar Lewis argues that a transcultural reading of this event allows for a more holistic deconstruction of the power gradients rather than an interpretation of

the collective manufactured consent based on biased assumptions. While power structures determine meaning, they are fallible and are unable to control meaning in absolute terms in culturally complex societies such as the U.S. In transculturalism, "[t]he task of criticism and reform is thus enabled by a more complete rendering of the cultural elements which are informing operations of policy, the media, and public opinion" (Lewis 27-28). His principal argument is to reexamine the interpretation of Foucault's idea of the pervasiveness of power by "two quite divergent modes of post-hegemony, post-ideology cultural movements" (15). The first group of researchers seeks a "radical expansion of human identities and expressive subjectivities" (15) while the second group has adapted Foucault's ideas "in the area of cultural policy or 'cultural civics'" (15). He further argues that if cultural studies "seeks to establish itself as the evolutionary descendant of the traditional disciplines" (15), then the Birmingham school style theorization of the field needs to be revised. Lewis seeks to re-politicize our understanding of culture and cultural studies by advocating a shift from culturalism to transculturalism, such that it is pertinent to this century and that it responds to the needs of globalization and the hyperconnected mediasphere. With its basis in the poststructural theorization of culture, Lewis stresses the importance of political critique in the fields of cultural studies and the humanities to analyze political violence as well as to expose the fault lines in identity politics debates. Lewis advocates for transculturalism founded on R. Johnson's notion (qtd. Lewis 2002) wherein cultural studies plays a central role in the analysis of all forms of linguistic production. Lewis' theorization of transculturalism encompasses political aesthetics and cultural civics, adapting and extending the canonical Gramscian and Foucauldian approaches to society. It promotes a fresh mode of cultural investigation by mobilizing a new definition of culture "through the expression and deployment of new forms of cultural politics" (24). Culture is essentially created through the process of meaning-making; therefore, it must amalgamate the textual analysis aspects of cultural studies with anthropology and structural linguistics. When these aspects are enjoined with governmentality, civics, and policy debates, we attain the ability to engage more meaningfully with postmodern and poststructural realities. According to Lewis, culture is,

> an assemblage of imaginings and meanings that may be consonant, disjunctive, overlapping, contentious, continuous, or discontinuous. These assemblages may operate through a wide variety of human social groupings and social practices. In contemporary culture these experiences of imagining and meaning-making are intensified through the proliferation of mass media images and information. (23-24)

By using the above definition of culture and a new form of cultural politics, transculturalism fills the gap left behind by culturalism in only partially acknowledging "the relationships between meaning and non-meaning, ideology and subjectivity, social reform, and social imagining" (Lewis 24).

MINHAJ THE TRANSCULTURAL CRITIC AND *HOMECOMING KING* AS TRANSCULTURAL CRITICISM

In the remainder of this article, I will apply key characteristics of transculturalism as defined by Lewis to analyze the deeply personal anecdotes built around the themes of inequality, racial injustice, and intergenerational acceptance in Hasan Minhaj's stand-up comedy *Homecoming King.* The show faithfully represents the struggles and dilemmas of brown Americans in the contemporary era. Through his narrations, Minhaj highlights the need for an inclusive environment allowing for different options, perspectives, and strategies to cohabit. Through the use of observational comedy and political satire indicative of language games (Wittgenstein 1953) in his cultural performance, Minhaj puts forward the possibility to engage in social dialogue and debate with the state, by illustrating the interconnectedness between discourse and the context of use as a combined unit of reference in the process of meaning-making. Lewis claims that the textual configuration of the U.S. "is extremely volatile, transient," (30) and the role of the transcultural critic "is to limit the damage created by nodalizing and agonistic processes and to provide new imaginings for new possibilities in the human experience" (30). Lewis' key principles expose the ambivalent nature of transculturalism, uniting the critics' multi-targeted ability to wage language wars and engagement in social dialogue at all levels of the community and the nation at large with their capacity to constantly deconstruct and reconstruct reality. This essentially makes transculturalism a viable framework for decoding the U.S.' need "to form itself as a super-text, overriding and resolving the problematic through the imposition of a nodal and extraneous symbolic order" (29). The transcultural critic should be open to multiple interpretations and acknowledge the limited durability of knowledge, thereby always evaluating the truth based on a selection of divergent claims.

Like many other minorities, Muslim Americans have contributed to cultural diversity in the U.S. "But their voices have often been marginalized, a trend that has accelerated in today's political climate, as misinformation and the normalization of hate speech have given rise to divisive rhetoric and rampant Islamophobia" (McFadyen-Ketchum). For

the voices to be heard, not just of South Asian Muslim Americans, but of other marginalized groups as well, a process of transcultural criticism can help transform the idea of nationhood and citizenship. In several interviews, Minhaj (2016; 2017) has advocated for an environment that favors complex hybrid identities with a possibility to engage in self-reflexive and self-critical social dialogue within the diasporic community and with the state. He acknowledges that even two decades after 9/11, Muslim Americans still need to account for their ethnic differences attributed to their religion and the burden of collective guilt is even more prominent. In *Homecoming King*, Minhaj provides a perspective on being an immigrant that has never been told so clearly and succinctly before. The first time he became conscious of his skin color was at the age of six when a little girl told him that he was the color of poop. As he grows up in a predominantly white area, there are several incidents where his "otherness" is foregrounded just because he is brown and Muslim. However, we see that one does not have to be an immigrant to experience anxiety, fear, or the feeling of discomfort in not being able to fit in. At the same time, Minhaj also believes that it is ultimately love which is intrinsically bigger than fear and the capability of seeing people as individuals on the basis of their own merits that will help foster a sense of equality.

To be able to respond to the demands of cultural hybridity, Lewis argues that "transculturalism is as interested in dissonance, tension, and instability as it is with the stabilizing effects of social conjunction, communalism, and organization" (24). Minhaj is not afraid of dealing with the issues of growing up as a brown boy and going to an all-white school in Davis, California. He narrates the incident about how the teachers were never able to pronounce his name correctly in school making rollcall a nightmare for him. Incidentally, it was his English teacher who confused his name with Saddam Hussein. Minhaj consistently uses sarcasm and figurative language throughout the show that resonates with both insiders and outsiders (Handika 2019). This memory has had a profound impact on him, so much so that, even in his short segment on *TheEllenShow*, he spent most of his time educating Ellen and the North American audience on how to pronounce his name correctly. His argument is that if Americans can pronounce a difficult name like Timothée Chalamet, then they should also be able to pronounce HA-sun MIN-haj. The clip went viral and has struck a chord with the second-generation diaspora who hesitate to correct people when their name is pronounced incorrectly (Husain 2020). Through this story, Minhaj highlights the various angles of culture and the ways in which meaning is created and distributed in society by those in power.

Minhaj communicates and interprets positive and negative messages with equal ease. Throughout the show he relates carefully selected personal stories that highlight racism in different social settings, from educational to professional to personal interactions between brown immigrants and white Americans. He candidly states, "on that night, September 12th, it was the first night of so many nights where my family's loyalty to this country was under attack" (*HK* 00:30:19–00:30:27) and questions why Muslim Americans need to prove their patriotism every time America faces a terrorist attack. After the assault on their house, his father wanted him to let go, telling him that "[t]hese things happen, and these things will continue to happen. That's the price we pay for being here" (*HK* 00:28:33–00:28:41). However, Minhaj highlights the intergenerational differences, and challenges his father's version of the American dream. Minhaj recounts, "[m]y dad's from that generation where he feels like if you come to this country, you pay the American dream tax. You endure racism, and if it doesn't cost you your life, pay it. There you go, Uncle Sam" (*HK* 00:28:48–00:29-00). But Minhaj is able to switch between the various layers of meaning-making in a manner that allows him to both transform and be transformed by the discourse in the media, which in other words is his ability to wage language wars. He "battles bigotry with bittersweet humor" (Czajkowski) and uses "emancipatory racial humor that exposes and resists dominant power structures" (Islam iii).

As children of immigrants, the ability to speak in multiple languages is both a positive and a negative developmental aspect. Simple terms of endearment like "*bhai*", the word for brother in Urdu need to be justified in the presence of an all-white audience. Minhaj describes his frustration of having to explain himself to his peers when his younger sister calls him "Hasan *bhai*" in front of his classmates. "'What's Hasan-bye?' I went to school with a bunch of Ryan Lochtes. Just all traps. 'Uh, I don't understand other cultures, bro'" (*HK* 00:14:45–00:14:55). Lewis posits that "[t]hese language wars create the conditions of stability and instability as individuals and groups congregate, communicate, and seek to assert their material and semiotic interests over others" (24). As a transcultural critic, Minhaj has the ability to influence the discourse both within and outside the community. He narrates the South Asian obsession with associating the consequence of every action with the reaction of other diasporic community members. The famous Urdu adage his parents use to address every conflict is *Log Kya Kahenge?* or "What will people say?" In other words, Minhaj deploys language wars to manage and control the semiotic, personal, and material outcomes of all his social engagements.

Minhaj is married to a Hindu woman, and the discrimination faced by people in an inter-caste marriage is the Indian equivalent to American racism. When his father is not sure about Minhaj's choice of life partner just because she is from a different Indian religion, Minhaj questions his father "How many times do we complain about racism in our community? Now the ball is in our court, we're going to be bigoted? Dad, I promise you, God doesn't like bigotry. God's not like, 'You're racist. Good job'" (*HK* 00:22:34–00:22:47). Minhaj has a hard time convincing his parents and, in the end, decides that he is not going to change his life just because his parents want him to appease some aunty and uncle that he's never going to see. Lewis posits that if culture is manifested through language wars, then language has the ability to create and destroy community, relationship, power, and boundaries. Minhaj uses the medium of language to stay in control of the narrative by distinguishing the different layers of discourse without caring about winning or losing the debate. It is important for him to assert his identity as both Indian and American without having to justify or choose a side. His father's reaction to the events of 9/11 leads him to advise Minhaj to hide his identity. "So, when 9/11 happened I was in high school. My dad sits everybody down. He's like, 'Hasan, whatever you do, do not tell people you're Muslim or talk about politics'" (*HK* 00:26:25–00:26:35). Minhaj, on the other hand, sarcastically tells his audience what he actually wanted to tell his father at that time. "Alright, Dad, I'll just hide it. This just rubs off" (*HK* 00:26:35–00:26:40) referring to the color of his skin. In this case, for Minhaj, Stuart Hall's "struggle to signify" (qtd. Lewis 2002) is not polarized in a single direction, but rather changes depending on the context, without resulting in a feeling of pride or guilt. "Minhaj's racial and ethnic humor creatively exposes, destabilizes, and dissents against the prevailing power relationships and identity constructions that sustain racial oppression as commonsense knowledge" (Islam 2018). In terms of his own response to 9/11, because he was born in the U.S., Minhaj contends that, "I actually have the audacity of equality. I'm like, 'I'm in Honors Gov, I have it right here. Life, liberty, pursuit of happiness. All men created equal.' It says it right here, I'm equal. I'm equal. I don't deserve this" (*HK* 00:29:01–00:29:17) and argues with his father "But isn't it our job to push the needle forward little by little? Isn't that how all this stuff happens?" (*HK* 00:29:59–00:30:02).

Lewis further asserts that transculturalism holds the semiotic and material aspects of culture at the same level thereby acknowledging the interconnectedness between the productive and significative aspects of communication. The latter's roots are buried deep in the historical context which significantly influences the former. Assigning a secondary

status to linguistic production is a reductive approach for the purpose of diasporic identity. Rather, a move from cultural materialism towards semiotic materialism as defined by Echeverría's thesis where production=signification, (qtd. Saenz De Sicilia and Rojas 2018) is a more viable approach. It gives the diaspora "the capacity to form and reform the activity, the material environment and, thereby, the identity of a social group, in a manner which places the possibility of different and more amenable conditions at the center of critical social enquiry" (Saenz de Sicilia and Rojas 141) by asserting the importance of both dimensions in today's global neo-liberal society. In this regard, Lewis rightly observes that "[t]ransculturalism locates relationships of power in terms of language and history" (25). *Homecoming King* is an example of a cultural production that voices the tensions and conflicts between the dominant group and the diaspora in a series of dialectical images. "These are made images which bring certain relationships within any social formation or articulation of modes of production into sharper focus, or into the forefront of human consciousness, not as reflections of 'reality' but as multiple-faceted (at least two-sided) image" (Neale 214).

Minhaj foregrounds the question of racial class which is often not associated with Asian Americans in comparison to Black Americans, yet remains an essential ethnic and economic trait that separates South Asians from other Asians and Latin Americans. Throughout the show, Minhaj predominantly refers to the community as brown (mentioned twenty-seven times) and not Indian (used seven times) in an attempt to both highlight the racial in-betweenness in the White/Black continuum as well as the deep obsession of the Indian diaspora with the "Fair and Lovely" culture of aspiring for whiteness. When asked by his third-grade teacher what he would like to be, a six-year-old Minhaj wants to be white. He says, to the children of immigrants, "when you're white and you're playing the video game of life, and your avatar is white, you just get asked less questions along the way" (*HK* 00:31:47–00:31:55). Minhaj highlights the unconscious bias in this situation and argues that the privilege accorded to white children is evident in the choices available to them. "'I want to be Batman.' 'Well, of course. Batman is white. Duh!' 'I want to be president.' 'Duh! Forty-four-and-a-half presidents are white. We've had a great track record'" (*HK* 00:31:58–00:32:15). As he grows up, for the teenaged Minhaj, going to prom with a white girl, Bethany Reed, from Nebraska was the American Dream, a privilege of equality his parents' generation had strived for. But he is turned away by Bethany's mother because this was an important American rite of passage for them, and a brown boy would not fit in the photos. Minhaj regrets being dejected and not going to the prom because he did not want to ruin their picture-perfect celebration. And the following week, when his classmates

asked him about his absence at the prom, Minhaj takes the blame upon himself and pretends to have stood-up Bethany, who did not come to his defense either. He wonders how "people could be bigoted even as they were smiling at you. It's hard when you see people saying they love you, but they're afraid at the same time. And I didn't know what that meant" (*HK* 00:44:05–00:44:18). Through the use of narrative comedy as one of the tools of transcultural criticism for highlighting racial-ethnic polarities, Minhaj attempts a normalization and recentering of the immigrant and diasporic experience (MacDonald 2018).

In the America divided between post 9/11 rhetoric and the more recent anti-Muslim policies of the Trump administration, even economic globalization must contend to the emerging role of religion in the West. On the politics of fear perpetrated by conservative media channels like Fox News, Minhaj asserts that it is impossible not to encounter the "other" in a big city like New York today. Even though the brain can be racist the body will just betray the "self." Behind the enclaves of their walled spaces, white supremacists may hate people of color, but for lunch they are happy to have halal chicken and rice. "All morning they're like, 'Mexicans, All Lives Matter, Arabs… 12:01! Shawarma time!'" (*HK* 00:47:46–00:47:52). Minhaj contends that the negative associations popularized by mainstream media, particularly of Muslims, as plane hijackers and terrorists enforce discrimination in public places. However, he also argues that Muslim Americans are present in every sphere of U.S. society from doctors to engineers to restaurateurs and by that logic the white American faces a life-threatening situation even outside the airport. In our hyperconnected world, the capacity for discourse to be produced, the mediums of its distribution, the temporality and spatiality of its reach, the distortion of its meaning through the journey before reaching the intended audience, and the multiplicity of its interpretation know no bounds. As a transcultural critic, Minhaj is wary of the language wars used by the global media in projecting the worst in the Muslim minority as the universal reality of its majority. For Lewis, "[t]ransculturalism, however, identifies these multiple flowing processes in terms of broadly contested and uneven distributions, disjunctures, and concentrations" (25). In this sense, Minhaj is able to evaluate the prolific natuer and propinquity of every message he receives from or sends out in the global mediasphere. Unlike his father, he wants to engage in an open debate about the problem of race despite facing several instances of discrimination in his personal and professional life. He reflects on the advice he would give to his younger self along the lines of, "'don't let this experience define you. It's good people and bad people. Irrespective of creed, class, color, find those people. Because love is bigger than fear.' […] I really believe that. I really

believe love is bigger than fear" (*HK* 00:46:33–00:47:00). Towards the end of the show, Minhaj reveals his version of the American dream and asserts the freedom of equality granted to all American citizens. In the New Brown America, his vision is for people to stop blaming others and take control of their destinies. "It's not asking for a co-sign. It's what every generation did before you. You claim that shit on your own terms" (*HK* 01:02:48-01:02:54).

Meanings are produced through social assemblages and when they achieve a significant quantum they are converted into ideological and hegemonic practices. Lewis claims that "[t]he process of fixing (meaning) transgresses the inevitable dynamic of meaning-making; signifiers are strained beneath the ossifying force of fixity, eventually splintering, fissuring, and separating in a process of dissociation" (25). Minhaj is a part of the apparatus that challenges these poles of power and seeks to incorporate new meanings into the dominant culture unreservedly and unashamedly. If he can be transformed by the mainstream, he also has the power to transform the established culture by actively engaging in language warfare. Through continuous deconstruction and reconstruction of racial inequalities Minhaj forces us to do what Lewis argues, and that is "identify nodalizations and the brutish infamies of social and cultural injustice" (26).

Minhaj goes on to view his brownness as a privilege vis-à-vis the racial discrimination faced by Black Americans. His disappointment at not being able to take a white girl to prom is nothing compared to the spine-shattering violence induced by the police on African Americans even today. For a moment, he resigns to paying the dream tax to Uncle Sam but pauses to reflect about the fact that America's racial problem is not dealt with adequately. "Why is it every time the collateral damage has to be death for us to talk about this? [...] For every Trayvon Martin or Ahmed, the clock kid, there is bigotry that happens every day" (*HK* 00:46:10–00:46:27). Minhaj argues that the reason for this type of bigotry that transpires daily is the fear of the "other." This time he wages language war to draw a parallel between the Black community which has been historically discriminated and continues to struggle even today and the Brown community which is treading along the same trajectory. Lewis further posits that as the dominant culture is continuously challenged, the boundaries of meaning and non-meaning are rendered porous and ultimately begin to break, resulting in the emergence of new cultures from the fault lines. "The test of transculturalism is to think outside the box of one's motherland, seeing many sides of every question without abandoning conviction, and allowing for a chameleon sense of self without losing one's cultural center" (Slimbach 211). On one hand, Minhaj lets go of the hatred he has been carrying in his heart about

Bethany and her family and on the other hand, Bethany marries an Indian guy, Rajesh Rengatramanajananam, despite her parents' narrowmindedness. She rebukes her parents and declares, "This isn't high school. Raj is a good person and so am I. So, I'm going to be with him because it's right. I hope you make up your mind" (*HK* 01:02:01–01:02:13). Transculturalism also challenges those who use language wars to justify racism and creates heroes from the dominant group who champion the cause of immigrants for creating a level playing field. Minhaj narrates the story about the clip from *Real Time with Bill Maher*, where Bill tells Ben Affleck that 85% of Muslims hate Americans and should be contained. Ben reminds Bill of the result of the same strategy used by Americans towards the Japanese. In that moment, Minhaj recounts that Ben Affleck "may not be the hero we want, but he is the hero the Muslim world needs" (*HK* 01:05:38–01:05:42), thereby suggesting a new structural reality. Here Minhaj closes the loop of his language war by ultimately drawing the White race into the politics of identification by building solidarity with the marginalized groups.

The manner in which meaning is constructed has a direct impact on how a society evolves. If the dominant groups continue to undermine and repress the culturally marginalized "others", given the power and counter-power of the network society, such a structure is bound to collapse (Castells 2009). Lewis reasons that within transculturalism "de Certeauian and postmodern conceptions are incorporated into a broad visceral politics, which engages fully in all representational forms, including those shaped through human relationships, the body, and identity formation" (26). As a form of transcultural criticism, *Homecoming King* constantly strives to deconstruct and reconstruct the causalities of racial injustice and discrimination. The show exposes the dominant discourse and subjects it to analysis and critique without the fear of being repudiated by the majority cultural group or the Muslim community. Minhaj examines the path of his own parents' journey as immigrants in the U.S. as well as their prejudices and fears that prevented them from seeing themselves as equal citizens. He argues that unlike his own generation, born, raised, and educated in America, the first-generation did not have role-models and never felt at home in the U.S. At the same time before 9/11 his parents' religion was invisible and people did not even know where they came from but now it is the only thing that people care about.

We also see that Minhaj is open to cultural differences and at the same time is wary of them. This aspect of transculturalism gives him the capacity to radically engage in social, political, and ideological debates without the idea of faithfulness or faithlessness, without the fear of loyalty or disloyalty, and without the need for obedience or

transgression. Unlike his parents' generation who are happy to pay the American dream tax, Minhaj chooses what Lewis calls a "path through the minutiae and the macrocosms of various cultural assemblages, claims, and power nodes" (26). Minhaj believes in the power of love, but at the same time disagrees with the advice given by his father to always forgive others for their discriminative acts and says that "there are some days where I can forgive that person. The past is the past. Tools, Clear History. It's done. Other days, 'No, fuck that. This is House of Cards. Crush our enemies'" (*HK* 00:53:53–00:54:05). Therefore, Minhaj asserts his rightful place in the U.S. as a Brown, South Asian, Indian, Muslim American striving for a cosmopolitan citizenship "that recognizes that each person of that nation-state processes multiple identities that not only link him or her to their own cultural heritage, but also to the culture of the host country, continent, neighborhood, street etc." (Cuccioletta 4). In the closing story of *Homecoming King*, Minhaj alludes to the gradual progress being made towards mainstreaming of Brown Americans (Michael 2018) when he describes his feelings on getting selected as a correspondent for *The Daily Show*.

> Don't you know what this means? Don't you get it? I'm the cure for racism. I cured it. Alright, maybe I didn't cure it, but everyone has a purpose. Some people were put here to find a cure for cancer or find a vaccine for Ebola. My life is definitive proof that once you go brown, you've got to lock that shit down. (*HK* 01:10:47–01:11:16)

CONCLUSION

In *Homecoming King*, Minhaj deconstructs the discursive reality of the U.S., ascribed through its power relationships on the global political stage particularly with the Middle East as well as the complicit surrender of its media's critical function in times of crisis on the American soil (Chomsky qtd. Lewis 2002). Due to the proliferation of social media and an increased awareness among the second-generation diaspora, the transcultural criticism provided by Minhaj challenges the mainstream's attempt to fix power and meaning. "New cultures and new meanings break out within the fissures and echoes of the structures that seem to contain them" (Lewis 25). Such a culture gives the marginalized the ability to communicate with each other and to form communities based on shared solidarities. Just as society comprises diverse people, culture comprises the imaginings and meanings we attribute to known and unknown phenomena, and these meanings are represented using the tools of textual analysis, always remaining fluid with the ability of being changed by space, time, and human action. Lewis' conceptualization of transculturalism discussed here,

acknowledges the dissonant co-existence of multiple layers of culture within contemporary society. Dissonance does not necessarily mean that everything is acceptable, it merely indicates the ability to balance one's priorities and self-expression in a given space and time by respecting the sanctity of the shared and communal nature of an interdependent global society. The emergence of new media platforms has given rise to a rapid escalation of language wars and the role of the transcultural critic is to impartially mediate discursive disputes resulting from cultural differences and communication gaps. Thus, transculturalism offers us the possibility to critically examine the ways in which these language wars are shaped and conducted in stand-up comedy performances by diasporic comics.

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FORM AND PERCEPTION OF NATURE IN ELIZABETH BISHOP'S "QUESTIONS OF TRAVEL"

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ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Bishop's poetry is acutely form-conscious and human perception informs its descriptions of nature; critics who study Bishop's poetry refer to her use of poetic artifice and note in passing the ethics of restraint and impersonality in her poetry. However, Bishop's poetry is rarely discussed in the sphere of ecocriticism; and the formal significance of human perception infused with the descriptions of nature in her poetry is conveniently overlooked. Likewise, anthropogenic climate change is underrepresented in traditional ecocriticism which insists on removing form—and with it, any trace of the human—from the text. This article proposes that a study of Bishop's travel writing and exploring the significance of concern for nature in conjunction with form-consciousness can contribute to a more profound understanding of both human-nature relationship and Bishop's ecopoetic sensitivities. "Questions of Travel" is one of Bishop's poems that directly grapples with the ethics of human presence in nature. The article explicates the textual and formal features of this poem to elucidate the function of form in its ecopoetic descriptions. The article shows how Bishop accepts the inevitability of human perception of nature and its literary corollary in ecopoetry as form-consciousness, and, thus, by implication, points to the importance of such poetry for a deeper understanding of the relationship between human beings and nature in the context of climate change.

RESUMEN:
La poesía de Elizabeth Bishop es marcadamente consciente de la
forma y la percepción humana informa sus descripciones de la
naturaleza; los críticos que estudian la poesía de Bishop hacen
referencia a su uso del artificio poético y mencionan de paso la ética
de la contención y la impersonalidad en su poesía. Sin embargo, la
poesía de Bishop raras veces se discute en la esfera de la ecocrítica, y
el significado formal de la percepción humana que infunde las
descripciones de la naturaleza en su poesía se ignora
convenientemente. Del mismo modo, el cambio climático
antropogénico raras veces se menciona en la ecocrítica tradicional,
que insiste en eliminar la forma—y con ella, cualquier rastro de lo
humano—del texto. Este artículo propone que un estudio de la
escritura de viajes de Bishop y una exploración de la importancia de la
preocupación por la naturaleza en conjunción con la conciencia de la
forma puede contribuir a una comprensión más profunda tanto de la
relación humanidad-naturaleza como de las sensibilidades
ecopoéticas de Bishop. "Cuestiones del viaje" es uno de los poemas de
Bishop que aborda directamente la ética de la presencia humana en la
naturaleza. El artículo comenta los rasgos textuales y formales de este
poema para elucidar la función de la forma en sus descripciones
ecopoéticas. El trabajo muestra cómo Bishop acepta la inevitabilidad
de la percepción humana de la naturaleza y su corolario literario en la
ecopoesía manifestado en la conciencia de la forma, y así, por
implicación, señala la importancia de dicha poesía para una
comprensión más profunda de la relación entre los seres humanos y
la naturaleza en el contexto del cambio climático.

INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Bishop is known as a keen observer of nature, but
she is rarely regarded as an ecopoet. She occupies an odd place in
the intersection of literary movements and artistic coteries.
Modernists, such as Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore, heavily
influenced her poetry. Yet, as a self-described socialist, she
staunchly opposes the radical post-war politics of the High
modernists (Erkkila 285). She values and incorporates T. S. Eliot's
reticence and impersonality (Bishop and Monteiro 22); nonetheless,
she is connected with the confessional poetry of Robert Lowell and
his famous biographical style (Chiasson 32). Detailed and extensive
descriptions of nature constitute her key defining characteristics, yet
she cannot be reduced to one more "master of optics" (Bloom 11). It
seems, in all aspects of her poetry, she simultaneously subscribes to

and escapes from the conventions critics try to relate to her. This proclivity to defy categorization, Scott Knickerbocker claims, is exactly the cause of her noticeable absence in discussions of ecocentric poets. The claim, however, cannot be wholly true, since ecopoetry itself is not strictly defined. The protean boundaries of the concept, therefore, must allow for Bishop's poetic sensibilities to have a place in this realm.

Ecopoetry is a loosely defined term, spanning from poetry with purely ecological aesthetics to poetry with a mere green message (Clark 139). The "fluid boundaries" (Fisher-Wirth and Street xxviii) of the definition, however, fail to fully assimilate Bishop's poetry. Ecopoetry emphasizes the independence of nature from anthropocentric perspectives and values; Bishop's poetry, on the contrary, invests in experimentation with poetic form and acknowledges the necessity of artifice instead of spontaneity. According to Knickerbocker, she is form-conscious even in her freest of free verses (56). As a result, critics assume her poetry stands on the side of culture against the natural environment, presuming that nature and culture are two essentially exclusive categories (Bate 13-4). Improving Knickerbocker's argument, this article argues that Bishop's dedication to form and craft alongside a reductive understanding of the natural environment can be the reason why critics do not assign a place to her in ecopoetic practices. Because of this ecocritical bias against her poetry, critics dispense with studying the particular way form in Bishop's poetry facilitates perceptions of nature.

Belief in the immediacy of American nature writing propagated by the transcendentalists has influenced ecocritical approaches. Thus, they find Bishop's ethics of impersonality, together with her unwillingness to break away from formal concerns, problematic. Bishop, however, refuses to treat form as the inevitable accessory of anthropocentrism. Choosing the middle ground between concept and percept (Knickerbocker 57), Bishop's poetry refuses reduction to grand ideas or mere descriptions. Moreover, she rejects puritan sensibilities inherent in traditional ecocriticism—that is, the fundamentalist beliefs in the superiority of form over content. She also refuses to see human beings as distinct from nature. As a result, she welcomes self-referentiality in her poetry. Susan Rosenbaum, likewise, in her essay "Bishop and the Natural World," uses an anecdote provided by Bishop to illustrate the meaning of accessing the real through artifice. In a draft for an undelivered talk,

Bishop recorded that her grandmother used to wear a glass eye, and often when she was looking at someone, her glass eye looked upward and crooked. This metaphor explains that in Bishop's poetry, contemplation of the natural necessarily conjoins the imagination that obscures it (62). Both Knickerbocker and Rosenbaum argue that Bishop's poetry is not about nature per se but our perception of it. In this perspective, the human is part of nature and so what is constituted as natural is wholly reliant on cultural discourses. The insight Knickerbocker and Rosenbaum provide into the structure of nature-human interaction in Bishop's poetry is foundational to our understanding of her aesthetics.

Not only do critics challenge the notion of classifying Bishop's poetry as ecopoetry, but more seriously, they find her poetry's relationship to the contemporary questions of climate change untenable; she does not mention climate change in her poetry nor could she be concerned with it in the 1960s. However, it is possible to detect features of climate change poetry in her travel poems. More importantly, her poetry offers new vistas of poetic engagement with climate change and helps usher in a more nuanced perspective into the relation of human agency and the transformations of nature. Not being concerned with the urgency of climate change, her poetry refuses to engage in pastoral or elegiac representations of nature. Thus, she is safe from the weaknesses of most recent climate change poetry. In this way, her travel poetry can be a proper site of engagement with new ways of addressing climate change for contemporary poets who seek to transform the more conservative poetic engagements with the topic.

In what follows, the article offers a thorough explication of Bishop's poem "Questions of Travel" to illustrate how artifice/form-consciousness is germane to reaching legitimate understandings of human's relation to nature. It also provides a venue to consider new perspectives in the way culture has transformed nature. In this process, form is treated as the awareness-raising potential of language that allows us to "experience organic processes and the phenomena of nature" (Gross and McDowell 8). So the article will explore the formal quality of the poem to show how it contributes to an ecocentric consciousness and offers valuable insight into the possibility of devising new forms of poetic engagement with climate change.

DISCUSSION

In her essay "Noticing with Bishop," Cheryl Alison closely analyses Bishop's poem "The Moose." The poem is about the way a moose encounters a man who is traveling on a bus. Alison observes that most interpretations of the poem focus on the female sex of the moose and its implications in terms of gender studies (132). Bishop's anecdote about the incident that inspired the poem, as described in a letter to Marianne Moore, seems to highlight the gender of the moose. Alison, however, addresses the adjective Bishop uses to describe the moose: "curious." She proposes that Bishop is trying to capture the essence of the moose by using the word "curious" and the general stance she takes vis-à-vis the moose in the poem, as she leaves it free from assumptions generated by human language. As the moose and the man scrutinize one another, they reach a unifying moment of realization (141). Likewise, Bishop often compares natural sceneries with manufactured objects to juxtapose nature with human perceptions and depict their conceptual interdependency. According to Jonathan Bate, Bishop "always respects nature as it is and for itself, while at the same time recognizing that we can only understand nature by way of those distinctively human categories" (65). Bishop is aware that nature can elude human efforts to understand or portray it or that language can transform nature into culture (Alison 63); yet, she believes, human intervention is necessary for an understanding of nonhuman nature. Nevertheless, she rigorously tries to honor the integrity of nature and refuses to project her morality upon it.

The more profound ecological readings of Bishop's poetry often contend that her form-conscious poetry is mindful of nature. Nevertheless, most ecocritical readings of literary texts are theory-averse and refuse to acknowledge Bishops' poetry as ecocritical. This contradiction is due to the divergence in the more recent redefinitions of ecocriticism. Lawrence Buell divides the history of environmental studies in literature into two waves: First-wave ecocriticism and second-wave environmental criticism (17). First-wave ecocriticism belongs to the late twentieth century and is a reaction against "the distantiations of reader from the text and text from the world that had been ushered in by the structuralist revolution in critical theory" (Buell 6). This revolution entered ecocriticism via studies of British romantic poetry and American nature-writing. It resisted the celebration of anthropocentric texts

and aligned itself with the Deep Ecologists' ethics of moving "from a human-centered to a nature-centered system of values" (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 21). The first-wave celebration of harmony with nature and the championing of ecocentric text were soon disrupted by a second-wave environmental criticism focused on "querying 'nature' as a concept" (Garrard, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* 1). From this perspective, nature is always present in the arts through conceptual mediations of human beings. The second-wave incorporation of social and political theories into an environmental discourse provokes the simple but profoundly important objection that "one can speak as an environmentalist, [...] but self-evidently no human can speak *as* the environment" (Buell 7). It is this second category that allows Bishop's poetry to be regarded as positively ecocritical.

"Questions of Travel" as a relatively long free verse composition seems to be less constrained in form compared to some of Bishop's earlier poems which adhere to traditional rhyme and meter. However, it is not without form. Bishop's arduous process of drafting, rewriting, and the blank spaces she left for yet undetermined exact words in her papers (Wallace 87) indicate her concern for form on a much deeper level. "Questions of Travel," published in an eponymous collection in 1956, is a meditation on the ethics of observation that makes possible the rest of the verse travelogues in this collection. This meta-observation encapsulates the intermediacy Knickerbocker explains by "concept and percept" (57). In this poem exists on the one hand, the dilemma between the ethical concept of travel and human presence in nature solely for aesthetic pleasure and, on the other hand, the actual perception of that nature as a singular case. Hence, the questions Bishop's travel poems pose can be extrapolated to the central question of ecocriticism; that is, is it possible to have a definition of nature independent of human perceptions?

Compared to the list of titles in the collection's table of contents, the poem's title appears as an anomaly. Among poems with specific titles referring to exact objects, persons or places under observation such as "Squatter's Children," "Manuelzinho," and "The Armadillo" or the titles that resemble a detailed itinerary such as "Arrival at Santos" and "Brazil, January 1, 1502," the title of this poem strikes the readers as too abstract. "Questions of Travel" is the manifesto of the collection since it bears the collection's title and transcends pure description of landscape to dwell on the philosophy

and ethics of observing nature. Nevertheless, this abstract title does not ensure entry into a philosophical poem with grandiose declarations; instead, Bishop is quick to remind the reader of her "typical reticence" (Knickerbocker 58) toward conceptual statements via a descriptive inaugural stanza that elucidates her characteristic capacity for perception.

The poem's opening line portrays an observer disillusioned or overwhelmed by "too many waterfalls" and "the crowded streams" that "hurry too rapidly down to the sea" (Bishop 91). The negativity in the word "too" indicates the subversive aesthetics of the poem wherein nature writing's trope of treating nature as a transcendent source of infinite pristine beauty is subverted. This subversive attitude appears in Bishop's other poems within this collection as well; for example, in "Arrival at Santos," she describes the scenery as "Impractically shaped and—who knows?—self-pitying mountains, / sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery" (87). The landscape portrayed as self-pitying, impractical, sad and harsh, is the canvas on which the poet persona inscribes her intolerance to the exotic Brazilian landscape. Although this negative engagement with the nature description is bewildering to the readers, it is necessary to understand that Bishop here offers a perspective to be avoided, as she does in many other poems of this collection (Hicok 122). Although the repetition of the word "too" in "Questions of Travel" enacts the poet persona's desire to distance herself from exposure to an alien nature, it attests to the presence of a subjective viewpoint in the observation of the scenery. Even though the use of multiple modifiers intimates the readers with the poet persona's peculiar emotional response to the scene, the personification of the streams with the modifier "crowded" and attributing agency to elements of nature in "pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops" making the waters "spill over the sides in soft slow-motion" suggests a move away from the individual human's center of attention. The conflict between static human perception and active natural dynamisms dissolves the poem's anthropocentric quality of personifications and metaphors.

In the first two lines, the streams were pictured as "crowded," and nature was appropriated by the imposition of emotive and attitudinal modifiers. The following three lines liken the clouds spilling over mountaintops to the image of a waterfall:

. . . the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops

> makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,
> turning to waterfalls under our very eyes. (91)

While the human's presence is still indicated in the phrase "under our very eyes," the poem's attitude to nature becomes more ecocentric within the short span of a few lines. The first stanza's enjambments mirror the movement of the waterfalls and the fluidity of the clouds and the alliteration of the "s" sound in "spill" / "sides" / "soft" and "slow" strengthens the simile of the waterfall by foreshadowing its sound in the earlier line.

The succeeding lines appear entirely after a dash in a parenthetical remark portraying nature in the process of flux:

> —For if those streaks, those mile-long, shiny, tearstains,
> aren't waterfalls yet,
> in a quick age or so, as ages go here,
> they probably will be. (91)

This use of interjections in her descriptions, which can also be seen in her use of commas that provide alternative modifiers or clarifiers, is both an attempt for achieving a more accurate observation and a testament to the artwork's status within environment and time; hence, Bishop's poems employ this "figurative revision and resist any dogmatic relationship between language and nature" (Knickerbocker 68). Two such examples in these lines occur when she clarifies "those streaks" with both scientific observations and also metaphorical descriptors in "those mile-long, shiny, tearstains," and when she interrupts her general remark of "in a quick age or so" with a reminder that this same general remark is also her immediate observation, as she states in the phrase "as ages go here" (91). Self-awareness in this poem comes with the knowledge that the descriptions are not merely time and place-specific but are shaped by time flux. This knowledge separates the environment from the poet persona, and the formal interjections are in the service of that separation.

Having distanced herself from the natural phenomenon she describes, she casts herself in the role of the observer and the witness. Most recent climate change poetry treats the poetic persona as a witness to natural catastrophes and changes (Griffiths 4). Representation of the experience of witnessing, however, requires the medium of language. Knickerbocker attributes Bishop's preference

for a simile to her "ethics of restraint . . . and her subsequent treatment of language as only tentatively touching the reality to which it refers" (69). The final sentence of this stanza is an extended simile:

> But if the streams and clouds keep travelling, travelling,
> the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ships,
> slime-hung and barnacled. (91)

It displays this plurality of meaning in a single landscape and doubles down on this shift in meaning by repeating the word "travelling." Within the context of the other poems of the collection, a reader would assume that travel in the poem's title refers to Bishop's act of traveling to Brazil, which is a journey away from home. However, in this line, she significantly subverts this expectation. She uses the second sense of "travel" as moving in: "the streams and clouds keep travelling, travelling" (91) and removes the human figure altogether from the environment, while at the same time acknowledging its presence in language through the artifice of simile and repetition. This first stanza never wholly detaches its perspective from the human perception, but through Bishop's formal subversions, it moves towards a nature ontologically independent from human understanding and, as such, lays the groundwork for the ethical questions of the next section. As a result, the act of witnessing does not lead to an emotional epiphany. Instead of "recognizing that we are party to environmentally deleterious practices" (Griffiths 8), the poem develops an interrogative mood about the seemingly ideal stance of the human being concerning nature.

The second stanza, except for the first imperative sentence, is composed entirely of successive questions. After a keen perception of nature in the previous stanza, Bishop moves to pose ethical and epistemological questions of travel to be answered in the rest of the poem. Thomas J. Travisano interprets these questions regarding the humans' need for travel as an extension of the competing themes of imagination and reality, and Bishop refuting the romantic idea of imagination's superiority in favor of experience (142). Indeed, there is evidence for this binary opposition of reality and thought when she asks, "[s]hould we have stayed home and thought of here?" Furthermore, she uses the baroque trope of the world as theatre to imply the inherent imaginative nature of the world in her question,

> [i]s it right to be watching strangers in a play
> in this strangest of theatres? (91)

The use of the word "right" explicitly indicates an ethical concern, and when Bishop describes the urge to travel and witness as "childishness" in the next question, it becomes clear that her position is not a straightforward defense of experience against imagination. The trope of theatre and the strangeness Bishop ascribes to it purports a sense of imaginative lure and enchantment as well as uneasiness. Her observation that "while there's a breath of life / in our bodies, we are determined to rush / to see the sun the other way around" (91) implies insatiable greed, which Bishop cannot ethically condone, but she cannot resist either. This act of yielding to the temptation of observation appears in two more instances of repetition. First, in the line "[t]o stare at some inexplicable old stonework, / inexplicable and impenetrable, / at any view" in which the second use of the word "inexplicable" can be interpreted as referring to the ambivalence of human greed in perception, and second, in the following line, "instantly seen and always, always delightful" (91) wherein the finality of "always" is her ultimate surrender to this temptation. Therefore, Bishop does not exclude imaginative engagement for a bland real-life experience, but she regards observation of reality as a way to engage with the real imaginatively.

It seems unlikely that Bishop's uneasiness over her travels in this stanza stems from an environmental concern. The poem conveys the poet persona's discomfort, leading to ethical consciousness and questioning. The ethically interrogative mood of the stanza could be the result of a social dilemma as she is a foreign observer of poverty and the political standstill of Brazil, which "might have sharpened into direct protest, were she to have remained in the country" (Slater 35); likewise, it could be caused by the voyeuristic gaze that such detailed descriptions necessitate. However, when situating this entirely anthropocentric stanza after a section dedicated exclusively to waterfalls and mountains, it would not be too farfetched to assume that Bishop's discomfort can be ecocritical as well; she learns that nature's value and essence are independent of her observations. By inquiring from herself whether it was better to have stayed at home and imagined the place rather than traveling, she is contemplating the difference between a wholly imagined nature and

real nature perceived through experience. In both cases, imagination is central to our understanding of the natural world. The world she observes is "inexplicable and impenetrable, / at any view," (91) and she contemplates her experience as one of dislocation when she asks, "Should we have stayed at home and thought of here? / Where should we be today?" (91) Thus she desires to know whether the impulse to travel results from curiosity about strange theatres of human and wildlife existence or derives from cultural voyeurism. Questions are, however, immediately accompanied by a description of what she has seen: "the sun the other way around? / The tiniest green hummingbird in the world?" and "some inexplicable old stonework," which are all "instantly seen and always, always delightful" (91). The sequence of moral questionings followed by yielding to the temptation of direct experience and observation, and culminated in the assertion of the necessity of the experience in aesthetic-ethical terms—the experience is always, always delightful—indicates that imaginative human perception of nature in its oddest varieties is necessary and ennobling. Traveling and exposure to nature—as it includes both wildlife and the human world—imposes dislocations on the viewer, leading to the cartographic expansion of their psyche. As a result, human intervention may fail to grasp the essence of nature, but it grows in aesthetic and ethical maturity through this exposure. Thus, Bishop admits that her interest in nature and her presence in its vicinity are intimately bound up together. Nature for Bishop is not defined based on its relation to the human but is mediated through human perception, and even though she cannot ethically justify this position, she indeed yields to it.

Bishop's poem reverses the trope of the "Imaginative journey to the locus of climate change," (Griffiths 3) which is an attribute of nature poetry. The journey here is not imaginative but authentic, and its significance lies in the chance for direct observation and geographic and cultural dislocation. This dislocation is both topographic and mental, making the witness find the strange nature attractive and delightful. So instead of cultivating the passive and sterile feeling of lament over that which is changed, Bishop's poetry offers a chance to imagine a renewed relation among human cultures and between human culture in general and nature. "Questions of Travel," therefore, addresses change in the topographic position of the human as it deals with the transformation of our eco-ethical standards of engaging with the world.

The third and longest stanza of the poem is not so much an answer but the defense of one's right to ask questions. Bishop employs conditionals to juxtapose an imagined absence with the presence of the landscape and the consequent sense of loss with the materiality of the experience gained.

> But surely it would have been a pity
> not to have seen the trees along this road,
> really exaggerated in their beauty,
> not to have seen them gesturing
> like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.
> —Not to have had to stop for gas and heard
> the sad, two-noted, wooden tune
> of disparate wooden clogs
> carelessly clacking over
> a grease-stained filling-station floor.
> (In another country the clogs would all be tested.
> Each pair there would have identical pitch.)
> —A pity not to have heard
> the other, less primitive music of the fat brown bird
> who sings above the broken gasoline pump
> in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque:
> three towers, five silver crosses. (91-2)

Incorporating yet again detailed descriptions of singular images with the anaphora of "it would have been a pity not to have" (91), Bishop contextualizes her temptation to observe with her characteristic specialty in rendering her poems visual. The objects of observation are both natural and artificial, but similes blur their distinctions as trees are "like noble pantomimists" (91) and bamboos are like the "church of Jesuit baroque" (92). A simile indicates the interdependence of the natural and the cultural. In this way, Bishop resists the "separation of human and non-human worlds" (Trexler 17) as a cultural practice and emphasizes their interdependence as fruitful for human culture. In her stance towards man-nature relation, Bishop resembles David Abram who argues that the detachment of the human from its environment began with the invention of phonetic writing—when words were removed from bodily and natural life and entered the realm of abstract. Like Abram, she believes the act of perception is never without participation, so through mere observation of the environment and in the process of perception, humans change nature (Abram 45-7). The element of

wood appears first in trees and then in clogs, the sound of which compels the observer to see the process of nature becoming material goods over time and ponder "what connection can exist for centuries / between the crudest wooden footwear, and [...] the whittled fantasies of wooden cages" (92) in the next stanza. Wood appears to be Bishop's material of choice in describing manufactured artifacts as Knickerbocker observes in relation to her poem "The Monument," an object made of wood is "organic, subject to decay, the weather, and other environmental 'conditions'" (66). Bishop portrays the way culture transforms nature, but she also shows how nature lies at the foundation of culture. Wood as a tree grows, while wood as a clog decays when exposed to rain. Although the transformation of nature to culture is deleterious to the environment, it also offers humans a chance to cogitate their ethical relation to nature.

After this long series of justifications, Bishop shies away from a final declaration and returns to the interrogative mode as she imagines a traveler writing in her notebook:

> *"Is it lack of imagination that makes us come*
> *to imagined places, not just stay at home?*
> *Or could Pascal have been not entirely right*
> *about just sitting quietly in one's room?* (92)

Although in the form of a question, the near-rhymes of "come," "home," and "room" make this resemble a closing couplet that, had it not been for Bishop's restraint, would provide the definitive resolution to her dilemma. One can safely assume Bishop's questioning of Blaise Pascal's often-quoted claim that "all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber" (40) is her tongue-in-cheek refusal of such attitudes. Refusing to bask in the romantic or transcendentalist aesthetic perspective of spontaneity and immediacy, Bishop rejects their poetics of formal reductionism as a way "to achieve a faithful account of nature" (Clark 46-7). In ecocritical terms, staying in one's chamber is the non-interventionist philosophy of removing any human presence in nature in order to save its integrity but, as Bishop posits, even if safeguarding nature is ethically a value, it is a process dependent on the human's recognition of the importance of nature to their existence.

With its perfect rhymes, the following couplet sets up the reader for closure but again never fully commits itself to the responsibility of such an act.

> *Continent, city, country, society:*
> *the choice is never wide and never free.*
> *And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home,*
> *wherever that may be?"* (92)

It implies a hint of determinism when it claims the choice of where a human is present "*is never wide and never free*" (92), and the unconventional placement of the assertive "*No*" means it is possibly the answer to all previous questions. However, the poem ends with another question opening an entirely new frontier of thought on where human perception belongs. By asking, "*[s]hould we have stayed at home, / wherever that may be?*" Bishop is challenging the perspective that humanity should exclude itself from nature. To Bishop, the human is an irremovable part of nature and will remain integral to it. The nonchalant final line raises the profound objection to the ecocritical assumption that a binary opposition exists between nature and society or human and environment. Thus, although Bishop recognizes human beings' active agency in the transformation of nature, she assumes their ties must be strengthened on moral grounds rather than severed. "The intellectual challenges with which climate change confronts us" (Griffiths 24) requires the form-conscious poetry of a poet such as Bishop, who believes in the dependence of the moral human perception of nature on the existence of form and aesthetic experience of nature.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps, the imperative of all environmental studies in the past decade has been to mitigate first-wave ecocriticism's failure to offer a plausible interpretation of the relationship between human cultural advances and their detrimental impact on nature, specifically in the form of climate change wherein the interdependence of human and nature is central. Thus, the old assumptions of man versus environment and civilization versus nature are inadequate in studying an issue that affects both humans and nature. So any study that aims to be relevant within contemporary environmental discourses must examine the mindset

that defines the relationship of human beings with nature and human predispositions that cause his utilitarian view of nature and show how to change this reductive and detrimental view.

Elizabeth Bishop falls in a sweet spot on the culture-nature continuum; she is still a follower of the post-industrial modernist mentality, which culminated in this environmental catastrophe; however, at the same time—although not explicitly aware of a concept like global warming—she is deeply concerned with her relationship with the outside world, which also includes a fair amount of nature. Henceforth, she is neither a starry-eyed worshipper of nature nor oblivious that the nature around her requires close observation and study. In this intermediary position, her poetic sensibilities of form-consciousness and restraint are beneficial in studying how the environment appears in the mirror of a focused perception.

"Questions of Travel" is one of Bishop's poems that provide a glimpse into her philosophy of poetry and the self-awareness of her craft. Nevertheless, perhaps more than any other poem, it is about her conflict with the ethics of human perception. She feels a profound uneasiness about reacting to the social injustice and environmental degradation around her with just a commentary and a fear that her presence can be more detrimental than beneficial. Moreover, although she avoids a clear answer due to her proclivity for restraint and disdain for abstract declarations, she manages to justify her act of observation with an appeal to the temptation of the environment itself. Her coy suggestion that her travel is not to foreign lands but towards a natural home suggests that she would have disapproved of some environmentalists' efforts to remove humans and their perspective from nature and the ecologically concerned text, respectively. Bishop's poetry evokes some of the themes central to traditional ecopoems, such as the journey to a natural site, the contrast between the familiar and the strange, the transformation of nature as a result of culture, the human's agency in transmutations of nature, and the poet as a witness to environmental disasters brought by the human. Nevertheless, it makes possible a critical reevaluation of its other features, such as the tone of lament, the proposition that nature is better off without the human, and the binarism of natural and cultural, or immediate expression and formal play. With its selective treatment of poetic themes and emphasis on expression through form and content simultaneously, Bishop's "Questions of Travel" reinscribes the importance of human

perception as an element of nature, establishing a compassionate as well as an exulting relation with nature at large.

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