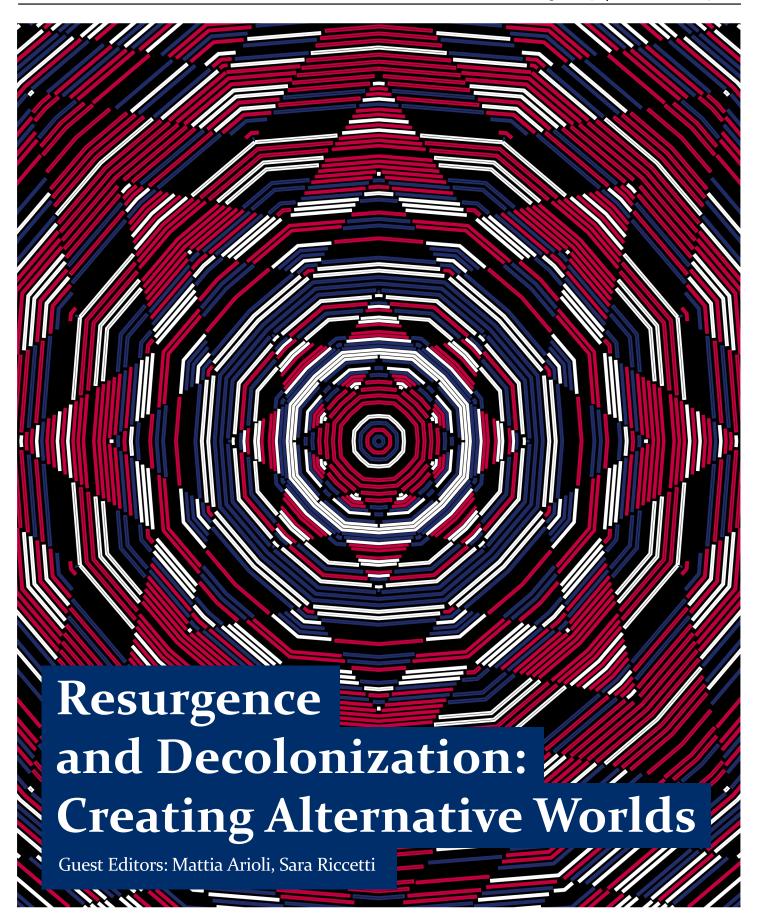


N. 10 - May 2025 | ISSN: 2612-5641





## NO. 10 | May 2025

## **EDITORS IN CHIEF**

STEFANO MORELLO | The Graduate Center, City University of New York MARCO PETRELLI | Università di Pisa

#### **EDITORIAL MANAGER**

CHIARA PATRIZI | Università di Bologna / Università degli Studi di Trieste

## **EDITORIAL COMMITTEE**

ANDREA CAROSSO | Università degli Studi di Torino
LORENZO COSTAGUTA | University of Bristol
MARIA GIULIA FABI | Università di Ferrara
ASTRID FELLNER | Universität des Saarlandes
JACK HALBERSTAM | Columbia University
ELENA LAMBERTI | Università di Bologna
ERIC LOTT | The Graduate Center, City University of New York
CHRISTOF MAUCH | Amerika-Institut München, Ludwig-Maximilians Universität
IVY WILSON | Northwestern University
ANGELA ZOTTOLA | Università degli Studi di Torino

## **MANAGING EDITORS**

FRANCESCO BACCI | Freie Universität Berlin LIVIA BELLARDINI | Università degli Studi Roma Tre ROBERT MOSCALIUC | Università degli Studi di Torino IURI MOSCARDI | The Graduate Center, City University of New York DAPHNE ORLANDI | Università di Catania

## **ADVISORY BOARD**

EMILIO AMIDEO | Università degli Studi di Napoli "Partenope" GAIA ARAGRANDE | Università di Bologna LUCA BARRA | Università di Bologna ELISABETTA BINI | Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II
MANLIO DELLA MARCA | Università di Parma
CLAITON MARCIO DA SILVA | Federal University of the Southern Frontier
SANDRO DUTRA E SILVA | Universidade Estadual de Goiás
SERENELLA IOVINO | University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
DONATELLA IZZO | Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale"
STEFANO LUCONI | Università degli Studi di Padova
CHIARA MIGLIORI | Freie Universität Berlin
MIRKO MONDILLO | Università degli Studi di Siena
GIULIA SBAFFI | New York University
MARCO VENUTI | Università degli Studi di Catania

## **PUBLISHED BY**

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

## **CONTACTS**

http://aisna-graduates.online/jam-it/ journal@aisna-graduates.online

COVER DESIGN
GLORICRISTIN MILIDONI



## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

RESURGENCE AND DECOLONIZATION: CREATING ALTERNATIVE WORLDS

Mattia Arioli & Sara Riccetti

| 5 |

EPISTEMOLOGIES OF CARE: AN ECOPOETIC CONVERSATION BETWEEN CRAIG SANTOS PEREZ, JAMAICA H. OSORIO, AND SIA FIGIEL

Ana Cristina Gomes da Rocha

| 23 |

NARRATIVE CARTOGRAPHIES OF INDIGENOUS RESURGENCE: WOMEN'S SELF-CONSTRUCTION, TRANSMOTION, AND THE DECOLONIZATION OF SPATIAL INQUIRY

Hend Ayari

RESURGENT WATER IN ANISHINAABE STORYTELLING: LEANNE BETASAMOSAKE SIMPSON'S "SHE SANG THEM HOME" AND "BIG WATER" Martina Basciani

75

ACROSS CONTINENTS AND GENERATIONS: FADING FAMILY HISTORY IN YAA GYASI'S HOMEGOING

Nicole Bernardi

INHERITED PRAGMATISM: RACE, REPRESENTATION AND TECHNOLOGY IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN* 

Jeremy Dennis

#### **BOOK REVIEWS**

THE PROBLEM OF FREE WILL IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE
Paolo Pitari (author)
Review by Ali Dehdarirad

151

## AMERICAN MASS INCARCERATION AND POST-NETWORK TELEVISION: CAPTIVATING ASPIRATIONS

Lee A. Flamand (author)

Review by Ginevra Bianchini

| 155 |

## ADRIENNE RICH: POESIA E POETICA DI UN FUTURO DIMENTICATO

Marina Camboni (autrice) Recensione di Livia Bellardini

161

## TWENTY YEARS OF ART OF ETHNICITY: A RETROSPECTIVE HOMAGE TO THOMAS J. FERRARO'S FEELING ITALIAN

Stefano Morello | 170 |

FEELING ITALIAN AT 22: WHAT NEW HAVEN HAD TO TEACH ACADEME IN THE

1980S

Thomas J. Ferraro

| 173 |

THE CHEERFUL DEFENESTRATOR

Carlo Rotella

| 195 |

ON FEELING ITALIAN

Mitchell Breitwieser

203

BEING ITALIAN (WHEN YOU'RE NOT)

Jane Tylus

207

FEELING FEELING ITALIAN

Georgios Anagnostou

210

FERRARO HIS WAY

Richard H. Brodhead

217

# RESURGENCE AND DECOLONIZATION: CREATING ALTERNATIVE WORLDS

## **Mattia Arioli** University of Bologna

## **Sara Riccetti** Sapienza University of Rome

Tn 2023, Lily Gladstone (Siksikaitsitapi/NiMíiPuu) made history as the first Indige-I nous actress to win a Golden Globe for Best Performance by a Female Actor in a Motion Picture—Drama. She also became the first Indigenous person in the US to receive an Academy Award nomination for her portrayal of Mollie Burkhart, an Osage woman, in Martin Scorsese's Killers of the Flower Moon. The film, based on true events, chronicles the systematic murders of Osage Nation members in 1920s Oklahoma, who were targeted for their oil-rich land in what became known as the "Reign of Terror" (Fixico 2012, 42). This landmark achievement highlights Gladstone's exceptional talent and signifies a shift toward more accurate representations of Indigenous peoples in mainstream cinema. That same year, Larissa FastHorse (Sicangu Lakota) broke new ground as the first Native American woman to have a play produced on Broadway with The Thanksqiving Play. A biting satire, the play critiques the well-meaning yet misguided efforts of white educators attempting to create a politically correct Thanksgiving pageant. Through sharp humor, FastHorse exposes the performative nature of liberal activism and the contradictions of inclusion efforts that fail to involve actual Indigenous voices and presence.

These milestones are particularly significant when considered against the backdrop of the long history of Indigenous misrepresentation in American cultural production. They not only mark a shift in representation but also gesture toward the creation of "alternative worlds"—spaces that challenge settler-colonial paradigms and center Indigenous presence, agency and futurity (Simpson 2016, 31). Since the 19th century, American theater and popular entertainment, predominantly produced by white Americans, have played a pivotal role in shaping dominant perceptions of Native Americans, often reducing them to simplistic, harmful stereotypes that supported settler-colonial narratives. As Bethany Hughes (2024) explains in Redface: Race, Performance, and Indigeneity, redface (non-Native individuals portraying Native American characters using makeup, costumes, and exaggerated stereotypes) functioned as a racialized performance, akin to blackface, through which (white) American identity was constructed by positioning Indigeneity as its constitutive Other (5). However, while blackface attached a caricatured Blackness to real bodies to legitimize their continued subjugation, redface worked by projecting a fabricated "Indianness" onto bodies to rationalize cultural and physical erasure. Whereas blackface emphasized inferiority to justify dominance, redface presented Indigeneity as something that could be appropriated, absorbed, or overwritten. The symbolic appropriation of Native identity, Robert Warrior (2005) argues, has long served settler-colonial nation-building, allowing white Americans to claim the image of the Indian while displacing actual Indigenous presence. Within this logic, redface did not merely distort Indigenous identity—it enabled the construction of a national identity predicated on Indigenous erasure, rendering Native peoples hypervisible as symbols and invisible as political subjects (92–94). Redface operates as a *collaborative* curatorial process—a complex configuration of embodied markers, dramaturgical techniques, and performative claims to authenticity that not only racializes Indigenous peoples but also works to delegitimize their political sovereignty (Hughes 2024). It constructs and circulates the "stage Indian" as an allegedly faithful depiction of Indigenous identity, yet the very impossibility of fulfilling this performance becomes its ideological function: Native peoples are continually framed as failing to match the expectations imposed by these fabricated images and thus, a "race that vanishes" (6).

Such representational practices have had material consequences beyond the stage, persisting throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in various performance-based contexts—from Halloween costumes and school pageants to sports mascots and advertising. In the realm of sports, for instance, football teams like the former

Washington Redskins, the Cleveland Indians (now Guardians), the Kansas City Chiefs, and the Atlanta Braves have been known to paint their faces, wear faux headdresses, and perform mock war chants or "tomahawk chops"—actions widely condemned by Native communities as offensive caricatures that perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Advertising has also played a role, with brands such as Land O'Lakes (formerly featuring a stereotyped Native woman) and the use of Plains Indian iconography in commercial logos (e.g., for tobacco or motor oil) commodifying Native identity without respect for its cultural significance. These seemingly harmless acts of cultural appropriation serve to naturalize settler presence while undermining Indigenous self-determination. In contemporary contexts, the same colonial logic that undergirds redface performance informs state and corporate efforts to encroach on Indigenous lands, as seen in the construction of oil pipelines across treaty-protected territories and continuous attacks on tribal sovereignty (Hughes 2024, 3). Thus, redface is not merely a problematic artistic trope but a foundational mechanism through which settler colonialism legitimizes its claims to land, power, and identity.

Redface, in this sense, manufactures what Thomas King (Cherokee) (2012) calls the "Dead Indian"—a figure rooted in nostalgia and myth, stripped of political agency and frozen in the past (81-85). Yet, as Hughes notes, it does so in response to the continued presence of what King identifies as the "Inconvenient Indian"—the living, resisting, sovereign Indigenous subject who refuses to disappear and disrupts settler narratives of closure and conquest. It becomes a mechanism through which American aesthetic culture "processes the materiality" of this inconvenient presence by translating it into manageable, commodifiable symbols (Hughes 2024, 6). This dynamic is closely tied to what Philip Deloria calls the practice of *playing Indian*—a longstanding ritual through which white Americans have performed Indigeneity to construct their own national identity. Deloria traces this tradition back to the Boston Tea Party, when revolutionaries donned Mohawk disguises not to remain anonymous, but to access the symbolic power of Indianness as a signifier of rebellion, authenticity, and anti-colonial resistance. The act of dressing as Indians was not incidental; it was foundational. By performing Indigeneity, white Americans gave material form to a national identity that depended on

Indigenous presence and necessitated Indigenous absence (Deloria 1998, 6-9; Slotkin 1973). This act marked the genesis of a persistent tradition of playing Indian, one that developed throughout the nineteenth century in theatrical performances and later permeated American cinema. In nineteenth-century literary and dramatic texts, Indigenous characters were often portrayed in one of two tropes: either as assimilated figures absorbed into white society (as in the Pocahontas myth) or as noble savages fated to disappear (as in the 1829 John August Stone's play *Metamora*). These narratives express a dual vision: one of "the nurturing, romanticized wilderness that assimilates," and the other of a "tragic, vanishing Indigenous presence-a tale of promise lost to betrayal and violence" (Bank 1997, 66). Plays like James Nelson Barker's The Indian Princess; or, La Belle Sauvage (1808) and George Washington Parke Custis's Pocahontas; or, The Settlers of Virginia (1830) exemplify how early American drama converted Indigenous figures into mythic symbols that supported national origin stories and rationalized expansionist ideologies. As Zoe Detsi-Diamanti (2007) notes, such portrayals functioned by "incorporating the Indian into a politically expedient mythic pattern regarding both a sense of national origin and the romantic dream of uninhibited expansion" (103). These staged performances of Indigeneity were not confined to the theatre: they laid the groundwork for the proliferation of redface in twentieth- and twenty-first-century media.

Film and media scholars such as Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, Michelle Raheja, and Lisa Black have demonstrated how these stereotypical performances were translated into cinematic tropes, producing what Kilpatrick terms the Celluloid Indian. Raheja, in her study *Reservation Reelism* (2010), explores the "Hollywood Indian" as a racialized cinematic construction, while Black discusses the "Movie Indian" as a recurring figure shaped by settler colonial logics of nostalgia and control. These screen representations often recycled theatrical tropes of the "magical medicine man," the "Indian princess," or the "stoic warrior," roles devoid of Indigenous agency, often performed by non-Native actors. Such portrayals have reinforced detrimental stereotypes and erased the realities of Indigenous life, contributing to the ongoing denial of Native political sovereignty and cultural specificity. These enduring legacies of misrepresentation and cultural

appropriation underscore the critical importance of moments in which Indigenous peoples reclaim narrative authority.

In this sense, the achievements of Lily Gladstone and Larissa FastHorse exemplify what Scott Richard Lyons (2000) terms "rhetorical sovereignty"—the "inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires" (449). While redface performance and its cinematic descendants have historically reduced Indigeneity to static images and consumable symbols, rhetorical sovereignty insists on Indigenous agency in storytelling and self-representation. Gladstone's and FastHorse's contributions do not merely correct previous distortions; they actively reshape the discursive terrain, offering Indigenous perspectives that challenge settler colonial narratives and assert ongoing nationhood. In The Thanksgiving Play, FastHorse uses satire to dismantle white liberal performance of inclusion while refusing to reinscribe a romanticized or assimilated Indigenous presence. Instead, she exposes the structural absence of Indigenous voices in mainstream cultural production, staging a meta-commentary on the very dynamics redface performances have long obscured. Similarly, Gladstone's speech at the Golden Globe ceremony emphasized the importance of Indigenous youth seeing themselves represented through stories told "by ourselves, in our own words" underscores the transformative power of Indigenous narrative practices. Crucially, Gladstone's invocation of her ancestral language—Siksiká, part of the Algonquian language family and currently classified as "endangered" (Ethnologue s.v. "Siksiká)—signals a powerful engagement with the broader project of Indigenous language revitalization. Gladstone emphasized that she had to learn the language later in life, as she did not grow up speaking it. This detail is not incidental: it speaks directly to the profound disruptions caused by colonial assimilationist policies that systematically severed intergenerational transmission of language and knowledge. As scholars of Indigenous education and history have documented, both US and Canadian assimilationist policies-enforced through boarding and residential school systems—sought to eradicate Indigenous identity by disrupting language, spiritual practices, and familial ties. These institutions, operating under the genocidal motto "kill the Indian in the child," deployed linguistic suppression as a central mechanism of colonial

Mattia Arioli & Sara Riccetti |

violence (Piccard 2013; Young 2015; Hinton et al. 2018). Gladstone's use of her ancestral language challenges what Caroline Desbiens (2004) identifies as the foundational logic of settler colonialism: the systematic separation of Indigenous bodies from land (366). Desbiens explains:

If this weakening of cultural patterns is effected most directly by removing populations from their ancestral territories, it also proceeds through re-education into a white cosmology where the relationship to the land is configured differently. The loss of traditional knowledge about how to survive on the land—or the lack of access altogether to that knowledge through traditional Aboriginal education—effectively finalizes this separation of body from land. (366)

Desbiens's framework illuminates how colonial power operates not solely through the occupation of territory, but through the dismantling of gendered, embodied relationships to land. These relationships—central to Indigenous epistemologies—are sustained through everyday practices, teachings, and intergenerational knowledge systems that colonialism has sought to rupture. As Desbiens argues, this separation is finalized not only by the physical displacement of Indigenous peoples but also by reeducation into settler cosmologies, wherein land is reconceived not as a living relation but as a commodified resource. The result is a profound ontological violence that severs land from meaning, people from place, and knowledge from embodiment. Thus, the land for Indigenous peoples is not just a commodity, a resource to be exploited, but a defining element of their cultures. The land informs their languages and (hi)stories and participates in their ceremonies. Viewed through this lens, Gladstone's use of her language, despite not having grown up speaking it, affirms an ongoing process of reconnecting to intergenerational knowledge systems deliberately targeted by colonial assimilation. Indeed, it enacts what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) describes as "land-based pedagogy"—a grounded refusal of settler ontologies and a reactivation of reciprocal relationships with land, kin, and memory (145-73). Simpson (2017) explains:

Setters easily appropriate and reproduce the content of the story every year when they make commercial maple syrup in the context of capitalism, but they completely miss the wisdom that underlies the entire process because they deterritorialize the mechanics of maple syrup production from *Nishnaabeg* intelligence,

and from Aki. They appropriated and recast the process within a hyperindividualism that negates relationality. The radical thinking and action of this story are not so much in the mechanics of reducing maple sap to sugar but lie in the reproduction of a loving web of Nishnaabeg networks within which learning takes place. (154)

The Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, and artist further maintains that for many Indigenous peoples education "comes from the roots up" and is "enveloped by land." In her worldview, the land demands that an individual develops knowledge and skills to ensure his/her/their own survival and, in the process, learns how existence is dependent upon reciprocity and respect with all elements of creation, existing in both the physical and spiritual realm. When understood this way, the reclamation of land-based pedagogy, languages, and epistemologies must be seen not simply as acts of cultural revival but as expressions of political resistance. These practices are part of what Simpson and others conceptualize as resurgence: a lived, embodied refusal of colonial systems and a generative assertion of Indigenous presence, governance, and futurity. The revitalization of land-based education, continues a long history of resistance that has been central to Indigenous survival in the face of centuries of dispossession and attempted erasure. As Simpson (2018) explains, Indigenous peoples have been engaged in over four centuries of resistance against a violent backdrop of conquest, genocide, expansive dispossession, unfettered capitalist exploitation, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and environmental destruction (n.p.). Thus, Indigenous presence today is not an accident of survival but the result of sustained, generative refusal in the face of a relentless struggle for Indigenous life and freedom—what is referred to as Indigenous resurgence. The term signals more than cultural revival; it denotes the active exercise of Indigenous jurisdiction, governance, and lifeways outside of colonial paradigms. As Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully (2018) explain, "Resurgence is often used to refer to Indigenous peoples exercising powers of self-determination outside of state structures and paradigms. It is deployed by communities as a force for reclaiming and reconnecting with traditional territories by means of Indigenous ways of knowing and being" (23). Hence, the scholars further maintain that these individual and collective powers include "the resurgence of governance, Indigenous legal systems and languages, economic and

social self-reliance, and sustainable relationships with the ecosystems that co-sustain all life and well-being" (Asch, Borrows, and Tully 2018, 23). In this sense, resurgence builds upon a long genealogy of resistance—not only to oppose colonial violence but to regenerate Indigenous legal and political orders grounded in land, relationality, and self-determination.

Resurgence does not emerge from a vacuum; it draws strength from generations of resistance to colonial intrusion, from survival against genocidal policy, and from the refusal to accept the terms of assimilation. As Glen Coulthard (2014) affirms, "settler colonialism is territorially acquisitive in perpetuity" (152), meaning that the struggle for land and jurisdiction continues to lie at the heart of Indigenous resistance. The legitimacy of colonial land claims has been validated through ideological frameworks that cast North America as terra nullius, advanced narratives of the "vanishing Indian," and employed deficit theories that infantilize Indigenous peoples and justify their governance by others. This constellation of racialized narratives worked to naturalize settler authority while undermining Indigenous nationhood. It is to this ideological landscape that Vine Deloria Jr., writing in 1969, responded with his critique of the settler state's enduring refusal to acknowledge Indigenous political and legal sovereignty. "Whites have always refused to give non-whites the respect which they have been found to legally possess," he observed, noting the persistent settler belief that "although the law says one thing, 'we all know better'" (Deloria [1969] 1989, 27). These racialized, and paternalistic narratives provided the rhetorical scaffolding for coercive state practices aimed at assimilation—practices exemplified by the Indian Residential School system and the Sixties Scoop in Canada. Under the guise of education and protection, these programs systematically removed Indigenous children from their families and communities, severing intergenerational ties and undermining cultural continuity. Deloria captured the dehumanizing logic of these institutions with sardonic clarity, comparing their intent to turning "the wild animal [...] into a household pet whether or not he wanted to be one" ([1969] 1989, 28). This logic of deficiency and disappearance has continued to shape colonial policy and public perception. As the Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice (2018) remarked in his seminal book *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*,

deficit theories were often used to legitimize several injustices, including (cultural) genocide:

[a]ccording to the settler stories of Indigenous deficiency, our people were supposed to vanish into the sunset long ago; our families' stubborn refusal to disappear has vexed and perplexed colonial apologists for centuries, for, in spite of all their hopes and ambitions, policies and practices, laws and customs, and assaults and editorials, our peoples are still here, as are our relations, as are our stories. (5)

Justice's observation not only dismantles the myth of Indigenous disappearance but also foregrounds the enduring legal and ideological mechanisms through which settler colonialism continues to operate. The notion that Indigenous peoples were destined to vanish—reinforced through enduring cultural performances of redface—functions as a legal rationalization for the ongoing denial of Indigenous jurisdiction, land rights, and sovereignty.

Although the last Residential school closed in the 1990s, the financial and colonial drive to usurp Native peoples of their ways of life is still operating. For instance, one could mention how, on February 2, 2004, the Save the Peaks Coalition formed to protect the San Francisco Peaks and oppose the destructive activities of Arizona Snowbowl Ski Resort. Similarly, in August 2011, environmental and Indigenous groups launched a campaign to press President Obama not to approve Phase IV of the Keystone XL Pipeline project that would run through tribal lands, water resources, and places of spiritual significance. In 2013, the Havasupai Tribe Filed a Lawsuit to stop the operation of a uranium mine; and, famously, in 2016, Standing Rock Sioux opposed the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). As Deborah Cowen (2018) argues in relation to the development of infrastructures across North America, the building of railroads and pipelines was instrumental to the undermining of Indigenous sovereignty: "Historically and in the present the construction [of] railroads and pipelines relied upon the settler states' claims to jurisdiction, but that jurisdiction is also materialized through infrastructure" (15). These projects are not merely environmental threats—they represent an ongoing assertion of settler state power over Indigenous territory and governance. Much of Indigenous legal scholarship underscores how settler colonialism in the United States

functions not only through land dispossession but also through the calculated erosion of tribal jurisdiction. In US federal Indian law, tribal jurisdiction refers to the inherent authority of Native nations to govern their own peoples and territories, encompassing criminal, civil, and regulatory authority within reservation boundaries. Yet this authority has been steadily curtailed by federal statutes and Supreme Court decisions that undermine the sovereignty of tribal legal systems. Landmark cases such as Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe (1978), which denied tribes the right to prosecute non-Native offenders, and the Major Crimes Act (1885), which centralized prosecution of major crimes in federal courts, have produced what Muscogee (Creek) legal scholar Sarah Deer terms "practical vacuums" in legal protection—gaps that disproportionately endanger Native women and children (Deer 2015). These jurisdictional voids are not accidental oversights but reflections of a settler colonial logic that severs Indigenous nations from their political and territorial authority. The erosion of tribal jurisdiction must be understood not as a technical oversight but as a deliberate form of colonial violence—one that systematically exposes Indigenous communities, particularly their most vulnerable members, to sustained harm. This dismantling of legal authority has far-reaching consequences, not only in terms of public safety and justice but in its structural impact on Indigenous sovereignty. When tribal nations are denied the legal capacity to enforce their laws within their own homelands, the result is a profound disempowerment that fractures both political autonomy and the relational systems through which Indigenous communities maintain connections to place, kinship, and governance. The denial of jurisdiction thus operates as a mechanism of dispossession—fragmenting sovereignty, undermining Indigenous legal orders, and reinforcing settler control (Williams 2005).

In Canada, similar patterns of jurisdictional denial and legal marginalization have prompted widespread Indigenous resistance. In 2012, the Idle No More movement emerged in response to the federal government's dismantling of environmental protection legislation and disregard for treaty obligations. Originating among Treaty Peoples in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, this Indigenous-led movement called for a peaceful revolution to honour Indigenous sovereignty and defend the land, water, and sky. Its grassroots mobilization continues to challenge settler colonial structures and

inspire transnational solidarity. Further underscoring the continuity of jurisdictional and territorial conflict, in 2018, the construction of the Coastal GasLink pipeline through unceded Wet'suwet'en territory in Northern British Columbia proceeded despite opposition from all five hereditary Wet'suwet'en clans, various First Nations, and environmental allies. In December 2019, the British Columbia Supreme Court granted an injunction against land defenders, effectively criminalizing Indigenous resistance on their own ancestral lands (McKay 2024, n.p.). This episode reflects a broader pattern of criminalization across the Americas, in which Indigenous land defenders are treated as threats to state and corporate interests rather than as sovereign actors asserting their legal and relational responsibilities to territory. The continuity of Indigenous resistance in the face of ongoing settler encroachment attests not only to the enduring structures of colonial violence but also to the living, evolving legacy of Indigenous self-determination. Contemporary Indigenous peoples are not simply descendants of survivors; they are survivors in their own right—actively confronting legal, environmental, and epistemic forms of domination. This persistent engagement gives rise to what Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor (2009) calls survivance: "an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion" (85). Coined by fusing "survival" and "resistance," survivance signifies more than endurance; it embodies the ongoing assertion of Indigenous presence, agency, and continuity. It is, as Vizenor (2009) explains, "the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent," and works to displace narratives rooted in tragedy, defeat, or victimhood (85).

Hence, scholars such as Coulthard (2014) and Simpson (2011; 2013) have pointed out, resistance is insufficient on its own. It must be sustained by Resurgent practices that actively seek to transcend the limitations of the settler colonial systems. Such practices envision and materialize different ways of thinking, organizing, and being, thereby constituting the foundation for the emerging of alternative worlds that not only disrupt colonial logics but also fortify interdependent kinship networks vital to the continuity and prosperity of Indigenous communities. Indigenous Resurgence is here conceived as a practice of cultural self-recognition and empowerment at the center of a decolonial project that aims to go beyond the asymmetrical political forms of recognition and

politics currently (and for the past five centuries) enacted by settler States in North America, centered on genocidal practices, forced exclusion and assimilation. Thus, Resurgence is not only affirmative, but also transformative as it attempts to correct unjust models of redistribution of power and resources. At the heart of these movements lies the notion of "grounded normativity," which Glen Coulthard (2014) defines as "the modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time" (13). These place-based relationships are never hierarchical in nature, rather they present themselves as nonlinear, across time and space, entail responsibilities, and are subject to self-correction and rebalances. The land has a pedagogical function teaching Indigenous people how to live in relation to one another in non-dominating and exploitative terms, suggesting practices at odds with colonialism and capitalism, which threaten Indigenous identities through land acquisition, settlement, and resource extraction.

In particular, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's groundbreaking works have illuminated the essence of Indigenous Resurgence movements, stressing their regenerative potential. In *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* (2011) and *As We Have Always Done* (2017), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains how the Indigenous Resurgence movements were not created to challenge or even change the current settler colonial system, but rather they are aiming for a non-hierarchical, non-exploitative, non-extractive, and non-authoritarian approach. Moreover, they seeks to rebuild the vitality and autonomy of Indigenous modes of living, that settler colonialism sought to destroy through state policies, the school system, and dispossession (Talaga 2018). Resurgence is also an intergenerational effort as the Elders are actively engaged in the formation of future generations in love and committed to their land and Indigenous knowledge. The movement is an invitation to rebel, persist, commit, care, connect, and think about a radical alternative based on reciprocity and refusal of colonial recognition.

Whilst decolonization and resurgence do not necessarily foreground sovereignty, Indigenous scholars are promoting the concept of "resurgence-based decolonial indigenization" with the aim of revolutionizing the academic landscape by inclusively integrating Indigenous perspectives in ways that hold transformative potential (Kuokkanen 2008). This shift actively empowers and revitalizes Indigenous communities, fostering a more inclusive and respectful approach to Indigenous cultures (and spirituality) within and outside academia. Likewise, movements like the aforementioned Idle No More and #NoDAPL testify to Natives' willingness and need to reshape their current relations with settler societies. They often do so by suggesting ways of living (in relationship with the human and non-human) that are not dominating nor exploitative, and hence intrinsically anti-capitalistic, rooted in Indigenous traditions.

Therefore, this issue aims to reflect on how this urge to reshape the existent relations with settler societies has influenced many Indigenous texts, often opening up opportunities for what Simpson (2017) defined as "constellations of coresistance" (9). As the scholar also wrote, "[c]onstellations in relationship with other constellations form flight paths out of settler colonial realities into Indigeneity. They become doorways out of the enclosure of settler colonialism and into Indigenous worlds" (Simpson 2017, 214). Hence, in its attempt to map some of these "constellations," this issue does not engage with a nationalist reading of Indigenous literature, but it adopts what Chadwick Allen (2012, n.p.) has defined as a "transnational" method, as the *trans*- prefix indicates "the sense of across, beyond, and through, but not limited to national borders, and certainly not limited to the national borders of contemporary (settler) nation-states."

#### **ISSUE OVERVIEW**

This special issue explores how Indigenous cultural production enacts resurgence by imagining and generating alternative worlds—through story, poetics, spatial practice, and ecological care. Each contribution traces distinct constellations of Indigenous thought and resistance, grounded in place-based knowledge and artistic sovereignty. Together, these essays illuminate how Indigenous creators challenge colonial structures and envision pathways to futures rooted in relationality, land, and artistic sovereignty.

The issue opens with Martina Basciani's essay "Resurgent Water in Nishnaabeg Storytelling." Basciani turns her attention to two texts published by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, her song "She Sang Them Home," published in her debut collection

Islands of Decolonial Love (2015), and the short story "Big Water," featured in the collection *This Accident of Being Lost* (2017). In her analysis of these two works, she investigates how Simpson's fluid poetics introduces readers to a Nishnaabeg decolonized universe, re-imagining water in relational terms to question Western extractivist approaches to aquatic matters and advance ethical alternatives.

Extending this environmental and relational focus into the Pacific context, Ana Cristina Gomes da Rocha's essay, "Epistemologies of Care: An Ecopoetic Conversation between Craig Santos Perez, Jamaica H. Osorio and Sia Figiel," analyzes how Indigenous poets in the Pacific Islands confront ecological degradation through poetic practices rooted in ancestral knowledge and political care. Through an ecocritical lens, Gomes da Rocha examines three Indigenous poems—"Green Washing and White Dollar Policy" by Jamaica H. Osorio, "Praise Song for Oceania" by Craig Santos Perez, and "In-Land-Ness" by Sia Figiel—to pinpoint how these authors living in the Pacific Islands share similar concerns about the current environmental degradation. In her discussion, Gomes da Rocha highlights how these poets trace the origins of the contemporary ecological crisis back to the first colonial encounters, arguing that global imperialism should not be addressed exclusively in economic and political terms, but also ecological ones. In her reading of the poems, the author argues that these poets aim to portray an alternative complex and sustainable relationship with the environment, rooted in traditional Indigenous practices. Her reading suggests that these poetic texts articulate an alternative, complex, and sustainable relationship with the environment—one deeply rooted in traditional Indigenous practices and ways of knowing. By doing so, the poets participate in the broader project of resurgence, offering ecopoetic visions of Indigenous worlds beyond colonial extraction and destruction.

Expanding the inquiry from decolonial imaginaries to spatial sovereignty and closing the issue, Hend Ayari's essay, "Narrative Cartographies of Indigenous Resurgence: Women's Self-Construction, Transmotion, and the Decolonization of Spatial Inquiry," engages the spatial dimensions of Indigenous resurgence, exploring how Native women's storytelling functions as a decolonial praxis that reclaims geography as a site of Indigenous agency, mobility, and political presence. Drawing on

Gerald Vizenor's concepts of transmotion and survivance, Ayari examines how several Native American women writers—Harjo, Jensen, Elliott, Washuta, and LeGarde Grove—construct counter-maps to subvert the way in which American settlers have used geography to both dominate the land and marginalize Indigenous peoples. These narrative cartographies envision alternative worlds grounded in relationality, movement, and Indigenous sovereignty.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Asch, Michael, John Borrows, and James Tully, eds. 2018. *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous–Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*. University of Toronto Press.

Allen, Chadwick. 2012. "A Transnational Native American Studies? Why Not Studies That Are Trans-Indigenous?" *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4 (1). Accessed March 2, 2025. <a href="https://escholarship.org/uc/item/82m5j3f5">https://escholarship.org/uc/item/82m5j3f5</a>.

Barker, James Nelson. 1918. *The Indian Princess; or, La Belle Sauvage. Representative Plays by American Dramatists*, edited by Montrose J. Moses. E. P. Dutton & Co.

Bank, Rosemary. 1997. *Theatre Culture in America*, 1825-1860. Cambridge University Press.

Coulthard, Glen Sean. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition.* University of Minnesota Press.

Cowen, Deborah. 2018. "The Jurisdiction of Infrastructure: Circulation and Canadian Settler Colonialism." *The Funambulist* 17:14–19.

Custis, George Washington Parke. 1917. *Pocahontas*, or, the Settlers of Virginia. Representative American Plays from 1767 to the Present, edited by Arthur Hobson Quinn. Appleton.

Deer, Sarah. 2015. The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America. University of Minnesota Press.

Deloria, Philip Joseph. 1998. Playing Indian. Yale University Press.

Deloria, Vine Jr. (1969) 1988. Custer Died for Your Sins. University of Oklahoma Press.

Desbiens, Caroline. 2004. "Women with No Femininity': Gender, Race, and Nation-Building in the James Bay Project." *Political Geography* 23:347–66.

Detsi-Diamanti, Zoe. 2007. "Burlesquing 'Otherness' in Nineteenth-Century American Theatre: The Image of the Indian in John Brougham's Met-a-Mora; or, The Last of the

Mattia Arioli & Sara Riccetti |

Pollywogs (1847) and Po-Ca-Hon-Tas; or, The Gentle Savage (1855)." *American Studies* 48 (3): 101–23

Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. (2014) 2023. *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*. Beacon Press.

*Ethnologue*, s.v. "Siksiká," accessed March 3, 2025, <a href="https://www.ethnologue.com/language/bla/">https://www.ethnologue.com/language/bla/</a>.

Fasthorse, Larissa. 2021. *The Thanksgiving Play. What Would Crazy Horse Do?* Theatre Communications Group.

Fixico, Donald L. 2012. *The Invasion of Indian Country in the Twentieth Century: American Capitalism and Tribal Natural Resources*. University Press of Colorado.

Hughes, Bethany. 2024. *Redface: Race, Performance, and Indigeneity*. New York University Press.

Justice, Daniel Heath. 2018. Why Indigenous Literatures Matter. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

King, Thomas. 2012. *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*. Doubleday Canada.

Kuokkanen, Rauna. 2008. Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes, and the Logic of the Gift. University of British Columbia Press.

McKay, Jackie. 2024. "Trial of prominent Wet'suwet'en leader and pipeline opponents begins" *CBC News*. Accessed March 2, 2025 <a href="https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/wet-suwet-en-coastal-gaslink-">https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/wet-suwet-en-coastal-gaslink-</a>

 $\frac{trial1.7077905\#:\sim:text=In\%20December\%202019\%2C\%20the\%20B.C.,occupying\%20a\%20key\%20work\%20site}.$ 

Piccard, Ann. 2013. "Death by Boarding School: The Last Acceptable Racism and the United States' Genocide of Native Americans." *Gonzaga Law Review* 49 (1): 137-85.

Raheja, Michelle H. 2011. Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film. University of Nebraska Press.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. 2018. "Indigenous Resurgent Mobilization." *Uprising* 13/13 Seminars at Columbia, April 9. Accessed March 13, 2025 <a href="https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/uprising1313/leanne-betasamosake-simpson-indigenous-resurgent-mobilization/?cn-reloaded=1">https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/uprising1313/leanne-betasamosake-simpson-indigenous-resurgent-mobilization/?cn-reloaded=1</a>.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. 2017. As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance. University of Minnesota Press.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. 2016. "Indigenous Resurgence and Coresistance." *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2 (2): 19–34.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. 2011. Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence. ARP Books.

Slotkin, Richard. 1973. Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860. Wesleyan University Press.

Stone, John August. 1965. *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags. Metamora & Other Plays*, edited by Eugene R. Page. Indiana University Press.

Tanya Talaga. 2020. All Our Relations. Indigenous Trauma in the Shadow of Colonialism. Scribe.

Vizenor, Gerald. 2009. *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*. University of Nebraska Press.

Warrior, Robert. 2005. *The People and the Word: Reading Native Nonfiction*. University of Minnesota Press.

Young, Bryanne. 2015. "Killing the Indian in the Child': Death, Cruelty, and Subject-Formation in the Canadian Indian Residential School System." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 48 (4): 63–76.

Williams, Robert A. 2005. *Like a Loaded Weapon: The Rehnquist Court, Indian Rights, and the Legal Theory of Racism in America*. University of Minnesota Press.

Mattia Arioli is adjunct professor at the University of Bologna. He holds a PhD degree in Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures from the Alma Mater Studiorum – University of Bologna; his doctoral project focused on the remembrance of the Vietnam War in graphic narratives. His main research interests include Cultural Memory Studies, Comics Studies, Asian American Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Visual Culture. He authored several essays on the relationship between comics and cultural trauma, and a book, *Buone, sporche e dimenticate. Guerre a stelle e strisce* (2023), on American War Comics. In 2022, his doctoral dissertation was awarded an Agostino Lombardo Award Honorable Mention. He also received a 2023 John A. Lent Award Honorable Mention for his project "Clément Baloup's Memoires de Viet Kieu: Exploring the Legacy and History of the Vietnamese Diaspora(s)." E-mail: mattia.arioliz@unibo.it

**Sara Riccetti** holds a PhD in English Literatures, Language, and Translation from the University of Rome "La Sapienza" and the University of Silesia, Poland. Her research explores the intersection of law and theater in the work of contemporary Indigenous women playwrights from the US and Canada, with a focus on performative counterstorytelling. She has held fellowships at the University of Victoria (B. C.) and the

## Mattia Arioli & Sara Riccetti |

International Forum for US Studies (University of Illinois), and was awarded the 2023 International Council for Canadian Studies Graduate Student Scholarship. Her translation of the play *The Unplugging* (2012) by Algonquin playwright Yvette Nolan won the Canada Council for the Arts Translation Grant in 2024. She is a member of the International American Studies Association (IASA), the Italian Association of North American Studies (AISNA), and the Italian Association of Canadian Studies (AISC). E-mail: <a href="mailto:sara.riccetti@uniroma1.it">sara.riccetti@uniroma1.it</a>

# EPISTEMOLOGIES OF CARE: AN ECOPOETIC CONVERSATION BETWEEN CRAIG SANTOS PEREZ, JAMAICA H. OSORIO AND SIA FIGIEL

## Ana Cristina Gomes da Rocha

University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, Portugal

#### **ABSTRACT**

Bearing in mind Epeli Hau'ofa's concept of "a sea of islands," this article proposes an ecocritical analysis of three poems written by three Indigenous authors, Craig Santos Perez (CHamorro-Guam) Jamaica H. Osorio (Hawai'i), and Sia Figiel (Samoa) published between 2016 and 2022, respectively. Together, the poems create a relevant example of Indigenous ecocriticism that is overtly interacting with global flows of power and are simultaneously entangled with the struggles of many other Pacific islanders when it comes to topics such as ecological degradation, land occupation, mass tourism, and militarization/nuclearization of Pacific island-nations. The poems to be analyzed are "Green Washing and White Dollar Policy" (Jamaica H. Osorio), "Praise Song for Oceania" (Craig Santos Perez) and "In-Land-Ness" (Sia Figiel). The epistemologies of care that I am referring to are based on Indigenous ancestral knowledge and practices that are vessels of environmental ethics and honor Earth as an ancestor, as well as demonstrations of multiple forms of belonging in which human and non-human elements are symbiotically connected. Therefore, this article problematizes and critically questions the impact of global policies upon Indigenous communities as well as it presents examples of resistance that are generating transcultural movements in which contemporary Indigenous writers question the validity of globalized policies that had proven to be disruptive and harmful for their societies. Each of these authors presents challenging questions that trace environmental degradation back to the colonial encounter while demonstrating that their Indigenous societies developed complex and sustainable relationships with the environment, those that were disrupted by colonialism and subsequently imperialism and globalization. Moreover, the voices of these writers resonate through waves of anger against the harm that has been inflicted upon ecosystems, and thus their poems are ways of denouncing injustices, and, to a certain extent, ensuring cultural survival when assuming a strategic significance as counternarratives to the Americanization of the islands. Consequently, my analysis of the poems aims at demonstrating that coalitions formed among Pacific Islanders vividly respond to the imperial West and fiercely resist land occupation and environmental degradation. Embedded in my analysis is also an assumed critique to colonial/Western views of nature as a separate and empty object that exists to be exploited and to generate profit. In sum, the tapestry woven by the poems selected here highlights the importance of activism, education, care, and love as actions that simultaneously denounce multiple forms of "slow violence" against Indigenous cultures and generate decolonial discourses.

**Keywords:** Indigenous poetry; decolonial love; ethics of care; ecopoetic; activism.

"We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again... in the tiny spaces that we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed places, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves" —Epeli Haua'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands"

"We are not drowning, we are fighting" —Pacific Climate Warriors

## **INTRODUCTION**

If one looks at the astonishing images of Planet Earth taken from outer space, one is immediately confronted with the geographic vastness of the Pacific Ocean, which covers a considerable part of the planet's surface. Inevitably, in the face of such vastness, there is also a certain sense of cosmic loneliness engulfed by waves, tides, and the fluidity that is always entangled with water imagery. Considered the largest geographical feature on Planet Earth, the Pacific Ocean occupies one-third of the planet's surface. There is also in that vastness a "sea of islands" that have prompted the imagination of many people for centuries. The Pacific continent is composed of more than 20.000 islands which is nearly 80 percent of the world's total. Moreover, it is also commonly described as "the water continent" due to this characteristic. Focusing on the dimension of the geographic area, Rod Edmond (1997) describes the Pacific as follows:

The most banal yet awesome fact about the Pacific is its size. This vast ocean with its scattered pinprick islands has raised questions of scale, proportion and relation whenever it has been contemplated. From an outside perspective the islands of Oceania are almost submerged in the immensity of their surroundings (indeed Pacific islands have come and gone), their sea-locked inhabitants marooned on coral or volcanic tips of land. (1)

It was, nonetheless, this particular feature of dimension that seems to have compelled European nations both to fight over its control and divide it, when the Pacific became a 'white possession.' For centuries, it was called by Europeans the "South Sea" reaching from "the Arctic to the Antarctic, and [it] straddles the 180<sup>th</sup> meridian, or what has come to be seen as the eastern and western hemispheres" (Armitage & Bashford 2014, 5).

Spread across one-third of the planet Earth, this "water continent" encompasses one of the most heterogeneous cultural groups in the world, with a remarkable number of native languages that were displaced. They did not completely disappear, but they were, indeed, displaced in institutional spaces such as schools, where they lost their visibility and were substituted by English, French, or Spanish (Trask 1999; Keown 2013). In response to the vicissitudes brought by several global politico-economic alliances, the geographic and conceptual limits of the Pacific have shifted at different historical moments, and, with the increasing of European and American voyaging from 1760

onwards, there were significant alterations of the Pacific region as a geographical and social space. Following the Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa (2000), it remains fundamental to focus on the forgotten people of history, and how they have resisted and held together by realigning their positionality within a global panorama that has been marginalizing their voices.

This confinement inflicted upon islands-nation from the Pacific has been serving to justify and legitimate multiple forms of violence against Indigenous peoples, lands, and ecosystems. Consequently, violence against the environment or eco-violence can be assumed as "slow violence" (Rob Nixon 2011), which is the violence that "occurs gradually out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Although it is no longer possible to assume that environmental degradation occurs at a slow pace given the state of some islands in the Pacific that run the risk of disappearing within the next decade— Kiribati being one of the most elucidating examples of that—what is at stake in Nixon's analysis is the fact that most natural catastrophes occur out of the geographic domains of Western nations, and by being so it largely contributes to ongoing forms of exploitation. Moreover, climate change is prone to accentuate profound socioenvironmental inequalities as those who are poor and vulnerable are likely to become even more. That said, a thorough critique of capitalism as presented in Jamaica H. Osorio goes hand in hand with a critical analysis of its relationship with climate change as it has been saturated with divisions based on race, class, and gender.

Planet Earth is changing if one considers the escalating desertification of Africa, the disappearance of seashores caused by the sea level rise in places such as Southeast Asia, and in the island nations of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the disintegration of Greenland and Antarctica to the escalation in frequency and intensity of weather events in many other parts of the world, climate change clearly has an impact on people, plants, and animals. The ever-increasing awareness of climate change is catalyzing the interconnectedness of dialogues across the globe and, by extension, multiple forms to address the dynamism of our planet flourish in order to contribute to raising awareness to those questions. Ultimately, it seems crucial to acknowledge that human beings are not

alone, we are always in relation with humans and non-humans, always ecological. As a matter of fact, these relations should be perceived in terms of interdependency (Haraway 2008) that aims to foster an ethics of care. The conceptual frame of ethics of care that I am referring to is informed by ecocriticism and animal studies, as it implies inclusiveness (Haraway 2008; Gruen 2015)—the interaction rather than the juxtaposition of human and animals—and it also values the multiplicity of ways that tend to organize human moral experiences based on compassion. Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2019) defines the ethics of care as "constitutive to our being of (and on) earth/Earth, and to our embodied relation to our futures, human and otherwise" (196). Accordingly, it is this ethics of care that characterizes Polynesian cosmologies and whose features become legible in the poems. Therefore, the possibility for decolonial practices to be enacted resides in the epistemological assumption of love for the land and the ocean within which people are inseparable from their ecosystems, and this assumption informs their struggles based upon this ethic of care. In sum, those decolonial practices are, to a certain extent, the materialization of love as a praxis rather than a mere feeling (Sandoval 2000).

It is, thus, my argument that together the poems I selected for this article create a relevant example of Indigenous ecocriticism that is overtly interacting with global flows of power. Consequently, through poetry the authors selected in this article prove to be simultaneously entangled with the struggles of many other Pacific islanders when it comes to topics such as ecological degradation, land occupation, mass tourism, and militarization/nuclearization of Pacific island-nations creating a sort of "Oceanic imaginary" (Subramani 2001). Through this Oceanic imaginary, the authors concurrently chart the links between colonial experience and emancipatory principles and elaborate an extended critique to oppressive socio-cultural systems involving Indigenous knowledge, cosmologies, languages, and genealogies. The ecopoetic dialogue that I am referring to when analyzing the poems seeks out an integrated perspective through which human and more-than-beings interact from a point of biocentric relationality. It also focuses on how Indigenous knowledge is interrelated with territory, kinship, identity, governance, economy, and education. Accordingly, culture and artistic creation are forms of political resistance used to fight back the erosion of Native peoples' heritage or

even the attack on what Haunani-Kay Trask (1999b), the Native Hawaiian writer and activist, has defined as "people's self-respect through a colonization of the mind" (19). Indeed, culture and art are political, "writing, music, painting, dance, and voyaging are profoundly political, just as land ownership, medical care, universities, hazard-waste sitting, and cultural hegemony are political" (Trask 1999b, 18). It is this decolonial aspect that seems to inform the poems analyzed here.

Bearing in mind the importance of deconstructing anthropocentric discourses, bell hooks (1998) asserts that "Western conceptions of humans and of cultural life are founded on beliefs that the human is somehow separate from and superior to nature" (150). Thus, it is precisely this axial aspect that has also served colonialism and has been serving globalization, and the one that is fundamental in Indigenous struggles against cultural and land dispossession. Most Pacific Indigenous cultures developed profound connections to land and oceans as evidenced in oral traditions that demonstrate genealogical links between Indigenous peoples and their ecosystems. A symbiotic relation that can be translated in terms of an ethics of care (DeLoughrey 2019). Uninterested in Indigenous cosmologies and ways of knowing, imperial and global ideologies were implemented by Western nations and Indigenous peoples were often coerced to accept them. Forms of coercion and persuasion often occur in ways that are complicated to dismantle as is the example of economic growth, for example, in Hawai'i motivated by tourism (Kelly 2014). Yet, Indigenous groups have been permanently fighting against imperialism still promoted through globalization and capitalism, and part of their resistance resides in the importance given to ancestral knowledge, and to the politics of everyday life.

Following, Chela Sandoval's (2000) discussion on the possibility of love as a decolonial practice and a "differential consciousness," asserting that "the language of lovers can puncture through the everyday narratives that tie us to the social time and space, to the descriptions, recitals, and plots that dull and order our senses insofar as such social narratives are tied to the law" (139-40), it can be argued that the ecocritical dialogue established between the authors selected here revolves around a profound love towards their Indigenous cultures. The sort of discourse that allows the possibility of

connections between people and communities, and one that forwards the recognition of the failure of Western discourses, of the entire matrix of Western modernity that sustains its power based on the coloniality of being.

#### GREEN WASHING AND WHITE DOLLAR POLICY

Published in 2018 in *Effigies III*, an anthology of Pacific Indigenous poetry, the poem "Green Washing and White Dollar Policy" by Native Hawaiian author Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio is part of a collection of poems that traces back the history of Hawaiian occupation and its militarization. The anthology presents an array of Indigenous authors whose poems have woven a vibrant tapestry of impressions about culture, the environment, politics, feminism and history overall. Its importance is unquestionable as it simultaneously offers a counternarrative to mainstream ideologies of power, brutal occupation and militarization of island-nations, the erosion of Indigenous languages. Hence, it constructs a reparative discourse that aims at shedding light into the darkness caused by enforced colonial practices, praising ancestral memory, oral traditions and demonstrating a profound love towards land, oceans, and all beings.

In Native Hawaiian culture *aloha 'āina* (love for the land) represents one of the fundamental aspects of Native Hawaiian identity, and it has been at the core of those discourses against land occupation, militarization, and mass tourism that have largely contributed to contest the impoverishment and marginalization of Native Hawaiians. There is a decolonial rhetoric in the Hawaiian concept visible in the symbiotic relation between human and nonhuman elements. It is this counter-discourse that animates the poem produced by Jamaica H. Osorio, as the author clearly alludes to the importance of protecting the islands from the excessive use of natural resources and describes processes of identity formation based on those connections between the land and Native Hawaiian people. This is important to observe because the concept of love for the land may also be extended to the way Perez and Figiel portray their cultures respectively. To this end, these authors contribute to an ethics of care (DeLoughrey 2019) that is constitutive to the embodied relation between Indigenous peoples and their lands.

"Green Washing and White Dollar Policy" surges as a manifesto whose words are full of both rage and compassion. The poem covers a multiplicity of themes spanning from the colonial encounter to climate change and its inevitable intersectionality between race, gender, and geography. It is this intersectionality that reinforces the nature of violence perpetrated against Indigenous communities across the globe. The poem itself starts with the reference to historical events chronologically described—the Hawaiian occupation and two major earthquakes in Chile, in 1960 and 2010 respectively as constitutive events of the same major catastrophes, colonialism and climate change, that have been destroying the planet—while part of the world crumbles, the other half watches it happening, blaming "poor infrastructure and tectonic plate anger" (Osorio 2018, 65). However, to argue that half of the world passively watches the catastrophes does not belie the uneven impact that Western global aspirations and policies have exerted over socioenvironmental landscapes in international contexts (Nixon 2011). Therefore, the accelerated destruction of the Planet Earth caused by mass consumption and extractivism intensified, fomented violence and solidified structural inequities, exactly as all that together increases greed and "Leaves brown children / Swept under a growing pilar called poverty" (Osorio 2018, 65).

As the poem unfolds, Osorio unpacks the nature of ecological racism by using the expressions "brown bodies" and "brown spaces" to refer to Indigenous people and their lands, those who are forgotten by multi-billionaire corporations whose occupation and destruction of Indigenous lands have been largely contributing to poverty and depletion of natural resources. While capturing the energy of natural disasters, the author transforms it to highlight the darkest angles of structural violence, particularly with regard to Native Hawaiians, and creates webs of connections that escape geopolitical frameworks. By constantly using the expression "brown bodies," the author is utterly exposing the racial dimension of violence that intersects with other forms of marginalization, such as economic violence and social discrimination. The verses, "To the deep sea mining off the coast of Fiji/ to Puna's scorched spine/ and Chile's cracked lips/ Hawai'i's biocultural prostitution/ And Guam's military base hips" (Osorio 2018, 69) are illustrative of how Oceania became a playground for developed industrialized and

militarized nations to enact their power. It may be accurate to point out that the previous verses are profoundly feminized which overly alludes to the way Indigenous women have been marginalized due to colonial practices.

Moreover, it is possible to assert that the colonialism practiced in Hawai'i is economic, and cultural violence occurs both via militarism and mass consumption of natural resources (Trask 2004). Accordingly, violence has indeed color, which means that "the color of violence, then, is the color of white over black, white over brown, white over red, white over yellow. It is the violence of north over south, of continents over archipelagos, of settlers over natives and selves. Shaping this color scheme are the labyrinths of class and gender, of geography and industry, of metropoles and peripheries, of sexual definitions and confinements" (Trask 2004, 9). The color of violence that Trask describes is the one that has been pervasive in Hawai'i but also the one affecting other Indigenous peoples across the globe, and the one that Osorio addresses when constantly referring to "brown bodies" and "brown places." Osorio's poem then acknowledges and gives visibility to those "brown bodies" that are often erased by unseen forms of slow violence, namely land occupation, extractivism, and over-consumption of natural resources. Her voice speaks of solidarity, a transnational solidarity that, to a certain extent, aims at achieving justice and ethical accountability. In doing so, and based on Osorio's personal background, it is possible to establish a bridge between her interventive voice and the magnetic force of the Native Hawaiian concepts of aloha 'āina and malāna 'āina, to care for the land, whose connection is mainly centered on the symbiotic relation between humans and non-human elements.

Osorio's ecocritical approach is, thus, rooted in Native Hawaiian epistemology and the symbiotic relation between human and non-human elements that can be translated in the concepts previously mentioned. It seems this form of love and knowledge, *aloha 'āina*, that is transformed into a counter-discursive concept that, ultimately, challenges coloniality in Hawai'i. According to the poem, "an Umbilical chord biding us not only to the world's natural/ resources but to each other" (Osorio 2018, 69). "We" is figuratively alluding to all beings—human or not—whose connections come from a primordial link, an extended "umbilical chord" that makes us all part of something bigger,

something that transcends the materiality of bodies, an extended genealogy that bonds us together. Consequently, the possibility for decolonial practices to be enacted resides in the assumption that within the conceptualization of aloha 'aina people are inseparable from their ecosystems, and this assumption informs Native Hawaiian struggles based upon this ethics of care. It is my understanding, then, that aloha 'āina purposes an ethics of care that needs to be considered when examining Osorio's poem in relation with Native Hawaiian struggles against ingrained injustices. Ultimately, Osorio's sense of aloha 'āina appears articulated in her form of denouncing ecological exploitation, structural racism affecting Indigenous people, and certainly as a decolonial counternarrative that has also been part of the discourses of Hawaiian sovereignty movements that encapsulate multiple forms of caring for the environment. Rather than looking for silences or silenced subjects that may eventually speak from the margins, Osorio's poem is informed by the power of what can be said, and the importance of education as a form of resistance against institutionalized racism and the legacies of the empire. With all that said, Osorio is actively working to make invisible violence visible, and to raise awareness for the importance of the connection between human and non-human elements.

## **I-LAND-NESS**

In 2021, Sia Figiel published the poem "I-Land-Ness" in the latest anthology of Indigenous literatures titled *Indigenous Pacific Islander Eco-Literatures*. The anthology itself represents a landmark in contemporary Indigenous literatures as well as it weaves together a tapestry of dialogues across Oceania that intend to revitalize Indigenous epistemologies and ways of knowing in tandem with how Indigenous peoples grapple with the enormity of colonialism and anthropogenic climate change. The multiplicity of works presented in the anthology span from Oceanian narratives, the threat of sea-mining to the honoring of Pacific fights against land exploitation, being water and land central concepts of indigenous cultural identity and genealogy. Hence, Planet Earth is sacred, a source of life in all forms that has to be treated with respect, care, and love. These stories are forms of self-representation, they shape indigenous relationships to

existence, and they are informed by multiple definitions of belonging, place, and reclamation. In the same vein, Sia Figiel composes a poem whose content is profoundly visual in terms of how humans interact with land.

Land in Euro-American and colonial epistemologies is a commodity that can be bought and sold and taken into ownership. Accordingly, land occupation and its militarization are consequences of settler colonialism, which simultaneously employed processes of dispossession and enforced slavery. Hence, it fostered methods of changing the land, transforming the Earth, its peoples, the plants, the composition of the soils, and the atmosphere. It was about extracting minerals, spreading diseases, altering landscapes (Crosby 1994). Overall, these acts were intimately entwined with the pervasive project of erasure that is the imperative of colonialism. Therefore, as in other colonized areas, "a changed ecology also introduced a changed political system that, in the eyes of the nationalist poet or visionary, seemed retrospectively to have alienated the people from their authentic traditions" (Said 1993, 77). In Native Samoan culture—as in many other Pacific cultures—the conceptualization of land is relational, a living and breathing family member that one is descended from (Gabbard 2018). Land is, then, an embodied subject that constitutes itself in relation with other subjects and vice-versa. Challenging the colonial narrative of progress, Sia Figiel's poem starts by questioning the ruins and devastation of the empire.

The conceptual meaning of the poem begins in its title, the hyphenated nature of it and the way Figiel intentionally creates a wordplay between "I" the individual, the human, and "land," the non-human element that has been severely abused by that other I. In English language the suffix "ness" means state, condition, quality, thus the title of the poem allegorically alludes to the symbiotic relation between the I and the Land as correlated elements of the same thing. However, the hyphen may be comprehended as the separation between those elements, an imposed separation that questions the survival of the two elements. What may be of the I if separated from the land? What are the chances of survival? What, then, is the planetary consciousness that should inform the response to those questions? Perhaps, one possible answer may be related with the

dismantling of binary and hegemonic constructions of power that still marginalize Indigenous ways of knowing.

This form of disconnection between subject and land is presented through the astonishment of the author while crossing Turtle Island<sup>1</sup> and looking at the number of battered animals lying alongside the roads, "We were often stunned into / Silence by the number / Of possums, racoons / Rabbits, snakes / Foxes, porcupines / Deer, turtles / That lay battered" (Figiel 2021, 162). Cars passing by oblivious, plastic flowers adorning the dead bodies. The same plastic flowers that eventually will end up filling the oceans and destroying multiple marine life forms. In fact, plastic is one of the biggest threats that oceans face today, causing untold harm to ecosystems, tremendous economic damage to coastal communities and posing a potential health problem for three billion people whose livelihood depends on the sea, and it is still one of the materials mostly used on every item bought on a large scale. Food comes wrapped up in plastic, clothes are filled with micro plastics that will travel through water and end up inside of marine creatures. This is the legacy of waste that shores in the Pacific coastlines: plastic bottles, plastic bags, chewing gums, fragments of polyester clothes, nuclear debris, electronic components, waste from cargoes and cruise ships, and medical waste. They are all part of the interminable list of 'things' that enter the oceans every day, being this a portrait of the Anthropocene, an era shaped by climate changes and environmental catastrophes. Accordingly, George Handley (2015) asserts that "climate change has introduced the problem of a human agency that is so profoundly collective that accountability for the changes wrought on the climate is no easy matter to trace" (333). Furthermore, it is fundamental to think that natural disasters simultaneously manifest historical vulnerabilities that cannot be untangled from power structures and are produced by human actions whose accountability has been obscured by certain discourses that claim the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Turtle Island is the name attributed to Planet Earth and to North America by some Indigenous peoples, and it is based on creation stories / myths common to Indigenous peoples from North America. The poem starts with the description of a year-long journey across Turtle Island in which the two human protagonists are stunned by the level of destruction inflicted upon the ecosystems and its animals in clear contrast with progress and the fast automobiles that cut their way oblivious of everything else.

'newness' of an environmental crisis rather than paying attention to the historical endurance of dispossession caused by empire (DeLoughrey 2019).

As the poem progresses, we are still confronted with this predatory attitude towards nature, its objectification and exploitation described using speed cars passing by oblivious of everything else that surrounds them. Roads are the representative of progress, that same progress that did not consider anything else aside from its economic goals. Occasionally, the two human subjects in the poem are seen and helped by the driver whereas "the movements of wildlife stuck beneath their impetuous tires" (Figiel 2021, 162) repeatedly and indisputably proves how human beings are oblivious to fauna and flora, and how progress/modernity/globalization attempted at supplanting the necessity to care for any other non-human species. The descriptive use of vocabulary reiterates the permanent idea of destruction and how oblivious and indifferent human beings act in the face of that. The impetuous tires, for instance, are a metaphor of the reckless behavior of human beings.

In a form of a journey, one moves from Turtle Island—the first part of the poem fully characterized by ruin, death and oblivion—to Louisiana—the second part of the poem—where a funeral for an owl is held. The moment is profoundly solemn, and all the elements described are from nature in contrast with the plastic flowers previously used to adorn the roadsides. The owl found next to the road was wrapped up in sycamore leaves and returned to the land. This simple ceremony is vested in symbolism as in Samoan cosmology, humans descend from an owl. It further summarizes the kinship to the land and one another as experiences of 'spiritual continuity.' Therefore, placing the bird in the land allegorically alludes to those symbiotic connections that are part of Indigenous concerns when it comes to the altering of their ecosystems, and it reinforces that all beings are interrelated, and it also alludes to a cyclical perspective of life in which death may represent returning to an initial state of purity. Besides, it is in this act of kindness—holding a ceremony to a dead bird—that I broadly understand affect as a force that "fuses the body with the imagination into an ethical synthesis that bears directly on the micro-powers inherent in everyday interactions" (Park et al. 2011, 15). In other words, the affect demonstrated here reiterates an ethics of care that is part of Indigenous cultures, and whose actions reflect upon how fauna, flora, animals, lands, and oceans need to be treated and protected. The last lines of the poem describe a flock of geese in V formation which can be read as an auspicious sign. A sign that when the "I" reconnects with the land there is a certain rhetoric of hope that can be applied to dismantle and to resist the long history of colonial and military occupation. Nonetheless, for this counternarrative to be effective and complete, it needs to accommodate Indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies. What is perhaps the most powerful and telling difference between the two parts of the poem is that one is predicated on violence generated by progress while the other is centered on love by returning the dead owl to land. There is a cyclical perspective here that implies the interdependency of which all beings are connected. By emphasizing love, the ceremonial nature of the last part of the poem presents an Indigenous ethics of care that derives from the sharing storied place² between human and nonhuman others. This ethics of care presented by Sia Figiel can also be perceived as an embodied relation to our future(s), human and otherwise in which love is assumed as a decolonial practice.

#### PRAISE SONG FOR OCEANIA

"Praise Song for Oceania" by Craig Santos Perez is an eco-poem-film that was written for the celebration of the World's Ocean Day, in 2016. In 2017, the poem was used in an eco-film with the same title created by the Hawaiian filmmaker Justyn Ah Chong and screened in several film festivals across the Pacific and the United States. The collaborative work between Perez and Chong generates a sensorial and immersive experience. It showcases how aesthetically and poetically attune to water imagery as a performance whose content oscillates between human and beyond human relationships.

-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> I am drawing on Cristina Bacchilega's studies on Native Hawaiian culture and the politics of places (2007). Bacchilega explains that storied place refers to the definition of places as "an emotionally, narratively, and historically layered experience" (35). Hence, place also translated as land is sensed, lived, experienced, contested and struggled over based on Indigenous cosmologies and the symbiotic relation between human and non-human elements.

In sixteen stanzas, the author explores how violent colonial histories intersect with environmental precarity when choosing figurative vocabulary to describe that exact violence "your capacity to endure the violation / of those who name you / who claim domain / over you who map you" (Perez 2020, 101), creating a living text that is the enactment of the art of acknowledging the ocean's grief. Throughout the poem Craig Santos Perez utters the importance of raising awareness about human interaction with the ocean by speaking directly to the ocean and creating a strong dialogue between us—as humans—and the natural elements, and does so by tracing back the ocean's exploitation to the maritime expansionism that characterized Western empires from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

The poem presents a complex, energetic vision of a world in transformation, of oceans that are exploited by people, thus acknowledging the importance of the ocean while also emphasizing our lack of appreciation for it when referring to tourism, invasive drilling, deep sea mining and intensive fishing (Perez 2020). The tone used to directly address the ocean fluctuates between anger and sorrow, though it also presents itself in caring terms as the author fully recognizes that despite the violence endured by the oceans, continuously perpetrated against them, they still are sources of nourishment, "praise your capacity / to survive our trawling / boats breaching / your open body" (Perez 2020, 102). Perez balances this dialogue between fierce accusations against human beings whose actions have been largely contributing to the disruption and destruction of entire ecosystems ironically introduced by using the repetition of "praise," and the recognition that oceans are central in the constitution of Indigenous collective identities. Throughout the poem, in an ongoing attempt to praise the ocean's capacity to regenerate and to forgive, the author reminds us that without hope we cannot return to love, and while the poem denounces tragedy and abuses, it centers itself on the renewing power of love.

In addition, Perez's poem maps out global imperialist and capitalist conditions of modern approaches to the ocean viewed as a commodity. Central to this construction are the recurring ideas of adaptation of the ocean that serves as a human laboratory for multiple experiments, namely a nuclear testing ground and a garbage dump, as well as

its description as a site of resistance "praise your library of drowned stories praise your museum of lost treasures your archive of desire / praise your tidalectic theory praise our migrant routes" (Perez 2020, 102). As a trope, metaphor moves from one object to another—in this case, ocean to laboratory and ocean to archive/memory—in a way that renders what might be invisible visible. Yet, an extractivist idea of the Earth's resources persists throughout the poem as the most fundamental critique to human action. In this way, the poem contests the Western discourse that has transformed the ocean into a globalized property, while also challenges hyper-localizing discourses that eventually turn oceans into isolated, static locations. Therefore, oceanic movements and ecologies help us think through water, waves, and tides ensuring that no environmental or poetic space in this poem is described as neutral or static. Ultimately an occupied space, it rather shows the genealogical connections and common heritages that are shared by all human beings. These spaces can be read as hyper-relational, adaptive, and grounded in particular legacies, as well as affected by particular traumas, while looking to persistent Oceanian futures in which the relationship between human and more-than-human elements should be infused with affect, care, and respect as we should praise our "blue planet/ one world ocean praise/ our trans-oceanic/ past present and future" (Perez 2020, 104).

In exploring people's relationship with water as an embodied entity, addressing the ocean as an "open body" whose features span from "smothering whales and schools of fish" (Perez 2020, 102) saving them from human cruelty to "enduring the violation of those who name you and claim domination / who map you empty ocean" (103), Perez's poem establishes multiple connections with economy and social life as well as hardships and inequalities, "your capacity to dilute our sewage and radioactive waste and plastics" (Perez 2020, 103). The nuclear tests in the Pacific were foundational to the understanding of power relations and constructions of vulnerability that have greatly impacted on the livelihood of Indigenous nations. Consequently, large amounts of radiation were released into the ocean and atmosphere with long-term radiological effects. Therefore, the author insists on enumerating all those aggressions in clear contrast with the oceans'

ability to recover, to forgive. However, that effort does not imply that we should forget but rather that we must act in order to envision a decolonized future.

It is, thus, this transformative capacity attributed to the ocean that closes the poem and infuses its readers with a sense of hope but also some kind of cruel optimism. The last part of the poem praises resilience, hope, and simultaneously posits a clear request for a world without war, a denuclearized planet, and demilitarized territories in which trans-indigenous and transnational coalitions are formed, "praise your capacity for communion / praise your vision of belonging / praise your blue planet / one world ocean praise / our trans-oceanic past present future flowing through our blood" (Perez 2020, 104). This embodied ocean encapsulates shared experiences, shared concerns and a shared decolonial love that simultaneously aims at liberating Indigenous peoples from the legacy of colonial violence and destabilizing the Western binarism between human and non-human figures. Ending the poem with the promising note that we praise the ocean's "capacity for hope / (...) praise your sacred water walkers / praise your activist kayaks" (Perez 2020, 104), Perez refuses to conform with discourses of fatalism and rather chooses to establish a bridge between the ocean's capacity to regenerate and the human obligation to take action to protect it from further damage.

In sum, the poem foregrounds the idea of interconnection and interrelatedness of humans, nature, and other species as well as the centrality of the ocean in the conception of indigenous genealogies, identities, and communities. Moreover, especially considering those aspects and the current global crisis of water scarcity, it is relevant to look for communion and coalitions that aim at praising trans-oceanic futurities. Ultimately, the poem asks us to re-examine conventions about human nature, and how those conventions lead to the reproduction of certain ways of living in economic, political, and social terms. While Western views of human nature have largely become rooted in dominant socioeconomic and global capitalistic systems, Indigenous views may be precisely what is necessary to create more equitable and sustainable futures. The frameworks that link environmental justice movements equally call for an increased attention to "systems of responsibility" that incorporate "of interspecies relationships" (Whyte 2013, 518). Finally, it can be argued that it is through an Indigenous

ecopoetics that highlights the sacredness of the earth that the author honors the earth and the ocean as ancestors while protesting against environmental degradation, and asserts that land and the seas are sites of healing, belonging, resistance, and mutual care.

#### CONCLUSION

The islands in the Pacific Ocean have been colonized in multiple ways, and during different periods of time in history with different degrees of violence enacted against their Indigenous peoples. This ongoing process of global imperialism cannot solely be addressed in economic and political terms, but it should also be considered in terms of how these islands were and still are intellectually occupied and conceptually shaped by Europe and the USA. Hence, in nearly two centuries, Pacific Islanders saw it all, the changes brought with colonialism and the lingering effects of imperial policies that have culminated in partial disintegration of Indigenous cultures. Unsurprisingly, a considerable proportion of Indigenous Pacific literature creates a counter-discursive approach to Western violence enacted against Indigenous peoples. Within current debates about Indigenous cultures, questions related with gender, race, and cultural commodification have been extensively addressed. Moreover, it is also significantly demonstrated that Western fantasies about 'the Other' are continually exploited through filmography, advertisements, tourism, and "cannibalistic consumerism" (hooks 1992) that not only translate Indigenous cultures into Western cultural modes but also deny the significance of their histories through multiple processes of decontextualization. There is a subjacent cultural imperialism in these forms of cultural appropriation, and often it perpetuates systemic violence against Indigenous peoples whose cultures are exploited to fulfil Western colonial nostalgia. Within this context of exploitation, gender, race and ecosystems are transformed into commodified assets for pleasure and the cultures of Indigenous peoples perceived "as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other" (hooks 1992, 367).

Accordingly, the poems problematize and critically question the impact of global policies upon Indigenous communities as well as they present examples of resistance that are generating transcultural movements. Each of these authors presents stimulating questions that trace environmental degradation back to the colonial encounter while demonstrating that their Indigenous societies developed complex and sustainable relationships with the environment that were disrupted by colonialism and subsequently by globalization in clear relation with various forms of extractivism and petrocultures. Moreover, the voices of these writers resonate through waves of anger against the harm that has been inflicted upon ecosystems, and thus their poems are ways of denouncing injustices, and, to a certain extent, they seem to ensure cultural survival when assuming a strategic significance as counternarratives to the Americanization of the islands. Consequently, my analysis of the poems aimed at demonstrating that coalitions formed among Pacific Islanders respond to the imperial West and resist land occupation, and environmental degradation. Patrick Wolfe (2006) emphasizes that "invasion is a structure and not an event" (388). Since this structural colonialism is not historically limited to the past but an ongoing process, the process of decolonization cannot be limited to decolonial thinking and epistemological deconstruction of colonial mindsets, it has to be extended to lands and oceans. Ecosystems have to be fully considered rather than being apprehended as secondary in relation to humans and anthropocentric views of the world. The restoration of lands, places (and even perhaps identities) happens through symbolic acts of imagination, including those within the frameworks of literature. Eventually, they weave together a sense of place and belonging long disrupted by foreign cultural fabrications, touristic fantasies, and apparatus. Following Edward Said (1994), it can be argued that imaginative futurities are fundamental in decolonizing the mind because they serve as the locus where "the land is recoverable at first only through the imagination" (225). The significance of geography, belonging and the sense of place are crucial in the construction of narratives about the Pacific in which there is a clear anti-imperialist perspective in a tourist-globalized-driven era. Ultimately, literature functions as a decolonizing practice in which multiple meanings are accommodated validating a powerful form of political expression and "in a world

permeated by insidious yet unseen and imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear" (Nixon 2011, 15).

The ecopoetic conversation that I have been referring to encompasses much more than attention to socio-cultural constructions of flora and fauna. But, as Jonathan Skinner elaborates on, it fundamentally comprises a critique of Western modernity itself: "any ecopoetics is always already an *ethnopoetics*. It traces the boundaries of a logocentrism that will go unquestioned by even the most radical poststructuralist poets and philosophers when they fail to link the foundation of Western rationalism (the *cogito*) to the repression of subaltern, indigenous writing systems" (Hume 2012, 763).

Consequently, the poems selected here attempt at offering discursive spaces through which it may be possible to imagine and reimagine decolonial futures based on love, hope, and affinity. Besides, it is also the recognition of violence perpetrated against Indigenous ecosystems, Indigenous peoples and their dehumanization that showcases the extent to which colonialism remains ingrained in contemporary societal models, i.e, the permanent occupation of lands to serve the Global North.

There is also an assumed critique to colonial/Western views of nature as a separate and empty dimension that exists to be exploited and to generate profit. In sum, the tapestry woven by the poems selected here highlights the importance of activism, education, care, and love as actions that simultaneously denounce multiple forms of slow violence against Indigenous cultures and generate decolonial discourses. Therefore, they map out an ethic of care and obligation/accountability along the lines of Vandana Shiva's (2005) model of an "earth democracy" which is derived not from moments of crisis but, rather, from the everyday actions. She argues, "We [must] base our globalization on ecological processes and bonds of compassion and solidarity, not the movement of capital" (5). This is an *embodied* practice that resonates the love and care of the land as Osorio describes in her poem, for example, or the love of the ocean in Perez's poem, because ultimately "we *are* the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe" (Shiva 2005, 5), and thus the importance of protecting all ecosystems regardless cartographies and geopolitical borders. Ultimately, we are interdependent beings, always in relation rather than in isolation. While *aloha 'āina* and Hawaiian cosmology depict

the intrinsic kinship to nonhuman nature or environment by Kānaka Maoli, I connect the meanings of this relationality with the need for dynamic action grounded in community as well. It is both the description of relationality with other islanders and islands, and the relationality to the land and the oceans that precisely informs decolonial practices and movements across the globe.

Overall, the poems read together develop a notion of "reflexive solidarity" (Mohanty 2003) which is particularly useful to comprehend the extent to which it remains crucial to form coalitions for the possibility of futures to be imagined. Mohanty (2003) addresses this reflexive solidarity in terms of "mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities" (7). Moreover, this notion of solidarity embodies "the result of active struggle to construct the universal on the basis of particulars/differences" (7) that actively responds to the American construction of the Pacific and the Caribbean (for the matter) as strategic locations for military experimentation and the production of new scientific epistemologies. While focusing on processes that have disempowered Indigenous peoples and undermined their ways of knowing and organizing social life, it is crucial to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples continuously resist and fight back ecological degradation as a way of ensuring that the future is possible for the planet. Contemporary Indigenous literatures of the Pacific are inextricably connected with social movements, thus the poems by Osorio, Perez, and Figiel foreground Indigenous socio-cultural practices and contribute to the ongoing debate about land occupation and ecological degradation. It can be argued that Indigenous writing is "a powerful tool in the struggles against colonialism and in the subsequent efforts to cast off the legacies of empire and dispossession" (Ballantyne & Patterson 2020, 5). Their contribution to processes of decolonization of Indigenous cultures and societies of the Pacific occurs through the representation of multiple social, political, and cultural aspects related with those Indigenous cultures. The textualization of their cultures becomes fundamental in raising awareness for shared struggles in which multiple perspectives are (re)inscribed in the officialized and politicized version of Indigenous historical narratives that are often written from a Western standpoint (Trask 1999; Silva 2004).

Taken together, the poems create a sense of despair tinged with hope, and it is hope that drives the need to decolonize the future. Hence, hope is simultaneously invoked as awareness of the present world that involves struggles, upheavals and losses, and the promising uncertainty of imagined pathways. However, hope is not naively assumed, or simply taken as the solution, on the contrary it involves critical and informed perspectives on the current trajectories of globalized and militarized policies as well as it looks for alternative modes of empowering people. At times when Indigenous peoples are navigating cruel forms of environmental degradation, ecological racism, and continuous loss of rights over their lands, hope could possibly be perceived as willful blindness to reality. It is my argument that hope does not necessarily mean lack of awareness, rather it contingently responds to injustices, injuries and precarity that typify the world. Hope in this context assumes a structural engagement with social life. Additionally, the poems also propose a politicized approach to hope as an engaged mode of contesting both present realities and the future. The politicized agenda of hope is crafted on action, accountability, and responsibility, and ultimately "hope is not simply given to people by the broader world, however; it is enabled by their connections with her world, including how they see, feel, act, and imagine" (Shewry 2015, 3).

Moreover, and despite the enormous change in mentalities, nature is still apprehended on the basis of its non-human features which clearly implies a lack of practices that step out from the obvious and perilous binarism human *versus* nonhuman. In contrast, the epistemological position that characterizes Indigenous peoples overtly encapsulates the fact that nature is an entity worth protection and respect, so that Indigenous struggles will always remain connected with environmental protection. Nonetheless, in order to move forward, societies in general should be able to acknowledge the still visible consequences of ongoing colonial practices that have affected Indigenous people, and those include the loss of lands, environmental self-determination, and the right to protect their sacred sites from being used either to build resorts, golf camps or military facilities/infrastructures. In sum, it is crucial to build solidarity across the divisions of place, gender, class, race, and identity. In these very fragmented and complex times we are living in, it may be fundamental to question globalization and capitalism from an

Ana Cristina Gomes da Rocha |

angle that uncovers their masculinist and racist values and extractivist practices. What if we look at nature through the lens of care and love? Will we become more observant if love towards all beings—human or otherwise—is constructed outside the anthropocentric views we usually apply? Assuming all those possibilities, we may become more apt to dismantle the oppressive systems that have been imposed on Planet Earth and be able to foster ecological justice.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Andersen, Chris, and Jean O'Brien, eds. 2017. Sources and Methodologies in Indigenous Studies. Routledge.

Anderson, Warwick, Miranda Johnson, and Barbara Brookes, eds. 2018. *Pacific Futures: Past and Present*. University of Hawai'i Press.

Armitage, David and Alison Bashford, eds. 2014. *Pacific Histories: Ocean, Land, People.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Ballantyne, Tony, Lachy Peterson, and Angela Wanhalla, eds. 2020. *Indigenous Textual Cultures: Reading and Writing in the Age of Global Empire*. Duke University Press.

Crosby, Alfred. 1994. *Germs & Seeds and Animals: Studies in Ecological History*. M.E. Sharp, Inc.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. 2019. *Allegories of the Anthropocene*. Duke University Press.

Edmond, Rob. 1997. *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin*. Cambridge University Press.

Epeli Hau'ofa. 1999. "Our Sea of Islands." In *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific,* edited by Rob Wilson, and Vilsoni Hereniko. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2000. "Epilogue. Past to Remember." In *Remembrance of Pacific Pasts: An Invitation to Remake History*, edited by Robert Borofsky. University of Hawai'i Press.

Figiel, Sia. 2021. "I-Land-Ness." In *Indigenous Pacific Islander Eco-Literatures*, edited by Jetnil-Kijiner, Kathy, Leora Kava, and Craig Santos Perez. University of Hawai'i Press.

Gabbard, Caroline Sinavaiana. 2018. "Samoan Literature and the Wheel of Time: Cartographies of the  $V\bar{a}$ ." Symplokē 26 (1-2): 33-49.

Gruen, Lori. 2015. Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic to our Relationship with Animals. Lantern Books.

Haraway, Donna. 2008. When Species Meet. University of Minnesota Press.

hooks, bell. 1998. "Activism that Is Not One." *Feminism and Ecological Communities: An Ethic of Flourishing*, edited by Chris J. Cuomo. Routledge.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1992. Black Looks: Race and Representation. South End Press.

Hume, Angela. 2012. "Imagining Ecopoetics: An Interview with Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Evelyn Reilly, and Jonathan Skinner." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19 (4): 751-66.

Kelly, Anne Keala. 2014. "Portrait. Marie Beltran and Annie Pau: Resistance to Empire, Erasure, and Selling Out." In *A Nation Rising: Hawaiian Movements for Life, Land and Sovereignty*, edited by Goodyear-Kaʻōpua, Noelani, Hussey, Ikaika, and Wright, Kahunawaikaʻala. Duke University Press.

Keown, Michelle. 2013. "Our Sea of Islands: Globalization, Regionalism, and (Trans)Nationalism in the Pacific." In *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Graham Huggan. Oxford University Press.

Osorio, Heolimeleikalani Jamaica. 2018. "Green Washing and White Dollar Policy." In *Effigies III: An Anthology of New Indigenous Writing Pacific Islands*, edited by Allison Coke, Brandi N. McDougall, and Craig Santos Perez. Salt Publishing, Ltd.

Park Ondine, Tonya Davidson and Rob Shields, eds. 2011. *Ecologies of Affect: Placing Nostalgia, Desire, and Hope*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Perez, Craig Santos. 2020. "Praise Song for Oceania." *Scottish Geographical Journal* 136 (1-4): 101-104.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 2003. Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity. Duke University Press.

Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press.

Said, Edward. 1993. Culture and Imperialism. Routledge.

Sandoval, Chela. 2000. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. University of Minnesota Press.

Silva, Noenoe K. 2004. *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism.* Duke University Press.

Shiva, Vandana. 2005. Earth Democracy. Justice, Sustainability and Peace. Bloomsbury Academics.

Shewry, Teresa. 2015. *Hope at Sea: Possible Ecologies in Oceanic Literature*. University of Minnesota Press.

Ana Cristina Gomes da Rocha |
Subramani. 2001. "The Oceanic Imaginary." The Contemporary Pacific 13 (1): 149-62.

Trask, Haunani-Kay. 1999a. From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i. University of Hawai'i Press.

\_\_\_\_\_\_. 1999b. "Writing in Captivity: Poetry in the Time of Decolonization." In *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*, edited by Hereniko, Vilsoni and Rob Wilson. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2004. "The Color of Violence." Social Justice 31 (4): 8-16.

Wolfe, Patrick. 2006. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8 (4): 387-409.

Ana Cristina Gomes da Rocha holds a PhD in Advanced English Studies with a dissertation in Contemporary South Pacific Indigenous Women's Writing (Hawai'i, Tahiti, and Samoa) from the University of Vigo, 2021, and a MA in English studies from the University of Aveiro, 2012. Currently, she is working as Invited Assistant Professor at University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro (Portugal) where she teaches Postcolonial Cultures in English, Anglo-American Culture and English language. Her research interests include TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge); Indigenous Studies; Indigenous Feminisms; Decolonial studies; Sustainability and climate change; Applied ecology; Postcolonial studies; Ecocriticism; Affect Studies; Activism and ARTivism; Memory and Trauma; Identity constructions. E-mail: <a href="mailto:anacgrocha@utad.pt">anacgrocha@utad.pt</a>

# NARRATIVE CARTOGRAPHIES OF INDIGENOUS RESURGENCE: WOMEN'S SELF-CONSTRUCTION, TRANSMOTION, AND THE DECOLONIZATION OF SPATIAL INQUIRY

## **Hend Ayari** University of Debrecen

#### **ABSTRACT**

Drawing on a long-standing history of leadership within their communities, Native American women have become increasingly prominent in the movement for Indigenous resurgence including, but not limited to, their re-articulation of the connection with land. In this paper, I discuss Native American women's literary cartographies as a strategy towards spatial decolonization, in line with Native American resurgence, a project that aligns with what Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) refers to as a shift from being reviewed as research objects to becoming their own researchers. In their self-narratives, Indigenous authors connect such mapping practices to exploring overlying stories—familial, ancestral, historical, and spiritual—that mark autobiographical moments that "take place." Thematically speaking, the motif of the journey and constant movement can be read as "an attempt to counter, even symbolically reverse, earlier historical displacement of the authors' respective cultural groups" (Sarkowsky 2020). This paper provides a glimpse into alternative ways to map Indigenous embodied experiences in 21st-century memoirs by Native American female authors—Harjo, Jensen, Elliott, Washuta, and Grover—who adopt renewed representational strategies, utilizing various forms of literary mapping techniques, re-representing their own experiences of land through a complex geography of ties to places, movement, and mobility in textual contexts. Grounding the article in Indigenous feminist place-based and land-based readings that center Indigenous women's voices at the forefront of struggles for self-determination and sovereignty, and in Vizenor's oft-quoted notions of survivance and transmotion, I argue that the interplay between movement and rootedness is crucial in these life storiers' engagement with conceptions of land and place that grapple with the American understanding of territoriality. Women's life writings serve as oppositional mappings of Western-centered cartographies, thus providing a re-righting and rewriting of sovereign stories. The findings of this analysis hope to enrich the discussion of the decolonization of spatial inquiry and, by extension, Indigenous resurgence.

**Keywords:** counter-mapping; life writing; resurgence; spatial inquiry; survivance.

#### INTRODUCTION

Prawing on a long-standing history of leadership within their communities, Native American women have become increasingly prominent in the movement of

Indigenous resurgence thanks to their re-articulation of the connection with land.¹ The history of settler colonialism has often been informed by the connection between knowledge production and power. The interruption of the Indigenous worldview of knowledge transmission attended by "colonial unknowing" (Vimalassery et al. 2016, 1) partly resulted in the trauma experienced by Native American peoples. Taking her cues from the postcolonial thinker Franz Fanon and Edward Said, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) shows how imperialism and colonialism brought complete disorder to colonized peoples, disconnecting them from their histories, their landscapes, their languages, and their social relations (28). Indeed, Native American peoples conceptualize their identity as intrinsically tied to their experiences of place, emphasizing the profound connection they feel to the land and the significance it holds in shaping their sense of self (Gone and Kirmayer 2020, 238).

Given the above, this paper examines how Indigenous resurgence operates in Native American women's literary maps through a spatial decolonization and unsettling of colonial geographies. In this essay, I offer a reading of texts by Joy Harjo (*Poet Warrior*), Linda LeGarde Grover (*Gichigami Hearts: Stories and Histories from Mesaabekong*), Elissa Washuta (*My Body Is a Book of Rules, White Magic*), and Toni Jensen (*Carry: A Memoir of Survival on Stolen Land*) to highlight how Native American women compose their memoirs as literary maps that challenge colonial spatial knowledge and restore Indigenous worldviews.<sup>2</sup> Assuming first-person narratives and

.

Although the terminology surrounding Indigenous Peoples is evolving in the academic sphere, the concept 'Native American' (as a reaction to American Indian and Aboriginal, for example) emerged in the late eighties. Indigenous peoples within the boundaries of the United States and Canada are referred to as Indigenous, with the term being capitalized and used as an adjective (Younging 2018), replacing, thus, the stereotyped term 'Aboriginal.' In pre-contact times, Indigenous Peoples had employed their tribal nations to identify themselves. These designations, however, were soon replaced by terms coined by European settlers, generally derived from the anglicization (or French and Spanish variations) of the Indigenous names. Indigenous is a racist category, but it is also a collectivized political identity, particularly in settler colonial nation-states in the CANZUS area. With these considerations in mind, I will use the terms Indigenous and Native American peoples interchangeably, with references, when possible, to specific tribal affiliations of the authors and theoreticians I quote using the spellings that comply with the preferences of the authors in question.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The concept of 'literary maps' emerged in various studies on spatial inquiry in literature and in postcolonial and feminist theorizations. Mishuana Goeman, for example, employs the term profusely in her book *Mark My Words* (2013) as she engages with colonial cartography by emphasizing Native American women's use of literary maps as alternatives.

storytelling as decolonial methodologies testifies to women's active resistance and reaffirmation of Indigenous epistemologies, both defining features of *survivance*. An umbrella term for resistance and survival, survivance synthesizes the major tenets of the decolonization of cultures. It throws into relief the significance of creating a sense of "presence over absence, nihility and victimry" (Vizenor 2009, 1).

My selection of these texts owes to the authors' investment in Indigenous feminist land-based ethics, which illustrates their engagement with Western spatialities. As I will demonstrate, Native American women engage with colonial spatialities and restore Indigenous kinship with the land to pursue curative ends and assert claims to sovereignty. These forms of literary mappings allow Native American women to decolonize colonial maps and spatialities, reclaim a "stolen" sense of identity, and attempt cultural resurgence by restoring relationality with the land. My reading of these memoirs is informed by Indigenous feminisms and Indigenous spatial inquiry, two theoretical approaches that share many points of intersection, including the understanding of land-based ethics as a prerequisite for decolonization, with the purpose of healing from disruptive colonial practices. Indigenous feminist scholars are concerned with exposing the colonial ideologies that shaped the construction of space and gender. For instance, feminist spatial inquiry scholars Marcia McKenzie and Eve Tuck (2015) have advocated for the decolonization of spatial practices through two diverse strategies: (re)mapping and building place-worlds.

Before delving into these issues, it is important to explore some concepts central to this discussion on Native American women's engagement with Western spatial "cognitive imperialism" (Simpson 2016, 19) in their memoirs. Building on this conceptual ground, I demonstrate how, in defining Indigeneity, Native women authors unpack the legal and discursive vocabularies that were engineered by settler colonialism to coopt Native American lands and bodies. In this context, this essay suggests that the incommensurate conceptualizations of space serve as a backdrop for Indigenous women's life narratives, exploring how they contest such geographies by reclaiming their relationality with the land as a major identifier of their Indigeneity—a self-construction also registered in the aesthetic and structural choices deployed in the analyzed texts. The

following section focuses on the attempts of Native American scholars to decolonize space by creating physical, spiritual, and cultural spaces compatible with American Indian cultures and beliefs. In particular, the selected memoirs make this process evident by illuminating "the ways in which they depart from (and collide with) conceptualizations of place that derive from Western philosophical frames" (McKenzie and Tuck 2015, 48), by (re)mapping their life narratives and building place-worlds. The final section of the paper investigates the authors' recasting of the trope of cross/mixed, both on the thematic and structural levels of the text, as the enactment of transmotion<sup>3</sup> to challenge colonial borders that continuously infixes Native American communities in time and space.

## CONCEPTUAL AND CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORKS

According to Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017), Indigenous resurgence is "a set of practices through which the regeneration and re-establishment of Indigenous nations could be achieved" (16). It is a key term in Indigenous Studies unmoored from the Indigenous resistance movements. It was theorized notably by Yellowknives Dene thinker Glen Coulthard in *Red Skins, White Mask: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (2014) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in her book *As We Have Always Done* (2017). They both emphasize the role of resistance as a daily practice that starts with the land through engaging in land-based practices. Frequently invoked by Indigenous scholars and activists, this term refers to the "flourishing" of Indigenous knowledges, languages, and ethics as integral elements of Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty and urge for a politics of refusal—as opposed to politics of recognition—towards the colonial state (Coulthard 2014, 154-79). *Grounded normativity*, a concept that both scholars center in their interpretation of resurgence, emerges as the ethical framework and the attending practices that stimulate resurgence and hinge on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> *Transmotion*, in Vizenorian terms (2009), is related to survivance and defined as "reciprocal use of nature, not a monotheistic, territorial sovereignty" (150). It is "inspired by native motion" (108) and "a sense of ancient presence and continental liberty" (111) which he defines as "a natural right" (162).

Indigenous relationships to land.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Indigenous resurgence is tightly linked to the concept of survivance, as defined by Gerald Vizenor. According to the White Earth scholar, survivance is a form of resistance and counter-interpretation that constantly seeks to expose the vocabularies of dominant colonialist ideologies in the production of everyday meanings. In other words, this notion counters the "colonial unknowing" ingrained in settler relations with Native American subjects.<sup>5</sup> Survivance subverts the Western narrative of deficiency that attempts to fix Native Americans in a state of absence.<sup>6</sup> This narrative constructs Indigenous peoples as victims lacking individual and communal agency. Thus, survivance becomes an active sense of presence that manifests in actively resisting colonial spatial violence through literary mappings.

Therefore, I argue that the exploration of these authors' grounding their memoirs in place unveils a common experience that lies in the reconnection with the land as a key aspect of Indigenous resurgence.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, even though their experiences of place are set in specific histories and tribal contexts—Grover in Anishinaabe relationality and *bimaadiziwin*, Jensen in mixed blood identity politics, and Harjo in Muskogee place-based praxis—women's stories share similar strategies of reclaiming special belonging.

Since the production of knowledge is untethered from power, settler colonialism's resort to border-making and maps can be conceived as a hegemonic practice meant to control Indigenous lands and bodies. Thus, it appears clear how counter-mapping is a cogent point of entry into resisting geographies of settler colonialism. Indeed,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> *Grounded normativity* is a central concept to Glen Coulthard's work on Indigenous resurgence. It encompasses "the ethical frameworks and land-based practices" that are rooted in Indigenous peoples' connection to land. Attending to this philosophy is a critique of politics of recognition, because, as he conceives of it, seeking validation from the state further entrenches colonial powers. In contrast, grounded normativity subverts this practice by enabling Indigenous peoples to feel validated through their connection to land and culture (2016, 254).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Retrieved from "On Colonial Unknowing" by Vimalassery et al. In this article, the writers contend that the epistemic genocide through processes of power/knowledge production (Foucault) resulted in the dismissal and ignoring of Indigenous knowledge systems (1).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The narrative of deficiency is discussed by Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) in his book *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (2018) where he makes the case for the importance of Indigenous authored literature in denying and subverting such narratives. He introduces the concept of "wonderwork" to define works of literature that fall under this categorization.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> "The good life" or "well-being" is an Anishinaabe worldview that has defined Anishinaabeg life. It can be achieved by leading life in a relational process.

the retrieval of forms of spatial knowledge—long dismissed by the colonial imagination as primitive—through the re-mapping of the landscape on Indigenous terms is primarily achieved by underscoring the significance of the recovery of both Native experiences and histories in stories and their perceptions of land and place (Sneider 2016, 105). By rescinding images that were coerced into being, Indigenous writers strive to decolonize the mind as a harbinger to other forms of decolonization of the map.<sup>8</sup> Through countermapping practices, Indigenous scholars highlight alternative epistemologies, reclaiming geographies and identities dismissed as peripheral by colonial narratives. Countermapping involves foregrounding Indigenous knowledges, critically interrogating colonial frameworks, and affirming Indigenous spatialities as tools for contesting "colonial unknowing" (Vimalassery et al. 2016, 1). Consequently, counter-mapping emerges as a powerful approach set forth by feminism and postcolonial studies. As Liz Deese-Mason (2020) remarks, "[d]ecolonizing the map considers counter-mapping as part of a broader process of reinvigorating and revaluing Indigenous language and culture through putting place names on the map or attempting to map Indigenous spatialities" (423). By situating one's narrative in place, the authors produce a spatial map, establishing a literary cartography for the reader (Tally 2011). Similarly, Peter Turchi (2004) has postulated that all writing is, in one way or another, cartographic, as storytelling is an essential form of mapping (11). The storyteller, like the mapmaker, delineates the boundaries of space, selecting the elements to be included in its narrative world, reclaiming de facto an agency the story narrated. The place-making that occurs in and through these stories enacts cartographies for Indigenous communities which weaves geography with Native history. Through this technique, the memoirs become a symbolic space where the authors establish a literary cartography for the reader.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> The Decolonization of the mind is an expression and invitation made by postcolonial scholar Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, who argued that colonialism was facilitated and sustained through the "colonization of the mind," or the domination over the mental universe of colonial subjects which resulted in an internalizing attitude of cultural inferiority that was facilitated by public education that disseminated the colonial narrative. As a reaction, he advances the counter strategy of decolonizing the mind, a concept at the heart of his book *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature.* 

#### INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S SELF-CONSTRUCTION: BEING OF PLACE

Indigenous women's engagement with colonial spatialities requires reconsideration of the concepts of space by pondering the incongruity between the Western and Indigenous vocabulary of spatialization. Indeed, in the Western philosophical tradition, the concept of space—though it has evolved through time—was at the center of investigation, particularly in the seventeenth century, thanks to Newtonian and Leibnizian ideations. In the Newtonian conceptualization, space is constructed as an independent entity, whether it is occupied by objects or events (Agnew and Livingstone 2011, 318). In his view, space is concrete, and, indeed, it is this concreteness that makes it real. In contrast, the Leibnizian notion of space foregrounds space as relational and dependent, holding no powers in itself (318).

In their critique and revision of these models of spatialization, Mckenzie and Tuck distinguish between *place* and *land*. They argue that *place* emerges from a human-centric Western place-based ontology, while *land* reflects a land-based ontology as a stenographic system encoding the ecology and the web of relations among diverse elements that interact within it (56). While this distinction is both compelling and essential for advancing decolonization of place from an Indigenous perspective, a thorough examination of the conceptual alterities between place and land lies beyond the scope of this essay. The discrepancy between the Western and the Indigenous ideas of space is further expounded by Mckenzie and Tuck as they draw on the Cartesian dictum "I think therefore I am," to illustrate their point. They propose that the ontology of placed-based paradigms might be understood as "'I am, therefore, place is,' in contrast, the ontology of land-based [research] might be summarized as '[I]and is, therefore we are'" (45).

Native American women storytellers engage with Western spatialities by challenging Cartesian binaries in favor of a holistic worldview that emphasizes their lived experience of the land. Their stories are linked to specific locations and landscapes, to which they are connected through embodied forms of knowledge. In their alternative cartographies, they consistently evoke an intrinsic kinship with land, revealing its profound influence on identity formation and politics. Indigenous peoples understand personhood as connected to specific places (Gone and Kirmayer 2020, 238), a worldview

disrupted by settler colonialism through acts of spatial violence. Re-establishing this relationship between humans and land becomes a vital means of grappling with the enduring impacts of colonialism.

The importance of relationality tied to the land is clearly illustrated in Grover's (Anishinaabe) memoir. In the incipit, the narrator addresses and comments on her community's relationship with the land, paving the way for the creation of a literary map: "[I]n sight of the gabbro ridge before there was a Duluth, or a State of Minnesota, before the lands of the Minnesota Arrowhead were lost under the terms of the 1854 Treaty . . . We, the descendants, are of this land and story, and this land and story are of us. We are honored to live in this place of the giants" (ix-x; emphasis added). The chiastic structure that concludes the passage recenters a land-based ontology reinforcing the entanglement between people and while subtly undermining the Cartesian truism. As she engages with settler colonial territorial claims, the author re-establishes kinship with the land that colonial claims sought to erase. The parallel with the Preamble of the American Constitution is striking. By re-appropriating its iconic opening phrase, "We, the people of the United States," Grover offers a response to the colonial misappropriation of Native American land. Through her grounding of the Anishinaabe people's presence in stories, particularly the Ojibwe creation story, she dismantles the narrative authority of the self-serving Doctrine of Discovery, which historically legitimized colonial and expansionist endeavors. The replacement of "people" with "descendants" highlights the contrast existing between "a Duluth, or a state of Minnesota" and the Ojibwe's understanding of ownership, as, for them, sovereignty emerges from stories, rather than treaties. Through this rhetorical act, the author claims that Indigeneity precedes and exceeds national boundaries. Her storytelling situates her in the sacred geography of her ancestors, collapsing the temporal divide between present and precontact generations. This continuity between past and present strengthens the intergenerational transmission of kinship with and through the land.

"NOT YOUR LEGAL SUBJECT:" RELATIONALITY AT THE HEART OF INDIGENEITY In the wake of nation-building and through an active process of space production, maps have played a vital role in serving as "geographical technologies" of dispossession (Goeman 2013, 27). Within the framework of colonial cartography, the incorporation of physical space necessitated the erasure of Indigenous spatial knowledges and practices, replacing them with a new vocabulary based on the physical demarcation of space. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) highlights:

There is a precise spatial vocabulary of colonialism that can be assembled around three concepts: (1) the line, (2) the center, and (3) the outside. The "line" is important because it was used to map territory, to survey land, to establish boundaries, and to mark the limits of colonial power. The "center" is important because orientation to the center was an orientation to the system of power. The "outside" is important because it positioned territory and people in an oppositional relation to the colonial center. (55)

In Smith's assessment of Western interpretation of space, the concept "line" is imbued with colonial dynamics, functioning as a tool of territorial demarcation. Beyond its geographical symbolism, however, the "line" also marks a boundary between cultural spaces, reinscribing the colonizer/colonized dichotomy through spatial means. The "center" functions as the core of the colonial organization of space and its associated institutions, standing in contrast to 'the outside'—the last concept in Smith's triad—which is interchangeable with the concept of the "margin," the periphery, or subjugated spaces. Establishing Indigenous lands as pertaining to the outside further reinforces the idea of its commodification which entitled settler colonialism the right to seize it, exploit it, and deprive its people of sovereignty over it. Emanating from the "center," these concepts were produced and implemented through linguistic violence and legal discourse.

Native American women's literary maps respond to and challenge Western spatialities by exposing the mechanisms of colonialism through "alternative conceptions of borders, nations, and place [that] are subversive to the masculine project of empire building" (Goeman 2013, 29). They enlist the self-representation mode to elude the cooptation of their voices and stories and transgress Western self-proclaimed centrality.

The 'outside,' embodied by Indigenous women reclaiming their voices, becomes a site of resistance and, therefore, no longer peripheral. Their act of creation through life narration becomes transformative and enables them to inhabit spaces historically denied to them.

The different texts under scrutiny explore the connection between colonialism and Western languages. Indeed, the selected memoirs show how Native American women use their writing to reveal the mechanisms that justified and sustained colonial violence. A poignant example of this use appears in Washuta's White Magic, where the author explains: "Exploration, patroonship, charter, survey, mapped, municipality, transatlantic trade, laws of inheritance, loyalty to the Crown, quitrents, proprietors, common law, Articles of Confederation, Great Compromise: these words are a new world, rich with subtext" (2021, 115; italics in original). The use of italics indicates the presence of foreign words, both to the Leni-Lenape language and to its worldviews, remarking the discrepancy between the Indigenous interpretations of place to that of the colonial power. Though not presented as such, the itemization of these colonialism-related nouns describes the process by which they were imposed. "Mapped," however, stands out from the list of words. Setting this term in the passive voice and strategically placing it between "survey" and "municipality" reinforces the description of a process. This reference is, thus, reflective of both the way in which Native American land was inscribed and subjugated into the American conceptualization of space, and of the deep entanglement between spatial and linguistic forms of violence.

Washuta further highlights a fundamental distinction between Western and Native ontologies regarding spatial knowledge. Indeed, now that the land is "mapped" and established as a bordered "municipality," it loses its sacred nature and becomes a mere fungible commodity as indicated by the list with trade-related concepts. Washuta punctuates her comment with an intended pun: "words that are a new world, rich

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Edward Said (1993) expounded on the nexus between geographical violence and linguistic violence in his seminal book *Culture and Imperialism*. The very language of mapping itself, he avers, perpetuates a kind of colonial incursion into particular Indigenous conceptions of place. As such, language constitutes a significant aspect of Indigenous cartographic re-articulating that may shake the very grounds through which mapping is understood.

with *subtext*" (115; emphasis added). The phrase serves as a blatant criticism of the manipulation of language by settlers, a strategy instrumental in luring Native American communities into signing documents whose deceptive nature lay precisely in their ambiguities and undertones. In turn, Native American authors, as Washuta's example shows, use language to subvert and redefine their realities.

Similarly, legal jargon served as a tool for settlers to impose Western spatial categories, playing a key role in defining and constructing the boundaries of Indigenous peoples' "place" within the settler state. This process culminated in three nineteenthcentury Federal Indian Law decisions that have been traditionally referred to by legal scholars and historians as the "Marshall Trilogy." These motions established and codified the legal relationship between the US settler state and Native American tribes, defining the scope of tribal self-governance and property rights.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, these law cases were instrumental in defining Native legal subjectivities and constructing an imperial geography that incorporated Indigenous peoples into the hegemonic jurisdictional structures, casting tribal members as a "foreign body to be policed and controlled" (Goeman 2013, 22). Native American communities were thereby assimilated into the Western system of land commodification and control. These legal frameworks—major signifiers of US-Indigenous relationships—loom large in Native American women's memoirs. For instance, in her memoir, Harjo recalls the traumatic experience suffered by one of her relatives, Alexander Posey, who died by drowning. When recalling his story, she connects the "shifts of fortune" on the Muscogee Creek people with the Dawes Act. Indeed, the narrator explains: "the worst probably being the passing of the Dawes Act or Allotment Act, a U.S. government act that instituted one of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Charles Wilkinson (1987) first used the term "trilogy" to collectively refer to these three Supreme Court decisions: *Johnson v. McIntosh* (1823), *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831), and *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832) by Chief Justice Marshall. The infamous legal motion *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1832) is considered the paragon of spatial violence because it intensified the control of Native American lands and bodies as it established The Cherokee Nation as a "domestic dependent nation," thus reinforcing the US hold of the territory while denying Indigenous peoples' sovereignty (Meyer 2015).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Federal Indian policy was marked by a series of acts that shaped the nature of relationships between the two parties. Notable acts include the 1830 Indian Removal Act, the General Allotment Act of 1887, the 1851 Indian Reorganization Act, the 1953 Termination Policy, and the 1956 Indian Relocation Act.

largest land thefts by parceling tribal land for private ownership" (40).<sup>12</sup> Despite his tragic passing, Posey's activism can be understood as an enactment of survivance especially in his critical engagement with the Federal Indian policy and its ongoing efforts to appropriate Native American lands. His employment of "local wit, wisdom, and dialect of a tribal citizen of our creek Nation," as Harjo (2021) reports, is a narrative braving of colonial dominance (40). By writing about him and keeping his song alive, especially his poem "Assured," Harjo establishes his poetry as literature of survivance and "spirit food" for younger generations. The title of the poem evokes the "active sense of presence" that Vizenor (1994) identifies as foundational in enacting survivance (4). By embedding his life as an activist against land dispossession in her memoir, the author honors those who sowed the seeds of Indigenous land reclamation, expressing the hope that her own story might inspire future generations to embrace the Indigenous resurgence movement. Through the example of Posey, Harjo creates a narrative connection with other postindian warriors.<sup>13</sup>

In aiming to decolonize both spaces and subjectivities—beyond the bounds of achieving material decolonization—Native American authors reimagine their relation to space in ways that challenge Western cartographic knowledge. Counter-mapping emerges within the textual space itself, thus offering renewed frameworks of physical mapping. This process is largely sustained through a critical engagement with the Western spatial representation and marking, while simultaneously retrieving forms of spatial production rooted in pre-contact epistemologies. As such, the literary maps of Indigenous peoples, embedded in both oral and written stories, function as alternative and subversive geographies.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> The Dawes Act, also known as the General Allotment Act and named after its author Senator Henry Dawes, was passed by Congress in 1887. The law authorized the President to split reservation land into small allotments to be parceled out to individuals. Therefore, Native American individuals registering on a tribal roll were granted allotments of reservation land ("Dawes Act [1887]").

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> According to Gerald Vizenor: "The postindian warriors of survivance" counter the literature of domination with their own simulations of survivance. These "warriors" actively engage in the repudiation of "inventions and final vocabularies of manifest manners" (Vizenor 1994, 167) through the deployment of imaginative strategies. As such, the "postindian" is a self-representation of Indigenous identity that eclipses the dominant culture's inventions of the *indian* (Vizenor 1994, 11).

#### DECOLONIZING SPACE: (RE)MAPPING

The recognition that space is both produced and productive of hegemonies promotes a critical inquiry into how the roots of spatial colonization lay bare its concealed systems. Re-articulating place on Indigenous terms requires unpacking the power dynamics that fueled colonialism. This includes the process of (re)mapping, an idea that Mckenzie and Tuck define as a potent method for the decolonization project. Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Band of Seneca), who coined the term, conceptualizes (re)mapping as "the labor Native authors and the communities they write within and about undertake, in the simultaneously metaphoric and material capacities of map-making" (2013, 3). It is, thus, a process that can destabilize colonial maps and re-anchor Native presence by refusing epistemological erasure. In line with her use of the term, (re)mapping stems from her pursuit "to interrogate the process of mapping, both as a metaphor and as the physical mapping of lands and bodies [that] is not restricted to the mathematical; it may equally be spiritual, political, or moral" (16). The framing of (re) with parentheses is intentional because it allows Goeman to point out Native American women's weaving of traditional and new tribal stories as a means of cultural continuity—what Gerald Vizenor calls stories of survivance. This approach challenges Western romanticized conceptions of Indigenous relationships to land by advancing place-based readings that center Indigenous women's voices and bodies at the forefront of decolonial struggles for self-determination and sovereignty. In reclaiming narrative agency, these texts resist erasure, functioning as oppositional mappings of Western-centered cartographies.

Indigenous women authors challenge colonial geographies by employing alternative forms of mapping. This strategy figures profusely in the memoir of the Muscogee poet Joy Harjo, who shapes language to articulate her own "space poetics" (Goeman 2013, 10). Harjo enacts "space poetics" through her employment of the Muskogean directional path, beginning her journey in the East, then moving to the North, West, and finally South. The Western practice of cartography is carried out through the scientific conventions of scale, longitude, latitude, and direction to depict a landscape. In a subversive turn, Harjo reimagines these scientific conventions through the lens of Native American knowledge systems. Her poetics challenge the epistemologies that sustain colonial narratives of erasure that deny Native presence. For Harjo, and many Indigenous

communities, mapping is not learned through Western education; rather, it is knowledge inherited traditionally and passed down from generation to generation through storytelling.

In the opening section of her memoir, "Ancestral Roots," the spirit of Harjo's ancestors empowers her with the gift of voice to pass on the teachings of the "Council." She is ready to embark on a journey as she is equipped with this map. Yet, unlike conventional Western maps, hers is not marked up by borders, coordinates, or hierarchical points such as centers and peripheries, nor is it inscribed on paper. Instead, the rigid lines of colonial maps are reimagined as poetic lines, forming the Girl-Warrior's spiritual map—one that was "placed [...] in her heart" (2021, 9). As the narrative progresses, Harjo's "space poetics" continue to guide her, enabling her to navigate "the story" as is evident in the following passage:

I AM OBSESSED WITH MAPS and directions. The key to my internal map appears to read something like this: East: A healer learns through wounding, illness, and death. North: A dreamer learns through deception, loss, and addiction. West: A musician learns through silence, loneliness, and endless roaming. South: A poet learns through injustice, wordlessness, and not being heard. Center: A wanderer learns through standing still. (45)

These lines highlight the poet's experience of space and how her understanding and navigation of the landscape are deeply rooted in land-based knowledges. Both the counterclockwise movement in Harjo's directional mapping and the paradoxical pairings within her verses—"healer/wound," "musician/silence," and "poet/wordlessness"—invite close attention. These reversals and juxtapositions reflect a worldview in which experiences are interconnected rather than defined in terms of dualities, aligning with the understanding that Native American societies relate phenomena to one another (Sneider 2016, 100).<sup>14</sup> Thus, Harjo critiques Western conceptions of space by seeking to mend the dichotomies produced by colonial maps. Her reinterpretation of the Western

\_

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Dualism emerged in the 17th century with French philosopher René Descartes and had a tremendous impact on Western reason. The most common duality that marked this concept and justified the self-proclaimed superiority of the West is the mind/body split. In this paradigm, the world is explained in terms of binarism.

cardinal points suggests a cartography of healing—one in which balance is achieved by healing these divisions. In comparison with the cartographic conventions that orient people through fixed special coordinates, Native American people are able to orient themselves through a spiritual balance, one achieved by embracing contradictions that Western frameworks seek to eliminate. Within Harjo's narrative, the roles stated above are associated with acts of artistic creation and reinforced through active verbs. As the journey comes full circle, it presents yet another paradox: "wanderer/standing still." It is precisely through this act of "standing still"— as in the endurance of Indigenous presence—that sovereignty over the land is reclaimed. In this moment, the interplay between movement and rootedness is recast as a defining feature of "postindian warrior[ship]" (Vizenor 1994, 4). The poem's final dyad warrants further attention, as it may be interpreted as the reenactment of what Vizenor (2009) terms "continental liberty" (108)—a vision of Native sovereignty rooted in the pre-contact era and associated with Indigenous mobility across the land.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, wandering the land is not oppositional in meaning to "standing still," both become a symbol of survivance, an "active sense of presence" (Vizenor 1994, 4).

#### DECOLONIZING SPACE: BUILDING PLACE-WORLDS

Indigenous research on and with place foregrounds narrative orientations to land, mobilized by Native authors in contrast to abstract Western conceptualizations of territory. Building place-worlds involves a re-visionary and "a re-memory" act (McKenzie and Tuck 2015, 133). I propose an engagement in the concept of building place-worlds, originally proposed by anthropologist Keith Basso and revitalized by Abenaki scholar Lisa Brooks in her book *The Common Pot*. This framework is embedded in the memoirs and conveyed through women's distinctive mapping of both personal and communal

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> According to Vizenor (2009), Native continental liberty started with the inception of colonialism. The Indigenous worldviews of "native liberty, reciprocity, and visionary sovereignty" were impacted or "diminished" by the acts of legislation and land dispossessions by the settlers, and later by the United States after independence (108).

stories as a way of rethinking Western maps. <sup>16</sup> This perspective echoes the idea of building place-worlds and/or place-making as articulated by McKenzie and Tuck (2015), who present it as a core method for challenging colonial maps. <sup>17</sup> This process begins by centering place itself because, as Basso and Brooks posit, where events occur matters as much as what happens and its consequences. Therefore, the questions "[w]hat happened here? Who was involved? What was it like?" serve, as Basso maintains, as catalysts for building place-worlds. Both scholars draw from Vine Deloria Jr., who argues that Indigenous Creation stories "are actually more concerned with geography and spatiality . . . than with chronology and temporality" (quoted in Brooks xvii). Rooted in efforts to decolonize Western mapping practices, building place-worlds involves a re-visionary and "a re-memory" act (McKenzie and Tuck 2015, 133).

Within this framework, women authors conceive land as "an archive, [a] library, [a] genealogy" (Whitehead 2022, 88) echoing Jodi Byrd's depiction of land as "mnemonic, [as] it has its own set of memories" (2011, 118). Indeed, these understandings foreground land as an active participant—one that preserves the memory of the peoples. This Indigenous view of the land directly challenges the myth of the *terra nullius*, which depicted America as an empty space, and bereft of human existence. By reclaiming their roles as knowledge keepers and storytellers—transmitting what the land remembers—women reassert Indigenous epistemologies. Tightly linked to storytelling and imagination, Basso (1996) contends that "[w]hat people make of their places," is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of society and inhabitants of the earth. We are in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine" (5). In Native American epistemologies, then, the land and the landscape impart lessons, bearing trace of the past.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> This term was reinvested by Abenaki scholar Lisa Brooks in her book *The Common Pot* (2008) where she finds parallels between the words meaning to draw, write, and map in the Abenaki word *awikhigawôgan* (xxi), or "image making" (xxiii). Brooks contends that *awikhigawôgan* is the activity of writing which is ongoing and collective.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> According to Keith Basso (1996), "place-making" is the retrospective of "building of place-worlds" (5). Despite this nuance in meaning, I use the terms synonymously.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw) prefers this designation because of her non-binary identity.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, for example, criticizes the *terra nullius* doctrine in the sixth chapter of her book *Decolonizing Methodologies* where she provides several examples of Indigenous social movements that were particularly significant in cultural revitalization through land reclamation as they engaged with the doctrine.

The landscape holds and embodies the cumulative memory and experience of the community.

The memoirs challenge colonial representations of places through re-storying, a process that involves presenting Indigenous knowledge of place, including place names.<sup>20</sup> This knowledge, preserved in stories, portrays land as a living entity having its own history—one that must be acknowledged through its connections "to multiple other spaces, histories, and peoples" (Goeman 2013, 206). As Basso's theory of building place-worlds suggests, the land is not a space produced by Western geographic conceptualizations; rather, it is shaped by the lives that affected and were affected by it.

One of the ways building place-worlds is revealed in the texts is through Indigenous toponymy or place naming, which usually involves a creation story. In Gichigami Hearts, for example, Grover reflects on how place naming is deeply steeped in Ojibwe lore and oral tradition. Indeed, according to the writer, whereas the American toponymic practice often derives from people's names, Ojibwe place names usually describe the geographical features of the place: "the area around Duluth has been known by Ojibwe words that describe this terrain. One of these is Onigamiising, the place of the small portage, which refers to the five-mile-long sandbar not far from the Point of Rocks. Another is Misaabekong, the place of the giants" (ix). She also adds: "We Onigamiisingowininwag, Native and non-Native, live surrounded by beauty created by the Great Spirit, the Creator, through the ages. This is both our history and our existence today" (3). Hence, these places are sacred and present "no man-made signage, nor [...] historical markers to identify [them]" (16) and are known and shared instead through Creation and sacred stories. This means that the worldview and teachings are woven into the tribes, communities, and families, as "a tapestry of knowledge" (16). In her descriptions, the origin of each geographic name becomes central. Misaabekong, for

\_

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Jo-Ann Archibald established storytelling as a significant project toward decolonization. In her view, storytelling humanizes and gives voice to people, which is deconstructive of the colonial "anti-storytelling agenda (Archibald, part 3, doc. 10.). Re-storying, or presenting old stories in new contexts, is a counter-narrative to colonization and its legal structures. "It disentangles us from our entrapment in knowledge institutions; it breathes life into our process of healing and storying, shifting from a reliance on dead white man theories towards a clearer and firmer reclamation of Indigenous meaning-making and lived experience" (Archibald, introduction).

instance, may have once referred to "the Point of Rocks in the past" (94). It is the place where "greenery grows from [its] cracks and spaces" (47), and which is seen as "an intended work of the Creator for our natural world" (2021, 6). The English translation does not do justice to the Ojibwe place names because the English language is mostly nounbased, whereas Ojibwemowin is rather verb-based,<sup>21</sup> reflecting an animate and active presence, since the land teaches the people how everything functions, and place names embody that worldview. Place-naming is akin to ceremony and carries a rich history of how the landscape—and the interactions of relations on it—influenced its labeling.

Similarly, when she compares the US practice of place-naming to the Native American one, Washuta argues that creating place-worlds through naming sites is closely tied to the storied nature of the place. She points to the colonial practice of the disruption of Indigenous place names, which were replaced with settler-imposed ones. For example, in *White Magic*, she states:

I learned about the Lenni-Lenape, the first nation the United States signed a treaty with after declaring independence. Lenape place names describe the land and what happened there before settlers tore into it. Aquashicola: the place where we fish with bush nets. Mahoning: at the mineral lick. Lopatcong: winter watering place for deer. Hokendauqua: searching for land. Settlers made new names: Liberty, Hope, Harmony, and Independence. I imagine the naming was a kind of white magic, an incantation against the wickedness they believed was striated into the bedrock. (2021, 115)

Through this passage, Washuta reflects on the power dynamics embedded in place naming. Her commentary offers an ironic nod to the stark disparities between the ideals associated by settler place names and the lived realities of Native American peoples. The reference to Enlightenment ideals—such as liberty and independence—is evident. First developed by philosophers like Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau, these concepts were later incorporated in the Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson, notably in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> This point was discussed by Jason Jones. As he establishes Anishinaabemowin as a language that emanates and is inspired by the land, he notes that it is a highly active language. He also reflects on the discrepancies between Anishinaabemowin and English, the former being made up of verbs whereas the latter being mostly thought of and expressed in nouns (Rhonda 2023).

phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (1776). These ideas laid the ideological foundation for Eurocentrism and helped justify colonial expansion (Smith 1999, 67).

In contrast, the Leni-Lenape tradition of naming places involves a deep connection to the land and its defining elements—human or other-than-human—reflecting a practice that is inherently communal. In Native American epistemologies, place names emerge from the land itself, whereas naming practices by settlers are driven by a sense of ownership. American place names often sound abstract, while Native names reflect their lived experience, as suggested by active verbs like "watering" and "searching." This contrast underscores a broader distinction in the conceptualization of space. Place names, thus, not only re-story Indigenous lands but also affirm Native American worldviews.

#### TRANSMOTION: "MIXED/CROSS BLOODS"

Native transmotion is one of the terms connected with survivance. It is "[a] practice of ontological transformation that overcomes the separations imposed by a colonial ontology or worldview" (Madsen 2013, 4). As Gerald Vizenor (2009) notes, "Native hybridity, transmotion, and that sense of an ancient presence and continental liberty were sacrificed by colonial, territorial greed" (111). Native American presence is neither fixed in space nor bound by colonial mappings. Movement, both in its presence and absence, is a recurring motif in memoirs. Katja Sarkowsky (2020) argues that "mapping territory and the self through the narration of different types of movement is a crucial strategy in life writing. In Indigenous self-narratives, such mapping often tends to be connected to the exploration of overlaying stories—familial, ancestral, and frequently also mythical/spiritual—that inscribes places of autobiographical significance" (109). Movement, then, holds both material and symbolic weight, as seen in the authors' traversals across native spaces and, at times, even across the borders between North and South America. Women uproot colonial practices of boundary-making by honoring their mixed heritage. In this vein, crossing the borders erected in the wake of colonialism becomes an act of transmotion. These borders can be physical, racial, or cultural. Hence, even though the authors are motivated by different aims, their crossing of colonial borders through

constant movement on and within the land can be seen as decolonizing strategies that enact the concept of transmotion.

This is reflected in how they build their lives around physical movement—between states, urban and rural spaces, on and off the Rez and tribal divides transcending the notion of fixedness on multiple levels. Rather than dwelling on the destruction of kinship and dis-unification of families and tribes, women write of separation as though it were not separation at all. The image of generations "mov[ing]" across the Earth aligns with the idea of the land's ubiquity—a land not measurable by the conventional Western scientific categorizations, but experienced and lived through the movement of its peoples. As she narrates,

I walk around lakes, meet friends for shared sandwiches at Como Park, spend weekends browsing book stacks at Native-owned bookstores, drinking coffee at a Native-owned coffee shop. There are Dakota and Anishinaabe and Métis and all manner of other Native people everywhere. There are Native people everywhere. There are Native people in everyday urban life, in everyday urban America. I love this more than I can properly explain. (Sarkowsky 2020, 141)

In its territorial management of dispossessed land, gentrification facilitated the classification of space through the creation of culturally gentrified zones. The erasure of the distinctions between time and space not only highlights the importance of place but also frames identity as collective—trans-Indigenous, through the mention of various tribes, and trans-temporal, linking past and present generations.

Vizenor (1981a) emphasizes that the "words *Métis a*nd mixed blood possess no social or scientific validation because blood mixture is not a measurement of consciousness, culture, or human experiences" (ix), highlighting the metaphorical nature of Indigenous blood. In this sense, cross-bloods embody survivance by engaging creatively with fixed notions of identity. Their trickster-like attributes enable them to navigate and disrupt the rigid notions of identity imposed by settler colonialism. Accordingly, movement in its metaphorical capacity, occurs between identities, challenging Western spatial logics and unmaking the "boxes" (Goeman 2013, 108) created by accepting the political and legal systems, such as blood quantum tabulations, that support settler colonialism. Yet, in the discussion of the term, it is important to acknowledge how Arnold

Krupat, in his book *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (1989), critiques the notion of "mixed-blood identity." He points to the tensions and the complications that arise from navigating multiple identities, and approaches the concept of cross bloods with caution, warning against its romanticization.<sup>22</sup> In response to Krupat's interpretation, Gerald Vizenor—himself a cross blood—problematizes such essentialist readings and reframes this term as a site of creative and narrative resistance.

Nonetheless, cross bloods defy the fixed representations of the "real Indian" as merely proper bodies and pure bloods, surviving in the right places, namely reservations. Therefore, in their constant movement, women escape spatial and temporal fixations. The interplay of movement and rootedness is reflected in Washuta's and Jensen's celebration of mixed heritage, yet also in their partial disconnection from either identity. The fact that these authors are both "cross bloods," to use Vizenor's term, features prominently in their life narratives. Their active sense of presence is achieved through mapping their lives as existing at the borders of contrasting cultures. Being at the borderlands of two racial identities, their metaphorical journeys between them emulate their self-definition as cross bloods. The borders crossed by these women join two identities and two cultures that become spaces of inclusion rather than sites of disjunction.

Washuta (Cowlitz) and Jensen (Métis) celebrate their mixed-blood descent as a reflection of their resistance to norms of fixity imposed on Native American individuals by blood quantum tabulations. This is reflected in the structure of the text. Native American women authors implement multi-vocality by crisscrossing various stories and voices.<sup>23</sup> Such a strategy serves to blur up the clear-cut and fixed borders of the text and, symbolically, the material borders drawn for the sake of territorialization by settler states. The borders demarcating the various modes of expression within a text are deliberately made porous to rescind fixedness. A perfect example of such experimentation

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Arnold Krupat discusses "blood reasoning" as a marker of identity in his book *The Turn to The Native* (1996) especially in the chapter entitled "*Ratio*- and *natio*- in Gerald Vizenor's *Heirs of Columbus*," where he distinguishes between *ratio*- and *natio*- to highlight the essentialist/ambivalent undertone of Vizenor's ideas.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Some of the storytelling techniques registered in the memoirs are reminiscent of postmodern experimentation with the text. These texts are replete with passages that feature polyvocality and intertextuality. I contend that these literary strategies have always existed in Native American storytelling practices, thus, not a result of cultural contact.

is visible in the layout of Washuta's My Body Is a Book of Rules. There is no clear-cut demarcation between distinct types of textual discourse in the memoir, such as fact and fiction, history, and myth. Jumping from one period to another, from the spiritual world to the physical one, and from one genre to another is deliberately fragmented and arbitrary. Washuta's aesthetic choices are eloquent. Despite the implied autobiographical inclination of her story, she chooses to add essays entitled "A Cascade Autobiography." Interestingly, this "autobiography" is told in bits and pieces that veer off on tangents, as they do not appear in the table of contents and interspersed between the essays of her memoir, typically occupying no more than a page, except for parts nine, eleven, and thirteen. Part eight, however, stretches out eating up space from other essays, which testifies to their struggle for recognition in the face of established essays. Their presence in the overall work mirrors Washuta's uneasiness with being confined to a single identity, as she herself exists in a liminal space. The play on the word "cascade" is, in itself, compelling. Cascade refers not only to the Indigenous affiliation of the author but also to the movement of a waterfall, thus mirroring the fluidity that is characteristic of Vizenor's cross bloods. She creates a connection between the biography—or story—of the Indigenous tribe and the downpouring of a waterfall, recreating their free movement across the land. The recurring reference could also be read as the "active presence" of her people—a symbol of their survivance. With this gesture, she grounds the presence of her tribe in place rather than in time. She styles her Cascade autobiography using justified text alignment, which visually emulates the movement of falling water. For the most part, this experimentation with textual form is inspired by Indigenous women's reconnection with the boundless nature of land.

The problematization of Western mapping practices is expounded in the memoirs at various levels. What is remarkable, however, is how women authors recast Western frameworks of temporality through their counter-emphasis on spatiality. Motivated by her professional endeavors, Jensen, for example, adopts a non-linear storyline that maps her memoir based on her mobility between campuses. As she memorializes the histories of each place she visits, she avers that they are not "hallowed [but] they are in fact stolen" (61), haunted by the colonial violence through land dispossession. It is no

surprise, then, that these spaces presently witness the atrocity of shootings facilitated by carry laws. She reminds the reader that these campuses and the land each of them occupies were once the home of Indigenous peoples until they were violently removed: the Osage from the University of Arkansas campus, the Umpqua from Umpqua Community College, and the Yankton Sioux and Dakota from the University of South Dakota campus.

These parallels between past and present, revealed through temporal shifts, underscore the cyclical nature of physical violence, which transcends linear conceptions of time. Settler colonialism, along with its associated violence constitutes a structural framework rather than a singular event. This is reflected in the non-sequential structure and progression of the fifteen chapters of Jensen's book. Likewise, the same memoir focuses on the trope of violence across its various chapters, arguing that each contemporary location (place) bears the weight of historical violence inflicted upon Indigenous lands. Observing the perpetuation of violence due to the concealed-carry law, Jensen becomes conscious of the reverberations of colonial violence. She argues that the same logic that facilitated place control is now used to justify and perpetuate gun violence. <sup>24</sup> By revealing the processes that uphold colonial maps, Native American women authors not only confront colonial spatialities but also give visibility to Indigenous knowledges and continued presence in these places.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Native American communities' geographical imaginations and everyday realities have been shaped by political domination and the maps of the state since the inception of settler colonialism. Consequently, the power of women's resistant geographies lies in re-articulating their knowledge of the land as an alternative to the legal claims over it.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> As per the Second Amendment to the US Constitution, people are guaranteed the right to keep and bear arms. This amendment was ratified on December 15, 1791, and reads: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed" ("The Bill of Rights"). "Constitutional carry" refers to the legal public carrying of a handgun without a license or permit.

Examining Indigenous spatialities in the work of women enriches the field of space inquiry by operating on multiple levels. This reflection exposes the spatial injustices perpetuated by settler colonialism against Indigenous communities. It chronicles Native American women's refusal to be defined, erased, or subjugated to colonial law, highlighting that colonialism was a gendered process and that decolonization efforts must address this aspect. Through their activism, Native American women engage with Western spatial practices, while asserting their own knowledge systems to produce and claim spaces. Through a meticulous analysis of the spatial dimensions within the creative endeavors of Native women, this study underscores the gendered nature of colonialism, stressing that decolonization must acknowledge and address these gendered dynamics. Additionally, the active agency of women in shaping spatial environments is highlighted in their crucial role in creating places essential to the vitality of Native communities.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Agnew, John A., and David N. Livingstone, eds. 2011. *The SAGE Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*. SAGE.

Archibald, Jo-Ann. 2008. *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*. University of British Columbia Press.

Basso, Keith. H. 1996. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache.* University of New Mexico Press.

"Bill of Rights: The 1st Ten Amendments." *Bill of Rights Institute*. Accessed May 17, 2024. <a href="https://billofrightsinstitute.org/primary-sources/bill-of-rights/">https://billofrightsinstitute.org/primary-sources/bill-of-rights/</a>.

Brígido-Corachán, Anna M., ed. 2023. *Indigenous Journeys, Transatlantic Perspectives: Relational Worlds in Contemporary Native American Literature*. Michigan State University Press.

Brooks, Lisa. 2008. *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast*. University of Minnesota Press.

Byrd, Jodi A. 2011. *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*. University of Minnesota Press.

Coulthard, Glen Sean. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. University of Minnesota Press.

Coulthard, Glen, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. 2016. "Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity." *American Quarterly* 68 (2): 249–55. <a href="https://www.jstor.org/sta-ble/26359594">https://www.jstor.org/sta-ble/26359594</a>.

Dawes Act. 1887. *National Archives*. <a href="https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/dawes-act?ga=2.252432586.277559593.1754815683-1934984894.1754815683">https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/dawes-act?ga=2.252432586.277559593.1754815683-1934984894.1754815683</a>.

Deese-Mason, Liz. 2020. "Countermapping." In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 2nd edition. Elsevier.

Deloria, Jr. Vine and Daniel Wildcat. 2001. *Power and Place: Indian Education in America*. Fulcrum Resources.

Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings by Michel Foucault* 1972-1977. Translated by Colin Gordon et al. Pantheon Books.

Goeman, Mishuana R. 2013. *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*. University of Minnesota Press.

Gone, P. Joseph, and Laurence J. Kirmayer. 2020. "Advancing Indigenous Mental Health Research: Ethical, Conceptual, and Methodological Challenges." *Transcultural Psychiatry* 57 (2): 235–49. 10.1177/1363461520923151.

Grover, Linda LeGarde. 2021. *Gichigami Hearts: Stories and Histories from Misaabekong*. University of Minnesota Press.

Harjo, Joy. 2021. Poet Warrior. W.W. Norton & Company.

Jensen, Toni. 2020. Carry: A Memoir of Survival on Stolen Land. Penguin Random House.

Krupat, Arnold. 1996. *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture*. University of Nebraska Press.

Madsen, Deborah L. 2008. "On Subjectivity and Survivance: Rereading Trauma through *The Heirs of Columbus and The Crown of Columbus.*" In *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, edited by Gerald Vizenor. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2013. "Preface: Tragic Wisdom and Survivance." In *Conversations with Remarka-ble Native Americans*, edited by Joëlle Rostkowski. SUNY Press.

McKenzie, Marcia, and Eve Tuck. 2015. *Place in Research: Theory, Methodology, and Methods*. Routledge.

McNab, David. 2006. "The Significance of Place and Indigenous Knowledge in Louise Erdrich's Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country (2003)." European Journal of American Culture 25 (3): 205–19.

Hend Ayari |

Meyer, Sabine. 2015. "The Marshall Trilogy and Its Legacies." In *The Routledge Companion to Native American Literature*, 1st ed. Routledge.

Rhonda. 2023. "Lessons in Ojibwe – Language That Comes from the Land (Part I)." *Pimachiowin Aki*, June 13. Accessed May 17, 2024. <a href="https://pimaki.ca/lessons-in-ojibwe-language-that-comes-from-the-land-part-i/">https://pimaki.ca/lessons-in-ojibwe-language-that-comes-from-the-land-part-i/</a>.

Rifkin, Mark. 2017. Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination. Duke University Press.

Sarkowsky, Katja. 2020. "Cartographies of the Self: Indigenous Territoriality and Literary Sovereignty in Contemporary Native American Life Writing." *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 11 (1): 103-25. <a href="https://escholarship.org/content/qtihw3p4kx/qtihw3p4kx no-Splash 4f962930e2674c424d879dde6a64aaif.pdf?t=gecxpo">https://escholarship.org/content/qtihw3p4kx/qtihw3p4kx no-Splash 4f962930e2674c424d879dde6a64aaif.pdf?t=gecxpo</a>.

Siemerling, Winfried. 2005. *The New North American Studies: Culture, Writing and the Politics of Re/Cognition*. Routledge.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. 2016. "Indigenous Resurgence and Co-Resistance." *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2 (2): 19-34. <a href="https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.2.2.0019">https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.2.2.0019</a>.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2017. As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance. University of Minnesota Press.

Sium, Aman, and Eric Ritskes. 2013. "Speaking Truth to Power: Indigenous Storytelling as an Act of Living Resistance." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2 (1): I-X. Accessed May 17, 2024. <a href="https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/19626/16256">https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/19626/16256</a>.

Sletto, Bjørn, et al. 2021. "Walking, Knowing, and the Limits of the Map: Performing Participatory Cartographies in Indigenous Landscapes." *Cultural Geographies* 28 (4): 611–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740211034479.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books. Epub.

Sneider, Leah. 2016. "Indigenous Feminism." In *The Routledge Companion to Native American Literature*, edited by Deborah L. Madsen. Routledge.

Tally, Robert T., Jr. 2011. "On Literary Cartography: Narrative as a Spatially Symbolic Act." *New American Notes Online* 1. <a href="https://nanocrit.com/issues/issue1/literary-cartog-raphy-narrative-spatially-symbolic-act">https://nanocrit.com/issues/issue1/literary-cartog-raphy-narrative-spatially-symbolic-act</a>.

Tuck, Eve, and Marcia McKenzie. 2015. *Place in Research: Theory, Methodology, and Methods*. Routledge.

Turchi, Peter. 2004. *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer*. Trinity University Press.

Vimalassery, Manu, et al. 2016. "Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing." *Theory & Event* 19 (4). <u>muse.jhu.edu/article/633283</u>.

Vizenor, Gerald. 1981. *Earthdivers: Tribal Narratives on Mixed Descent*. University of Minnesota Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1994. Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance. University of Nebraska Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1998. Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence. University of Nebraska Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2009. *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*. University of Nebraska Press.

Vizenor, Gerald, and A. Robert Lee. 1999. *Postindian Conversations*. University of Nebraska Press.

Warhus, Marc. 1997. Another America: Native American Maps and the History of America. St Martin Griffin.

Washuta, Elissa. 2014. My Body Is a Book of Rules. Red Hen Press.

\_\_\_\_. 2021. White Magic. Tin House.

Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. 1986. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. James Currey.

Whitehead, Joshua. 2022. Making Love with the Land: Essays. Alfred A. Knopf.

Wilkinson, Charles F. 1987. *American Indians, Time, and the Law: Native Societies in a Modern Constitutional Democracy*. University of Yale Press.

Younging, Gregory. 2018. *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing by and about Indigenous Peoples*. Brush Education.

**Hend Ayari** is a PhD student at the Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies, University of Debrecen, Hungary. Her research is oriented around the examination of Native American cultural productions like Native humor in contemporary visual art, the decolonization of representation of Indigenous peoples across various media, and the representation of trauma in the life writing genre, namely Indigenous Native American women-authored memoirs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She earned an MA in Cross-Cultural Poetics from the Higher Institute of Languages in Tunis, University of Carthage in

Hend A	vari
1 1 C I I U 1 1	vuii

2014. She received a Fulbright Teaching and Excellence Achievement (TEA) award at the University of Arkansas in 2020. E-mail: <a href="mailto:ayari.hend@arts.unideb.hu">ayari.hend@arts.unideb.hu</a>

# RESURGENT WATER IN ANISHINAABE STORYTELLING: LEANNE BETASAMOSAKE SIMPSON'S "SHE SANG THEM HOME" AND "BIG WATER"

#### Martina Basciani

John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies (Freie Universität Berlin)

# **ABSTRACT**

Drawing on Indigenous resurgence, the regenerative movement that revitalizes languages, traditions, and cultures while aiming at pan-Indigenous sovereignty, this paper focuses on Nishnaabeg resurgent advocacy and aesthetics. The Nishnaabeg (Ojibwe, Michi Saagiig, Chippewa, Algonquin, Salteaux, and Odawa) are a transnational Indigenous people whose ancestral land spreads across the two sides of the US-Canada border. Due to the several freshwaters that cross Nishnaabeg land, colonial dispossession and extractivism in this region have systematically affected bodies of water. Water symbolism is also present in the aandisokaanan, the traditional creation stories of the Nishnaabeg inspired by the land and revived through land-based practices. Finally, the Nishnaabeg resurgent advocacy is deeply soaked into water, as evidenced by the Mother Earth Water Walks (MMEW) movement. Inspired by cultural reinvigoration and political advocacy, Nishnaabeg artists continue to generate dibaajimowinan, new stories of resurgence, in which water still constitutes a fil rouge. Given these premises, this paper presents two Nishnaabeg water stories by Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who contributed to the resurgent scholarship by theorizing Radical Resurgence (2017a). Engaging with water symbolism, the first section analyzes Simpson's song "She Sang Them Home" published in her debut collection Islands of Decolonial Love (2015). Focusing on the author's use of code-switching, whereby the Nishnaabeg language is inserted without translation in the poetic flow, this section meditates on resurgent "storied waterscapes" (Oppermann, 2023). Adopting a hydrofeminist perspective (Neimanis, 2017), the second section presents Simpson's short story "Big Water" from the collection This Accident of Being Lost (2017b). Reflecting on Nishnaabeg ecofeminism, ethical human/non-human relationships in the story are thus framed as "bodies of water" (Neimanis, 2009; 2017). Proposing an alternative to the anthropocentric dominant discourse about wet matter, Simpson's fluid poetics suggest an alternative ethical relationship with water to envision new livable futures.

**Keywords:** Nishnaabeg storytelling; resurgent water; Blue Humanities; settler colonialism; Anthropocene.

#### INTRODUCTION

Power moved, and some pieces became the first seals. Power moved, and other pieces became walruses. Power moved, and still more became the whales.

—Qitsualik-Tinsley et al., How Things Came to Be: Inuit Stories of Creation

I am a bigger threat to the Canadian state and its plans to build pipelines across my body, clear-cut my forests, contaminant my lakes with toxic cottages and chemicals ...
—Simpson, As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance

Martina Basciani |

In Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence (2011), Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson compares resurgence to throwing a stone into water. "The stone makes its initial impact in the water, displacing it and eventually sinking to the bottom" and, while the act *per se* ends as the stone disappears in water, the aftereffects of that initial throw remain on the surface in the form of concentric circles for a much longer period of time (Simpson 2011, 145).

Water imagery has historically and symbolically shaped the resistance enacted by the Nishnaabeg, the Indigenous people that reside around the Great Lakes and in the Boundary Waters region across the Canada-United States national border (Johnston 2006, 5). If Boundary Waters refers specifically to the area between Ontario and Minnesota, Nishnaabeg land encompasses also southern Manitoba in Canada and northern Wisconsin and Michigan in the US and is covered by the 1923 Williams Treaties (Simpson 2011, 14).<sup>1</sup>

In North America and worldwide, Indigenous people have resisted through centuries of colonial dispossession, extractivism, and cultural genocide. As a territory gifted with several rivers, lakes, and wetlands, in Nishnaabeg land colonial and neocolonial violence have systematically passed through water. Ongoing hydrocolonialism (Hofmeyr 2021) in this region was originally instantiated in the 1830s by the Trent-Severn Waterway, an ambitious hydrographic project aimed at facilitating transport between Lake Ontario and Lake Huron, including several freshwaters in the area (Angus 1988, 9). Recognized nowadays as a massive failure of colonial engineering, the Trent-Severn Waterway altered the delicate ecosystem of the Great Lakes region, leading to salmon

-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Nishnaabeg (along with its variants Anishinaabeg, Anishinabuek, etc.) as a term refers to the Ojibwe, Michi Saagiig (Mississauga), Saulteaux, Algonquin, Odawa (Ottawa), and Chippewa. Often broadly addressed as "Ojibwe" (or "Ojibway") due to a historical mistranslation, the Nishnaabeg encompass several nations politically organized in a doodem system. In 1923, Canada coerced the First Nations of the Chippewa of Lake Simcoe and the First Nations of the Michi Saagiig of northern Ontario into signing the William Treaties, resulting in the loss of hunting and fishing rights. Although dispossession and extractivism had been ongoing for over a century, the William Treaties ultimately terminated Nishnaabeg right of sovereignty on land. On doodem political system, see Bohaker 2020; on the William Treaties and Nishnaabeg land, see Blair 2008; Williams 2018.

extinction and wild rice beds destruction, thus provoking famine among the Nishnaabeg (Whetung 2016, 65).

Influenced by the geographical composition of their land, Nishnaabeg oral storytelling is deeply soaked into the territory's wet matter. One famous example is the (re)creation story of the great flood, transcribed by Ojibwe Elder and knowledge-keeper Edward Benton-Banai (1988, 30-34). According to this *aandisookaan* (traditional story), after the Creator sent a purifying flood upon the planet to wash away evil sentiments and riots, Waynaboozhoo² and the animals joined their forces to create Mother Earth anew. After various attempts, the muskrat eventually managed to grab a handful of mud from the bottom of the sea, which, once placed upon the back of the turtle, created Turtle Island as the Nishnaabeg land that is known today.

Through repetition and cross-generational transmission, Nishnaabeg "poetics of water" (Mentz in Oppermann 2017, 13) serve as a counter-narrative to imperialistic and individualistic approaches to wet matter and the Anthropocene,<sup>3</sup> which conceive of bodies of water as doomed. In Indigenous resurgence—the regenerative movement of cultures, languages, and traditions that aspires to Indigenous sovereignty—the act of telling stories is political before cultural. As carriers of ancestral knowledge, creation stories preserve traditional teachings from the effects of cognitive imperialism (Simpson 2011, 32) and provide "the ontological and epistemological framework" for political advocacy (40). Retrieved from sacred stories, symbols, and meanings of water interweave Nishnaabeg culture and politics as "interdependent, cogenerators of knowledge" (Simpson 2017a, 20), and continue to generate new stories.

\_

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Waynaboozhoo, also addressed as Nanabozho or Nanabush/Nanapush, is a well-known spirit in Nishnaabeg creation stories often associated to the folkloristic archetype of the trickster. In storytelling, Nanabush is often depicted as a humorous being who creates problems or engages with the rest of creation to give birth to Indigenous worlds. As a co-creator, Nanabush was sent to the Earth by Gitchie Manitoo to name all the plants and the animals. Although typically addressed with masculine pronouns (he/his/him), Nanabush is a gender-fluid figure and a shapeshifter. For reference and Nanabozho stories see Johnston 1976; Benton-Banai 1988; and Simpson 2011.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Proposed in May 2019 by the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) as a distinct geological era instantiated by the Great Acceleration following World War II, Anthropocene emphasizes the catastrophic effects of human activity on the planet leading to ongoing pollution and species extinction.

# Martina Basciani |

Alongside *aadizookaanan*<sup>4</sup> (traditional legends and ceremonies), Nishnaabeg scholar Wendy Makoons Geniusz defines *dibaajimowinan* as "teachings, ordinary stories, personal stories, histories" (2009, 11). Both terms refer to the realm of storytelling but differentiate between the collective and the individual, sacred and daily dimensions. According to Simpson (2011), rather than being in opposition to one another, *dibaajimowinan* are "an echo" of *aandisookaanan* (46). Since theory and praxis—stories and advocacy—are deeply entangled, *dibaajimowinan*—personal, everyday stories of resurgence—encompass both contemporary histories of political engagement and modern storytelling.

Water protection is a central feature of Indigenous resurgence in North America. In 2019, the Yurok Tribe (California) legally granted the Klamath River personhood rights. Their example was followed two years later by the Innu Council of Ekuanitshit, which formally bestowed personhood rights upon the Magpie River in northeastern Ontario. In British Columbia, the Wet'suwet'en are opposing the Coastal GasLink Pipeline (CGL), which was approved without considering Indigenous sovereignty and constitutes a new environmental threat. In North Dakota, the Sioux of Standing Rock have established a social movement to oppose the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) (Dennis & Bell 2020). In the Great Lakes region, pacific water protection is represented by the Mother Earth Water Walk (MEWW). Founded by late Elder Josephine Mandamin in 2003, MEWW is a women-led social movement that seeks to attain global attention on ecological damage while revitalizing the role of Nishnaabeg women as water protectors (McGregor 2015). Mandamin's mission is continued by her niece, Chief Water Commissioner Autumn Peltier, who has advocated for water rights since 2016, when at the age of twelve she publicly confronted Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau about his support for pipelines. In Nishnaabeg resurgent advocacy, water symbolism finally shapes also commemorative ceremonies for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Aandisokaanan in Simpson 2011.

Women (MMIW),<sup>5</sup> where copper water pots are distributed to acknowledge water as a witness of violence.

Inspired by the revitalization of cultures, languages, and traditions and by the political advocacy, Indigenous writers and artists are continuing to generate new artistic configurations that echo creation stories and amplify Indigeneity in the present. Given the extraordinary value of water symbolism in Nishnaabeg culture and colonial history, contemporary storytelling uses water meanings to expose the replication of hydroimperialism (Hofmeyr 2017) in settler colonial societies. Contributing to the deconstruction of anthropocentric narratives of wet matter, Nishnaabeg "storied waterscapes" (Oppermann 2023) propose a decolonial alternative grounded in ethical relationality and minobiimadiziwin—the good life (Simpson 2011).

Given the above, this paper presents two works drawn from Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's fiction that play with water meanings in Nishnaabeg tradition and aesthetics. Engaging with the resurgent political agenda, these storied waterscapes expose Canada's complicity with ongoing hydroimperialism, and propose Indigenous internationalism (Simpson 2017a) as a networked ethical relationality with the human and nonhuman world. Published in the collection *Islands of Decolonial Love* (2015), the first storied waterscape is Simpson's poem "She Sang Them Home" in which the author switches between English and Anishinaabemowin (the Nishnaabeg language) and uses salmon symbolism to confront questions such as sovereignty, ethical relationality, and (re)mapping (Vizenor 1999). Shifting genre, the second storied waterscape is Simpson's short story "Big Water" from *This Accident of Being Lost* (2017b). Drawing on Neimanis's hydrofeminism (2017), this analysis reflects on the traditional connection between *nibi* and *kwe*—water and femininity—in Nishnaabeg culture.

\_

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), also referenced as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), and Two-Spirit people (MMIWG2S) is a pan-Indigenous social movement sparked across the Americas, New Zealand, and Australia in response to the waves of gender violence against Indigenous female and queer bodies, an ongoing phenomenon which stems from settler colonial history. The expression refers both to gender violence and to the relevant advocacy. For reference see Deer 2015; Lavell-Harvard & Brant 2016; Hargreaves 2017; and McDiarmid 2019.

# Martina Basciani |

To be sure, understanding Nishnaabeg ecocritics along with its ecofeminist tradition presupposes internal positionality. As a White European researcher, I cannot claim full comprehension of Indigenous worldviews and aesthetics because of our different histories, knowledge systems, and geographical contexts. Some feminisms, for instance, are particularly critical of the femininity-nature knot, which in Nishnaabeg resurgent practices and artistic configurations emerges as both shared destiny and gendered responsibility. Nonetheless, Nishnaabeg ecofeminism does not align with an essentialist view of gender difference; nor has the conceptualization of the femininity-nature nexus anything to do with the "ecological Indian" stereotype (Krech quoted in Neimanis 2017, 174). Rather, gendered responsibility here translates into the revitalization of women's centrality within their community (McGregor 2015, 73). By restoring their role as water protectors, Nishnaabeg women rescind their colonialist and patriarchal relegation at the edge of society and re-appropriate political advocacy. Occupying the frontline of resurgence, Nishnaabeg women and girls revitalize culture and tradition, while continuing to generate new Indigenous storied waterscapes.

# (RE)BIRTH BY WATER

Mixing poetry and prose, song, and essay, in *Islands of Decolonial Love* (2015) Leanne Betasamosake Simpson creates a Nishnaabeg universe in which spirits, animals, bodies of water, and ancestors negotiate their existence through ongoing violence, threat, and dispossession. Traveling back and forth between cities and reservations, paddling canoes across flowing rivers, and populating also digital environments, the spirits make their return from the precolonial past bringing exterminated species along with them and re-establishing Turtle Island in the present. Included in a fourfold section entitled *nogojiwanong* ("place at the foot of the rapids," the Anishinaabe name for the city of Peterborough), "She Sang Them Home" is an ode to water voiced by the first salmon who returns to Nishnaabeg land. Alternating between English and Anishinaabemowin,

.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> See Simpson 2017a, 95-118.

Simpson describes the salmon's reversed journey along the waterway in a *crescendo* that marks the fish's resurgence along with the liberation of the distressed freshwaters.

Embedded in the hydrocolonial history that has afflicted Nishnaabeg land since the construction of the Trent-Severn Waterway, salmon is a recurring figure in Nishnaabeg storytelling. According to Simpson (2011), "there is a convergence between the complex ways Nishnaabeg and salmon organize themselves, govern themselves, and mobilize" (87-88). Mobilization, intended both as physical migration and political advocacy, is the resilient approach which has enabled Nishnaabeg people and culture to survive the most catastrophic phases of the Colonial Age. In particular, the Great Migration is recounted in an oral story known as The Seven Fires Prophecy. According to this *aandisokaan*, seven prophets came to the Nishnaabeg in a time of flourishment, bringing prophecies about the future and a warning against the coming white people. They predicted an epic migration that would take over five hundred years to complete, and that would stretch Nishnaabeg ancestral land from the east coast of Turtle Island to the western shores of the Great Lakes. This epic mobilization, whereby Nishnaabeg nations were spread across a much wider territory, stands as a testament for survival.

Similarly, salmon's migration involves overcoming predators, dams, and natural barriers in their upstream route to find their natal grounds. Hatching in freshwater streams and migrating to the ocean to ultimately return to their spawning streams, salmon stands as a symbol of the metaphorical cycle of life, death, and re-birth, embodying Nishnaabeg resurgence. Kinship emerges from the first stanza of the poem, in which the poetic voice embodied in the salmon salutes the river as a newfound friend:

bozhoo odenaabe shki maajaamegos ndizhinaakaz it's been a long time. (124)

81

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> The big Nishnaabeg migration is referenced in a famous sacred story known as the *Seven Fires Prophecy* (Benton-Banai 1988, 90-94 and Simpson 2011, 65-66).

At the core of the Trent-Severn Waterway, the Otonabee River runs for fifty-five kilometers from Rice Lake to Katchewanooka Lake in Ontario, embracing the landscapes that inspired Susanna Moodie's colonialist depiction of the wilderness in her 1852 memoir *Roughing It in the Bush*. As Simpson (2011) explains, Otonabee is the English translation for *Odenabe*, a term that refers both to *ode* ("heart") and *odemgat* ("boiling water"); other interpretations lead to *oodena* ("city") and *Odaenauh* ("nation"), hence describing "the place where the hearts gather" or "our nation as an interconnected web of hearts" (94).

From the Otonabee river, in the midst of the waters constricted by the locks of the waterway, the journey begins. Accompanied by Cris Derksen in the instrumental version, the song is a stream of consciousness that blends English and Anishinaabemowin. The internal narrator is the first salmon returning to Nishnaabeg land guided by *nibi*—the water. Saluting the river in Anishinaabemowin, the narrator presents herself with her Nishnaabeg name—shki maajaamegos ndizhinaakaz, "my name is new trout that leaves (salmon)" (2015, 126). Hence, she proceeds by telling the river, her interlocutor, about her ancestry:

my kobade told her daughter about that feeling my great grandmother told her daughter my kookum told her daughter and my doodoom told me. (124)

Lineage is central in Nishnaabeg resurgence. As a regenerative movement that seeks answers "from within Nishnaabeg thought" (Simpson 2011, 31), resurgence is grounded upon ancestral teachings which, carried by *aandisokaanan*, are updated to the present time. As theorists of resurgence often remark, the revitalization of Indigeneity comes with land-based practices, and, as such, requires land. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard expresses the connection between land and knowledge as "grounded normativity" (2014, 13), i.e., the set of land-based instructions that are intergenerationally transmitted, thus ethically informing human/non-human relations. Analogously, Simpson's (2014) "land as pedagogy" (11) suggests that Nishnaabeg knowledge is built "through a compassionate web of interdependent relationships" between bodies, land, and spirits. In the same

concern, Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred presents a cultural restoration plan which promotes "experiential learning over a sustained period of interaction on the land" through practices such as "water, fishing, and the use of the river" (141).

The fourfold articulation of "told" in the stanza emphasizes the act of transmitting teachings from one generation to the next. This imagery is reinforced by the cadenced rhythm and the verb's cyclic repetition in each verse, further facilitated by the reiteration of "daughter." In Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg tradition, the intergenerational transmission of knowledge is a gendered process, to the extent that the Seven Grandfather Teachings are called "'Kokum Dibaajimowinan,' *Grandmother* teachings" (Simpson 2011, 125). Besides "daughter" the actors in the stanza are all feminine figures: "great grandmother," "kokoom" ("grandmother"), "doodoom" ("mama" or "my breastfeeder"), embraced by "kobade" at the beginning of the stanza, which roughly translates into "lineage" (Simpson 2015, 126).

Therefore, both knowledge transmission and resurgence are represented as entirely feminine processes. While the gender of the narrator (the salmon) is never disclosed, the logical *consecutio* of the stanza depicting a fully feminine lineage ("great grandmother" – "grandmother" – "mother" – "daughter") suggests that a woman is speaking. Instead of venturing in speculations on salmon biology, the gendered narration possibly mirrors the author's own gender through a narrative device that is typical of Indigenous storytelling. As Simpson (2011) explains, personal stories—*dibaajimowinan*—reflect and echo stories of creation—*aandisokaanan*. When a story is told, "we are taught to insert ourselves in the story," so that the narrator is "not just any 'First Person,' but […] me, or you" (40-41).

bubbling beating birthing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> In Anishinaabe spirituality, a set of instructions that lead to *mino-bimaadiziwin* (the good life). Stemming from a traditional story, these teachings are often associated to dodemag as follows: Wisdom (Beaver), Love (Eagle), Humility (Wolf), Respect (Buffalo), Bravery (Bear), Truth (Turtle), and Honesty (Raven). For reference see Benton-Banai 1988; Simpson 2011; and Simpson 2017a.

As acknowledged in postcolonial studies, "polydialectical writers" resort to code-switching to revitalize their endangered language by "installing cultural distinctiveness in the writing" (Ashcroft et al. 2022, 71). Besides maintaining "the writer's resistance to English as the only public language" (Bidwell 2010, 290) by subtly inserting Anishinaabemowin in the narrative flow, the author recreates a sense of community and defines her audience. Cherokee writer Thomas King, author of *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), refers to this device as "Rez English" (English from the reservation) and defines "interfusional literature" as narrative that blends oral and written culture (1990, 192). Admittedly, Simpson's work is always addressed first and foremost to Nishnaabeg people (Simpson 2017a, 35) because language revitalization is more an indication of a political transformative project than it is an act aimed at cultural reinvigoration (50). Strengthening one's sense of community through language, thus, means to reappropriate identity and to envision independence, with the aim of ultimately regaining sovereignty.

While "selective lexical fidelity" (Ashcroft et al. 2002, 63)—the act of leaving untranslated words in the text—is common in Simpson's writing, including the song under analysis, the quatrain above restores Anishinaabemowin without breaking from the linguistic frame. In her etymological exploration of Otonabee (*Odenabe*), Simpson (2011) defines the river as a "bubbling" and "beating heart" in connection to its Anishinaabe name (*Ode*—"the heart") (93-95). Therefore, the ritualistic repetition of "bubbling" and "beating" in the stanza ultimately discards the settler colonial landscape, thus restoring the river's original name and identity. Opened by the onomatopoeic "bubbling" and "beating" the four alliterative diameters additionally describe the salmon's (re)birthing process underwater. Rhythm and repetition, further reinforced by the reiteration of the quatrain (twice in the poem and eight times in its musicalized version), sharpen the idea of echo and circularity introduced in the previous stanza through lineage.

Once Odenabe's identity is restored, the narrator proceeds on her journey along the waterway and renames all the freshwaters, echoing Nanaboozhoo's creation of the world. The first stanza describes salmon's traditional journey along the waterway, departing from Chi'Nibiish (Lake Ontario), passing through Trent River and Rice Lake to

end up in Otonabee River, thus swimming up to Katchewanooka Lake and Clear Lake to finally reach Asin Saagegun (Stoney Lake) in Peterborough County. Through naming, the narrator liberates the troubled freshwaters from the locks imposed by the Trent-Severn Waterway. Hence, the stanza is repeated, this time in a reverse order, to suggest a new journey forward into the future. Using "land as pedagogy" (Simpson 2014), the salmon retrieves Anishinaabemowin along with grounded normativity (Coulthard 2014), and is thus able to travel forth towards resurgence:

chi'nibiish saagetay'achewan pimadashkodeyaang odenaabe kitchi gaming atigmeg zaageguneen asin saagegun

asin saagegun atigmeg zaageguneen kitchi gaming odenaabe pimadashkodeyaang saagetay'achewan chi'nibiish (125)

Following Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman (2013) and Chippewa writer Gerald Vizenor (1999), Simpson (2017a) defines (re)mapping as refusal of colonial spatialities and continuation of Indigeneity through storytelling (195-96). Intended as the restoration of Indigenous nomenclatures and negation of colonial borders, (re)mapping is made possible by aandisookanan that have transmitted ancestral knowledge to the present generations, and which are further echoed and reinforced by the ongoing generation of dibaajimowinan. Hence, stories that question water meanings—"storied water-scapes" (Oppermann, 2023)—serve as a channel for Indigenous counter-narratives which, once surfaced, can deconstruct ongoing hydroimperialism (Hofmeyr 2021), and lead to a resurgence that involves everyone—humans, animals, spirits, and water.

#### **FLUID MANIFESTO**

The second storied waterscape is Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's short story "Big Water," published in her collection *This Accident of Being Lost* (2017b). Fictionalizing her radical resurgence<sup>9</sup> project, already theorized in *As We Have Always Done* (2017a), the collection reproposes the revitalized universe introduced in *Islands of Decolonial Love*. Interweaving poetry and prose with fierce sarcasm, the author's lyric voice ironizes over White upper-middle-class culture and blows up the literary canon to unset the power-structure and re-affirm Nishnaabeg aesthetics. Included in part two, "Big Water" presents a meditative romance where sadness and pain are screamed solely via text-messages, while life proceeds in apathy.

Developing across three paragraphs, the story revolves around the relationship among three women. First, the narrator is the Nishnaabeg storyteller, who interprets meaning while telling the story. In the traditional practice of telling stories, the storyteller is endowed with a hermeneutical function, and is thus simultaneously narrator and commentator. Her role is not limited to the etiological function of connecting causes and effects while leading her characters across the designed route. Rather, she pauses to interpret meanings and symbols, engages the audience, and comments on facts to criticize or support her heroes. As Tedlock (1983) explains, such a dialectical relationship between text and interpretation creates an effect that is specific to Indigenous storytelling, and that can be defined as "hearing hermeneutics" (236). Enacting a trans-mediation of the typical hermeneutical narration device into written storytelling, Simpson obtains the double effect of reinforcing grounded normativity while amplifying Nishnaabeg aesthetics onto the wider literary stage.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Drawing on Glen Coulthard's grounded normativity (2014) and on Audra Simpson's politics of refusal (2014), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017a) theorized Radical Resurgence as a project which "uses Indigenous interrogation, critique, and theory, and the grounded normativity these systems generate" (34) to recenter Indigeneity in response to Reconciliation. In her words, Radical Resurgence "begins from a place of refusal of colonialism and its current settler colonial structural manifestation" and acknowledges the centrality of storytelling by employing "Nishnaabeg story as algorithm" (ibid.). Simpson further clarifies her use of the modifier "Radical" not to intend violent, but rather to suggest that cultural revitalization must go hand in hand with political autonomy (49).

Secondly, Niibish is the central character of the story, as also indicated by the title. "Big Water" is the English translation for Chi'Niibish, the Nishnaabeg name of Lake Ontario which we have already encountered in the previous storied waterscape. Addressed with an affectionate nickname, Niibish is the narrator's friend who is going through an existential crisis. Emerging as a moody, noisy, and somewhat obnoxious character that breaks into the narrator's routine with insisting text messages, Niibish is dealing with anxiety and depression due to ongoing pollution "that washes into her no matter what" (Simpson 2017b, 66). In deep contrast with Niibish's rattling notifications and screaming pain, Kwe is the third character of the story. She is the narrator's lover who appears solely in the opening scene, although her name often recurs in the considerations made by the narrating voice. As a silent character, Kwe's role seems relegated to that of a companion, only portrayed in the act of sleeping or waiting in bed for the narrator to come home. From the narrator's commentary, though, we learn that Kwe is dealing with an urgent crisis that is strictly connected to Niibish's:

Niibish wants to know where I am, why I'm not up yet, why I'm not texting her back, and she'd like my opinion on the stories in the Toronto Star and Vice this morning about the flood. "ARE THEY GETTING IT?" is the second-last text. The last text is another "Where are you? Ffs."

Niibish is mad at me for making her text me instead of doing things the old way and she's right and I promised it's just a tool and that we'll still do things the right way once this crisis is over. (65)

In the opening scene of the story, the narrator is waking up in her condo in Downtown Toronto where she lives with Kwe, a recurring character in Simpson's production often identifying a spirit. <sup>10</sup> Still half-asleep, she checks her phone and finds unceasing notifications on a private message application called "Signal" coming from her friend Niibish. Niibish is upset about the flood news on the two most famous Canadian newspapers and reproaches the narrator for not doing things "the old way." Since Niibish's identity

-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Introduced in the poems and stories of *This Accident of Being Lost* (2017b), Kwe is a fictional character dear to the author, appearing also in her novel *Noopiming: The Cure for White Ladies* (2020). The Anishinaabe word *kwe* is roughly translatable as "woman" and indicates femininity within the broader gender spectrum (Simpson 2017a, 29).

# Martina Basciani |

is still concealed, the passage could simply describe a banal situation between two friends who have not seen each other for a long time. As a *leitmotif* in Nishnaabeg (re)creation stories, though, the word "flood" rings a bell, and immediately transports the reader into the typical death-rebirth loop. This circularity effect is further exacerbated by "crisis" in the following passage. Stemming from the ancient Greek κρίσις ("decision," "discrimination," "crisis"), the term indicates in a more figurative sense also "a turning-point" and "a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent" (*Oxford English Dictionary Online* n.d.). Thus, taken in its metaphorical meaning, "crisis" conveys the two-fold effect of introducing resurgence, while echoing and amplifying aandisookaanan through traditional cyclic symbolism.

In Nishnaabeg flood stories, water rush always comes in response to human misbehavior, as also evidenced by the creation story mentioned in the introduction (Benton-Banai 1988, 30-34), and this story is not different. Lake Ontario/Chi'Niibish is overspilling and threatens to drink up the city of Toronto and its inhabitants. As it is often the case in flood stories, the people gather and use their best skills to solve the imminent crisis. And, as it turns out, settler colonial solutions are not sustainable because they are based on the ongoing colonial relations to land. The settlers interrogate forecasts, hysterically read through data, and proudly display math results because "math is always confident, even when it's dead wrong" (Simpson 2017b, 66). Caught up in their inner dialogue, they forget to listen to Niibish and reach the wrong conclusions. Alone and unheard, Niibish meditates on how to communicate her discomfort to the settlers—"ARE THEY GETTING IT?"—but is ultimately left distressed, grappling with anxiety and depression.

As Oppermann (2023) notices, water symbolism always fluctuates between "life-giving and life-threatening" (52). By centering on human necessities, this ideology results in an endless commodifying loophole that exploits bodies of water. In the story, the settlers' reaction to the imminent flood is coherent with the dominant hydro-

-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> For an extensive discussion on unsustainable settler relations to land, see Liboiron 2021.

imperialistic discourse. Replicating the power structure within cognitive imperialism (Simpson 2011, 32), journalists, scientists and politicians evaluate the possibility of raising walls, placing new locks, further distressing the lake, who painfully ravels in her sadness and runs over her options with Binesiwag (the thunder).

In contrast to the objectifying hydrocolonial narrative, which has transformed freshwaters into "the Anthropocene's postnatural sites" (Oppermann 2023, 42), the caring relationship between the narrator and Chi'Niibish provides a fictionalized embodiment of "watery thinking" (Oppermann 2023, 40). Grounded in ethical relationality, the "thinking with water" paradigm stemming from the aquatic turn in environmental humanities has always been the norm within Nishnaabeg mino-bimaadiziwin (good life) and, more broadly, within Indigenous philosophies. Reflecting on the revitalization of mino-bimaadiziwin, Simpson (2017a) suggests Indigenous internationalism as a transnational network that fosters ethical relations between Indigenous peoples and "with plant nations, animal nations, insects, bodies of water, air, soil, and spiritual beings" (58). Since oceans, seas, and freshwaters are alive beings in Nishnaabeg worldview, it would be incorrect to define Niibish as a personification of Lake Ontario. Rather, Niibish is precisely Lake Ontario, a body of water (Neimanis, 2009, 2017) endowed with a spirit, a physicality, and even an iPhone, pictured along her own journey to resurgence:

We call the lake Chi'Niibish, which means big water, and we share this brilliant peacemaker with the Mohawks. I call her Niibish for short and I'm the one that got her the iphone and taught her how to text. I look out the south-facing window of the condo and see her dense blue. She is full, too full, and she's tipsy from the birth control pills, the plastics, the sewage, and the contraband that washes into her no matter what. She is too full and overflowing and no one saw this coming like no one saw Calgary flooding, even though every single one of us should have. (66)

In Simpson's production, spirits and bodies of water are often portrayed as masters of technology. Arrogantly looking down on the fragilities of modern people, they sit on the passenger's side and demand to pick the music (2017b, 81-84). Settling onto social media, they chaotically spread hashtags and emoticons to coordinate the advocacy. As a body endowed with a spirit and a voice, thus, it should not be surprising that Lake

# Martina Basciani |

Ontario knows how to handle an iPhone and how to send text messages to her human friend. Mingling tradition and contemporaneity, Simpson shapes a heterogeneous universe in which past, present, and future coexist. This time-collapsing process, which Simpson (2017a) identifies with the Anishinaabe term *biskaabiiyang* (2011) or *biiskabiyang*, creates an a-temporal dimension that resembles a decolonial present.<sup>12</sup>

Defined as "an individual process of decolonization and resurgence" and literally translated as "the process of returning to ourselves" (Simpson 2017a, 17), biiskabiyang offers the vision of an alternative future rooted in the recovery of ancestral traditions to sustain Nishnaabeg ways of being in the present. As "an unfolding of a different present" (Simpson 2017a, 18), biiskabiyang resists nostalgia for an idealized pre-colonial past, and rather focuses on the present and future of Indigeneity. As for the hermeneutical function of the narrator discussed at the beginning of this section, time-collapse is a rhetorical device of Indigenous storytelling, both in its oral and written forms. Tedlock (1983) defines as "frame-breaking" the approach whereby the time of the plot and the time of the story are paired by the storyteller by inserting elements of the present in the past (292). Similarly, Clifford (2013) notices that in Indigenous storytelling "the past, materialized in land and ancestors, is always new" (25). And in this alternative Nishnaabeg world where spirits meet social media, Chi'Niibish recovers her identity as a "body of water" (Neimanis 2017).

Drawing on Haraway's cyborg theory (1985), Neimanis (2017) introduces the concept of "body of water" to emphasize our "more than human hydrocommons" (2). Discarding the phallogocentric viewpoint that portrays *man* as self-sufficient, Neimanis underlines how human bodies are dependent on bodies of water for their life, and thus intrinsically connected with the destiny of planetary waters. Since the biological composition of human bodies primarily consists of wet matter, "we are bodies of water" or, as Neimanis (2017) asserts following Virginia Woolf, "there are tides in the body" (1-2).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Grace Dillon similarly theorized this time-collapse as "Indigenous slipstream", intended as "viewing time as pasts, presents, and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream is central to Native epistemologies" (Dillon 2012, 345).

Moreover, bodies of water are the watery relations that we necessarily establish with the fluid world. Drinking, leaking, weeping, birthing, bleeding, among other human activities, make us bodies of water that grow symbiotic ties with other bodies of water. Through Neimanis' hydrofeminist view, the relationship between Chi'Niibish and the narrator, unfolding via text messages and deep care, can be understood as a body of water itself.<sup>13</sup> The core of the story is precisely constituted by positive and negative human-water relations, and the binary opposition siding the Nishnaabeg narrator on the one hand, and the settlers on the other, is sharp and definite.

She's not angry even though she looks angry. She is full. She is full of sad. She wants us to see her, to see what we're doing to her, and change. That's the same thing that Kwe wants, so I know both the problem and the solution, and I know how much brave solutions like these require. (66)

The passage above constitutes a clear example for the narrator's hermeneutical voice, interpreting and explaining meanings as the story unfolds. Commenting on the settler approaches to the incumbent flood, the narrator interprets Niibish's feelings along with the ecological causes behind the crisis. Amplifying the voice of the lake, the narrating voice takes up her role as water protector and speaks up to the wider audience inviting a change in our watery relations. Thus, the natural stream of her consciousness brings her to compare Niibish's existential crisis to Kwe's own sufferance, in a parallelism that binds together two ongoing plights.

It is not by chance that, in analyzing Nishnaabeg artist and performer Rebecca Belmore's 2005 video installation *Fountain*,<sup>14</sup> Neimanis (2017) mentions that art too can be a body of water (153). Deconstructing those "Enlightenment figures of coherent and masterful subjectivity" (Haraway 1992, 48), artistic and literary bodies of water boost ethical alternatives to our fluid relations that the dominant discourse has deliberately

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> The relationship among the three characters (human-spirit-lake) could be tackled also through the lens of queerness, a question which was deliberately not addressed here in coherence with the selected approach. For an extensive discussion on the topic see Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson 2010.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson celebrates Rebecca Belmore both in her *As We Have Always Done* (2017a, 203) and in her poem "smallpox, anyone" (2015, 33-36).

marginalized and excluded. Drawing on the connection between femininity and water in Anishinaabe worldview, Neimanis (2017) concludes that in Nishnaabeg art "watery relations are also gendered" (173). Stemming from ancestral teachings and carried along by specific responsibility within the community, Nishnaabeg women's role as water protectors also emerges in the contemporary resurgent advocacy.

In her sacred walks around the perimeter of the Great Lakes with the other MEWW water protectors, Elder Josephine Mandamin fostered the sacred bond between women and the earth in Nishnaabeg worldview. Associated to Mother Earth for their reproductive abilities, women are the only ones who carry the copper water pots in the ceremonial walks. Stemming from aandisookanan and transmitted across generations from grandmother, to mother, to daughter, the bond between women and land was further reinforced by colonial history. As Simpson (2017a) explains, the settler conquest of Indigenous land came with the raping and murdering of Indigenous women and girls, instantiating the waves of gender violence that continue to this day (88). While Indigenous bodies in general were an obstacle to the colonial extractivist project due to their spiritual attachment to land, female bodies were particularly targeted as the first enemy. Seen through the lens of patriarchy, Indigenous women were the life-givers able to replicate Indigeneity, giving birth to Indigenous nations and maintaining traditions across generations and, as such, the first enemy to remove.

The connection between environmental violence and gender violence becomes even more obvious in the case of the Wet'suwet'en activists in British Columbia. Fiercely opposing the ongoing construction of the CGL Pipeline, which cuts into the reservation disrupting the community, Wet'suwet'en matriarchs are at the front line in the blockades for water protection. At the center of a sequence of events that has brought to continuous confrontation with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and massarrests, Wet'suwet'en women are facing a double threat. On the one hand, the chemical toxins stemming from industrial development are incessantly tossed into bodies of water, thus also jeopardizing the residents' health. On the other hand, gender violence flows undisturbed across several workers' camps that are situated along the pipeline construction sites, resulting in increasing cases of rape, murder, and human trafficking.

The gendered dimension of Indigenous water advocacy further resonates with Neimanis's hydrofeminism. In "Big Water" the three Nishnaabeg women embodied in the storyteller, the lake, and the spirit/lover constitute three bodies of water that walk through a common resurgence while nurturing positive relationships. Echoing the famous *aandisookan* about the first big flood which, despite its initial catastrophic premises eventually led to a period of stability among the Nishnaabeg, this *dibaajimowin* envisions a new emergence of Indigeneity toward new livable futures for Niibish and *kwe*. Proposing a positive watery relation through the caring connection between the narrator and the lake, alongside the silent bound between Niibish and Kwe, Simpson's second storied waterscape suggests a counter-narrative to the Anthropocene's "doom-soaked stories" (Solnit quoted in Oppermann 2023, 40).

#### **CONCLUSION**

As fluid poetics, "She Sang Them Home" and "Big Water" by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson introduce readers to a Nishnaabeg decolonized universe in which our watery relations are questioned and reproposed in an alternative and ethical vision. The first section of this paper "(Re)birth by water" has provided an analysis of Simpson's song "She Sang Them Home" (2015). Building upon aquatic symbolism and radical refusal of hydroimperialism, the author imagines the first salmon who returns to Nishnaabeg land when the locks of the fatal Trent-Severn Waterway will be finally released. Echoing Haraway, the second section of this paper ("Fluid Manifesto") has analyzed Simpson's short story "Big Water" as a contemporary piece of storytelling which translates specific rhetorical devices into the written medium to amplify Nishnaabeg culture.

With the aim to deconstruct individualistic and exploitative narratives around wet matter, the ongoing conversation in the Blue Humanities encourages new stories that address water beyond the Anthropocene paradigm. Refusing Western extractivist approaches, Indigenous art, fiction, and advocacy reinvigorate that "relational thinking" (Chen et al. quoted in Oppermann 2023, 12) with bodies of water that stems from ancestral knowledge and traditional land-based practices. Both the two storied water-scapes analyzed in this essay build upon (positive and negative) relationships, whereby

locks and walls are politically and artistically opposed through care, song, and kinship. Through art and literature, "storied water reveals itself to the world" (Chen et al. quoted in Oppermann 2023, 49), shifting focus from the human to the non-human.

Interlacing English and Anishinaabemowin, "She Sang Them Home" describes a double journey, back to tradition and forward into the future, in a *crescendo* that culminates in resurgence. Through the Anishinaabe language, the distressed freshwaters are liberated from their status of placeless, dispossessed "modern water" (Neimanis 2017, 19) and reconstituted as kin, spiritual entities. Weaving the relationship between humans and non-humans in the form of a body of water (Neimanis 2009, 2017), "Big Water" presents an instance of care, love, and friendship between the Nishnaabeg storyteller and Chi'Niibish/Lake Ontario. Retrieving flood narratives from traditional storytelling, the story deconstructs hydrocolonial conceptualization of water "as spaces for aesthetic and spiritual contemplation, or as unpredictable, formidable enemies that need to be subjugated" (Oppermann 2023, 6). Adopting a hydrofeminist (Neimanis 2017) perspective, the story ultimately connects ecological crisis and gender violence as one unique plight.

Given their capability of acting as counter-narratives to water-related dominant discourses, Nishnaabeg storied waterscapes contribute to the blue turn in the environmental humanities. Engaging with the Anthropocene paradigm, which emphasizes the catastrophic effects of human activities on the planet, the Blue Humanities question how literature and the arts can suggest alternative and ethical ways for our watery relations (Neimanis 2017). The mission of the aquatic turn, thus, involves liberating water imagery from Anthropogenic "doom-soaked stories" (Solnit quoted in Oppermann 2023, 40), which replicate a victimizing representation of waterscapes as destined to perdition. Conversely, Nishnaabeg fluid poetics give voice to Indigenous traditional ways of "thinking with water" (Oppermann 2023, 40), hence proposing a lively alternative to individual narratives. Providing an example of ethical relationship with planetary waters, Nishnaabeg storied waterscapes help envision livable futures for humans, animals, and bodies of water beyond Anthropogenic pessimism.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Alfred, Gerald T. 2014. "The Akwesasne Cultural Restoration Program: A Mohawk Approach to Land-Based Education." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, Society* 33:134-44.

Angus, James T. 1988. *A Respectable Ditch: A History of the Trent-Severn Waterway,* 1833-1920. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. 2002. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Second Edition. Routledge.

Benton-Banai, Edward. 1988. *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway*. Indian Country Communications.

Bidwell, Kristina (Fagan). 2015. "Code-Switching Humour in Aboriginal Literature." In *Introduction to Indigenous Literary Criticism in Canada*, edited by Heather Macfarlane and Armand Garnet Ruffo. Broadview Press.

Blair, Peggy J. 2008. Lament for a First Nations: The William Treaties of Southern Ontario. UBC Press.

Bohaker, Heidi. 2020. *Doodem and Council Fire: Anishinaabe Governance through Alliance*. University of Toronto Press.

Clifford, James. 2013. *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century*. Harvard University Press.

Coulthard, Glen S. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. University of Minnesota Press.

Deer, Sarah 2015. The Beginning and the End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America. University of Minnesota Press.

Dennis, Mary. K. and Finn McLafferty Bell. 2020. "Indigenous Women, Water Protectors, and Reciprocal Responsibilities." *Social Work* 654: 378-86. Accessed March 23, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swaa033.

Dillon, Grace. 2012. "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms." In *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, edited by Grace Dillon. University of Arizona Press.

Fachinger, Petra. 2022. "Anishinaabemowin in Indianland, *The Marrow Thieves*, and *Crow Winter* as a Key to Cultural and Political Resurgence." *Indigenous Literary Arts of Truth and Redress / Arts littéraires autochtones de vérité et de réparation* 462:127-49. Accessed March 23, 2024. https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/32911

Martina Basciani |

Geniusz, Wendy. D. 2009. *Our Knowledge Is Not Primitive: Decolonizing Botanical Anishinaabe Teachings*. Syracuse University Press.

Goeman, Mishuana. 2013. *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*. University of Minnesota Press.

Haraway, Donna. 1985. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Socialist Review* 80:65-108.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1992. "Ecce Homo, Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape." In *Feminists Theorize the Political*, edited by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. Routledge.

Hargreaves, Allison. 2017. Violence Against Indigenous Women: Literature, Activism, Resistance. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Hofmeyr, Isabel. 2021. *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House.* Duke University Press.

Johnston, Basil. 1976. Ojibway Heritage. McClelland and Stewart.

Johnston, Darlene. 2006. "Connecting People to Place: Great Lakes Aboriginal History in Cultural Context." In *Ipperwash Inquiry*. Ministry of Attorney General. Accessed March 23, 2024. https://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/e\_records/ipperwash/closing\_submissions/pdf/AazhoodenaAndGeorgeFamilyGroup\_ClosingSubmissions.pdf.

King, Thomas. 1990. "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial." World Literature Written in English, 302:10-16.

Lavell-Harvard, D. Memee and Jennifer Brant (2016). Forever Loved: Exposing the Hidden Crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Canada. Demeter Press.

Liboiron, Max. 2021. *Pollution is Colonialism*. Duke University Press.

McDiarmid, Jessica. 2019. Highway of Tears: A True Story of Racism, Indifference and the Pursuit of Justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Doubleday Canada.

McGregor, Deborah. 2015. "Indigenous Women, Water Justice and zaagidowin (Love)." *Canadian Women Studies* 30 (2-3): 71-78.

Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona and Bruce Erickson, eds. 2010. *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Indiana University Press.

Neimanis, Astrid. 2009. "Bodies of Water, Human Rights and the Hydrocommons." *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 21:161-82.

Resurgent Water in Anishinaabe Storytelling
2017. Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology. Environmental Cultures Series. Bloomsbury.
Qitsualik-Tinskey, Rachel and Sean. 2015. How Things Came to Be: Inuit Stories of Creation. Illustrated by Patricia A. Lewis-MacDougall and Emily Fiegenschuh. Inhahit Media Inc.
Oppermann, Serpil. 2023. <i>Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene</i> . Cambridge University Press.
Simpson, Audra. 2014. <i>Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States</i> . Duke University Press.
Simpson, Leanne B. 2011. Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence. ARP Books.
2014. "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation." <i>Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, Society</i> 33:1-25.
2015. Islands of Decolonial Love: Stories and Songs. ARP Books.
2017a. As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance. University of Minnesota Press.
2017b. This Accident of Being Lost: Songs and Stories. House of Anansi Press.
2020. Noopiming: The Cure for White Ladies. University of Minnesota Press.
Tedlock, Dennis. 1983. The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation. University of

Pennsylvania Press.

Vizenor, Gerald. 1999. Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance. University of Nebraska Press.

Whetung, Madeline. 2016. "Nishnaabeg Encounters: Living Indigenous Landscapes." PhD diss., University of Toronto.

Williams, Doug (Gidigaa Migizi). 2018. *Michi Saaqiiq Nishnaabeq: This is Our Territory*. Arp Books.

Martina Basciani is a doctoral student at the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. She holds an MA in Modern, Postcolonial, and Comparative Literatures from the University of Bologna and a second MA in International Migration and Ethnic Relations from Malmö University. Her research centers on Anishinaabe resurgent storytelling and seeks to develop a decolonial theory of world literature that allows for the study of Indigenous literatures in a way that honors consent and cultural diversity. As a non-Indigenous scholar, she approaches these



# ACROSS CONTINENTS AND GENERATIONS: FADING FAMILY HISTORY IN YAA GYASI'S HOMEGOING

# Nicole Bernardi Independent Scholar

#### **ABSTRACT**

This essay explores the transmission and disruption of family history among enslaved individuals and their descendants in Yaa Gyasi's multigenerational novel *Homegoing* (2016). Focusing on Esi's lineage, whose members are transported from their homeland to the United States through the transatlantic slave trade, this study examines how slavery and its legacies not only erase personal and familial history but also complicate the descendants' attempts to reclaim a sense of identity and belonging, leaving many generations disconnected from their ancestral roots. This analysis first investigates the role of communicative memory in preserving family history for enslaved individuals and their descendants, despite the forced separations that impede the transmission of heritage from one generation to the next, thereby severing a crucial link to the family's roots. The second part of the essay addresses how the devastating impact of slavery and its legacies further disrupt the transmission of family history, leaving many characters adrift. The analysis then considers how historical knowledge and symbolic acts, such as journeys to historically significant sites, serve as alternative means for reconnecting with lost heritage, offering some relief from the genealogical alienation imposed by slavery, even when family history remains irretrievable.

Keywords: Homegoing; Yaa Gyasi; family heritage; slavery; African Diaspora; family saga.

# **INTRODUCTION**



Figure 1: Women Chronicle (2018), Reena Saini Kallat. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Professor Elisa Bordin for her valuable feedback and expertise. I also thank my husband, Giovanni, for his support and meticulous proofreading.

In her wall installation *Woven Chronicle* (2018) (figure 1), Indian artist Reena Saini Kallat employs multicolored electric wires to portray the transnational journeys of countless migrants throughout history. By depicting interwoven migration routes that transcend geographical borders and connect distant and diverse locations, Kallat's artwork highlights the global movements of different cultures, languages, and personal experiences. *Woven Chronicle* visually captures a key aspect of migration: as Chamberlain and Leydesdorff (2004) observe, "migrants, perhaps more than many people, are made by their memories of their birthplace, their homeland, those left behind" (228). Along with their belongings, migrants carry personal histories tied to their lineage, including its origins, cultural roots, and narratives related to its members, a set of recollections that can be encapsulated by the expression 'family history,' with "family" defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "a group of persons of common ancestry."<sup>2</sup>

This ancestral background acts as a bridge between migrants' homelands and their host countries, often enduring through its transmission across generations despite the challenges of displacement and diaspora. However, various forces can hinder or entirely sever the transmission of family histories—most notably, the coerced separation of kin, particularly under oppressive systems like slavery. Frederick Douglass ([1855] 2014) poignantly notes that "genealogical trees do not flourish among slaves" (30), highlighting the precariousness of family structures for enslaved individuals in the pre-abolition United States, where their lives were subject to the arbitrary control of their owners. Within such a system, abrupt and permanent separations often occurred (Davis 2006, 201), disrupting the transmission of family history and creating insurmountable gaps in descendants' understanding of their own roots. As a result, today, many descendants of enslaved people are left with no means of tracing their lineage, ultimately facing a genealogical dead end that leads to the loss of family history. Bordin (2014, 4) further emphasizes how the transatlantic and domestic slave trade, the prohibition of legal marriages for slaves, the *partus sequitur ventrem* principle (which tied a child's

-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Similarly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "family" as "those descended or claiming descent from a common ancestor; a lineage."

slave status to that of the mother), and the ever-present threat of sexual violence by slave owners compound the challenges of African American genealogical research, often making it difficult to trace clear family histories and, by extension, cultural heritages.<sup>3</sup>

Several novels set against the backdrop of slavery in the United States have explored the transmission of family history for enslaved individuals and their descendants. Notable works include Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019), and Jesmyn Ward's *Let Us Descend* (2023). A particularly compelling example is Yaa Gyasi's debut novel *Homegoing* (2016), a multigenerational family saga in which genealogical dead ends caused by slavery profoundly shape the lives of its characters.

Born in Mampong, Ghana, in 1989, Gyasi moved to Ohio with her family at the age of two, later settling in Alabama. In her twenties, she returned to Ghana and visited Cape Coast Castle, a key site of the transatlantic slave trade that, from the late 17<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, served as a hub where enslaved Africans were imprisoned before being transported across the Atlantic to the Americas. The castle became a major inspiration for *Homegoing*, fueling an exploration of the devastating impact of slavery and large-scale migrations, and particularly how these events irreparably sever family bonds (Goyal 2020, 478). *Homegoing* follows the lives of fourteen characters, all descendants of Maame, an enslaved woman from a village in present-day Ghana. Maame has two daughters, Effia and Esi, who are born under different circumstances in separate villages. Maame escapes captivity, abandoning newborn Effia, whose descendants remain in Ghana and do not experience forced displacement. After fleeing enslavement, Maame

<sup>-</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> In *Family Tree – A History of Genealogy in America*, historian François Weil (2013) explores the unique challenges African Americans face in tracing their family histories. While it was often possible to trace ancestry back to the 1860s, researching before that period—prior to the abolition of slavery—posed significant difficulties due to the scarcity of records. The advent of the internet provided access to previously unavailable databases, helping "black genealogists bridge a huge gap and *partly* overcome record fragmentation" (200; emphasis added).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Before the formation of modern Ghana, the region was home to various ethnic groups who ruled their respective territories as independent kingdoms. The Asante Empire (referred to as 'Asanteland' in *Homegoing* and throughout this article) was located in what is now central and southern Ghana, while the Fante Confederacy was established along the southern coast. The history of present-day Ghana is complex and deeply shaped by colonialism, and these few lines briefly touch only a portion of such historical landscape.

bears a second child, Esi. Effia and Esi never meet, as their lives take drastically different paths when, at fifteen, Esi is kidnapped, sold into slavery, and taken to a Mississippi plantation; in the United States, Esi's lineage is marked by family separations, which leave her descendants unable to trace their origins and reclaim their heritage due to the lasting and disruptive impact of slavery. Through her narrative, Gyasi explores the enduring legacies of slavery, offering a nuanced portrayal of how family history and heritage can be passed down or lost over generations. As a multigenerational novel, Homegoing captures these dynamics across approximately 250 years, weaving through diverse historical, social, and geographical settings. The storyline opens in Ghana, later shifting to the United States, where she examines the challenges of preserving family history not only in the context of plantation slavery but also in the post-abolition era, when the legacies of slavery continue to hinder the transmission of family heritage, complicating descendants' efforts to reclaim their ancestral connections. In this way, Homegoing reflects a genuine struggle faced by many descendants of enslaved people—a process that, as Clint Smith (2021) notes, leaves them with a deep sense of loss for the history that cannot be fully uncovered.

In line with her desire to give voice to those denied the opportunity to recount their experiences, Gyasi sheds light on the lives of enslaved people whose personal histories and heritages have often been omitted from formal historical records (Chicago Humanities Festival 2016). By intertwining history and fiction, Gyasi engages in a process of reconstruction that aligns with Saidiya Hartman's (2008) concept of "critical fabulation." This technique addresses gaps in historical records, challenging the limits of the archives by creating imaginative narratives that re-envision the lives of individuals, particularly enslaved people, whose experiences and emotions cannot be fully documented or verified. Hartman (2008) explains that critical fabulation, particularly when recounting slavery and the lives of captives, is not aimed at recovering or redeeming their lives, but rather at constructing as complete a picture of their experiences as possible by merging a critical reading of the archival materials with fictional narrative (11). Through critical fabulation, *Homegoing* provides a more holistic depiction of the past, filling the emotional voids left by official historical records and capturing the

complexities of history and its emotional resonance across generations. In this sense, literature plays a vital role in preserving and transmitting cultural and historical awareness, shaping how readers perceive the past, present, and future while encouraging deeper reflection on history itself (Erll 2011).

Focusing on Esi's descendants—the family branch continuing in the United States as part of the African diaspora—this article investigates how slavery and racial oppression not only erase familial history but also complicate the descendants' attempts to reclaim a sense of identity and belonging, addressing a gap in current scholarship. In fact, while several studies have explored the transmission of trauma related to slavery in *Homegoing*, the analysis of family history and heritage transmission has often been overlooked.<sup>5</sup> However, investigating this aspect offers valuable insights into the profound and lasting effects of slavery and its legacies on contemporary identities, while also highlighting the broader challenges of reclaiming heritage in post-slavery contexts. The essay's first section examines the transmission of family history through communicative memory, revealing how this process enables a connection to family roots and heritage. The second section explores how slavery and its legacies can obliterate family history, leaving individuals disconnected from their heritage, with much of it rendered irretrievable. The last section discusses how, in the absence of family history, broader historical knowledge can help bridge this gap, offering a sense of identity grounded in a shared past.

#### RESILIENT FAMILY HISTORY: SURVIVING THROUGH DISPLACEMENT

Esi, a young Asante woman captured by Fante slave traders in her village, imprisoned in the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle, and ultimately shipped to a Mississippi plantation, exemplifies the profound challenges of preserving and transmitting family history

\_

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> See Laura Dawkins's "They are not only one; they're two, and three, and four": Building a Trauma Community in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2023); Marijana Mikić's "Race, Trauma, and the Emotional Legacies of Slavery in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*" (2022); Dirk van Rens's "This Ain't the Way It's S'posed to Be': Negotiating Trauma Through Postmemory and Implication in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*" (2023).

# Nicole Bernardi |

under the institution of slavery. Despite her forced displacement, Esi retains a strong connection to her Asante identity, which is rooted in the language, customs, religion, and culture to which she was exposed from birth. She passes elements of this heritage to her daughter, Ness, through communicative memory—a form of personal and noninstitutional memory transmitted through informal, everyday interactions and typically lasting three or four generations (Assmann 2011). For enslaved people, communicative memory often served as the sole means of passing on and preserving family history, as official records rarely documented these details. Annette Gordon-Reed (2021) observes that very few enslaved individuals left documents that reflected their lives, resulting in an imposed anonymity that leaves their thoughts, feelings, and experiences underrepresented in historical records (chap. 1, par. 1). Official accounts of their lives often stemmed from biased records kept by enslavers or court documents in which the enslaved had little to no voice, further marginalizing their perspectives. Consequently, the family histories and heritages of many captives remain irretrievably lost. In *Homegoing*, Gyasi challenges this erasure, reconstructing Esi's family history through critical fabulation.

Esi's ability to retain fragments of her heritage provides Ness with a tenuous link to her roots, conveyed, for example, through Esi's use of her native language, Twi, in their interactions. However, *Homegoing* offers limited insight into Esi's transmission of family history and cultural heritage to Ness, suggesting that Esi may not share much of her past with her daughter. The trauma Esi endures as a result of her forced displacement and enslavement likely affects her relationship with Ness. Esi may have primarily conveyed the pain of her bondage, omitting memories of her pre-slavery life, including those connected to her family and native culture (Mikić 2022, 105). Consequently, Ness

-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The chapter focusing on Esi opens in the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle, marking a pivotal turning point in her life: "Esi learned to split her life into Before the Castle and Now. Before she was the daughter of Big Man and his third wife, Maame. Now she was dust. Before the Castle, she was the prettiest girl in the village. Now she was thin air" (Gyasi 2016, 31). Such an experience of dehumanization resonates with Saidiya Hartman's (2007) assertion that "the dungeon was a womb in which the slave was born" (111). However, it is significant to note that Esi's connection to slavery predates her own capture, as her family also possessed a slave. Gyasi thus addresses the active roles that Fantes, Asantes, and other ethnic groups played in the institution of slavery (Goyal 2020, 481).

is familiar only with the traumatic aspects of Esi's existence, beginning with her experience of the Middle Passage. This event becomes an inherited memory for Ness—so intense and distressing that, despite not having directly lived it, it manifests in her dreams, feeling almost like a personal experience and leaving her with a profound, inherited trauma. This phenomenon aligns with Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, defined as the "relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (2008, 106). Although Hirsch's studies primarily focus on the collective trauma of the Holocaust, the Middle Passage, as an integral part of the slavery experience, can similarly be understood as a cultural trauma, manifesting in Ness as an inherited memory.

Ness's limited knowledge of her heritage and family history leaves her disconnected from Asante traditions and culture, an estrangement that becomes permanent in a chain of forced partings. This cycle begins with Ness's separation from Esi when she is sold away, and continues as Ness is later separated from her son, Kojo, during an attempted escape from the plantation where they are enslaved. In this critical moment, Ness entrusts Kojo to Aku, an Asante woman who had previously escaped slavery, and who subsequently raises Kojo in freedom. Despite the separation from his mother, Kojo remains connected to his lineage's past and gains a deeper insight into his origins than Ness ever had, thanks to Aku, who shares Esi's cultural background and has endured similar experiences. Through Aku, *Homegoing* illustrates how non-family members can play crucial roles in reconstructing a lost family's history: although not a blood relative, Aku shares Esi's Asante heritage, and her personal memories help fill some of the gaps in Kojo's understanding of his ancestral roots. Aku's accounts of her life in Ghana, her reflections on the Asante culture and her own experience of the Middle Passage and slavery—passed on as communicative memory—grant Kojo a window into his heritage

# Nicole Bernardi |

despite the inaccessibility of his family's past.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the narratives and cultural insights she shares, Aku speaks Twi with Kojo, providing a linguistic link to his family heritage. Kojo's bilingualism, combined with the Asante cultural knowledge he learns from Aku, enables him to maintain a connection to his roots.

However, the transmission of family history and heritage is once again impeded with the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which exposed free Black individuals to the threat of re-enslavement—a fate that Anna, Kojo's pregnant wife, experiences despite her papers confirming her free status. This results in yet another insurmountable family separation, leaving Kojo unaware of Anna's and their unborn child's whereabouts. Such an abrupt shift in Kojo's life reflects the precariousness of freedom for African Americans in the pre-abolition era, instilling a persistent sense of insecurity even among those legally free. Thus, despite his and his family's freedom, the lingering impact of slavery continues to shape Kojo's life, fracturing the transmission of the lineage's heritage passed down by Aku—this time affecting H, the child Anna is carrying when she is captured and enslaved. The structure of *Homegoing* plays a crucial role in intensifying the sense of disconnection. The novel is divided into two parts, with Part 2 opening with H, a character who personifies the unbridgeable gap that slavery can impose between individuals and their family histories.

#### GENEALOGICAL ISOLATION: LOST AND IRRETRIEVABLE FAMILY HISTORY

The second part of *Homegoing* marks a definitive rupture in the transmission of family history, as the lineage's past—which had previously been passed down as communicative memory despite the obstacles posed by slavery—becomes permanently irretrievable for H and, consequently, his descendants. The only piece of family history he

-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> For example, Aku's belief in the Akan gods mirrors the spirituality Esi would have likely passed on, while Aku's participation in Christian practices showcases a form of religious syncretism. Raboteau (2004) notes that, although in some areas—like Cuba and Brazil—enslaved Africans often preserved traditional religious practices, maintaining these traditions in the United States proved especially challenging, because the natural population increase among the enslaved resulted in many being born in North America, leading to a gradual detachment from African cultural traditions (92). Aku, born in Asanteland and forcibly transported first to the Caribbean and later to the United States, manages to preserve her native religion, eventually incorporating Christianity alongside it.

possesses is the knowledge that his mother, overwhelmed by the trauma of her enslavement, took her life moments before his birth. The awareness of slavery's role in the lineage's history becomes the foundation for a new family narrative, beginning with H himself. H grows up entirely disconnected from his heritage and unaware of his ancestry, embodying the condition of 'genealogical isolation' theorized by Orlando Patterson (2018):

not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations [...]. He was truly a genealogical isolate. Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, he also was culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors. He had a past, to be sure. But a past is not a heritage. Everything has a history, including sticks and stones. Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory. (5)

H's genealogical isolation cuts him off from any opportunity to inherit communicative memories and postmemories from his ancestors. Born into bondage, inheriting his mother's enslaved status, he remains on a Georgia plantation until the abolition of slavery. However, while emancipation grants him legal freedom, it does not ensure safety in the post-abolition South, where the racial hierarchy and subjugation that had defined slavery are quickly re-established through new systems of oppression. One such practice is convict leasing, where individuals were often arbitrarily imprisoned for minor or fabricated offenses and coerced into labor to pay off heavy fines in order to regain their freedom (Alexander 2010, 38). Convict leasing disproportionately targeted Black people, evolving into a continuation of plantation slavery under a different guise (Price 2015, 81-82). H is drawn into this system when he is falsely accused of a minor crime and, unable to pay the imposed fine, is forced to work for a coal mining company in Alabama, shifting from "once slave, once free, now slave again" (Gyasi 2016, 162). His experience

\_

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> From Gyasi's interview with *The Guardian*: "Suffering changes and stays the same. In America, the worst was never over, just made new. That was something I was trying to trace in the novel—the trail of trauma reinvented. The history of America has involved figuring out new ways to subjugate black people since the beginning" (Kellaway 2017).

# Nicole Bernardi |

reflects the brutality of the convict leasing system, where conditions could often be as gruesome as those endured under slavery (Smith 2021, 87). H's suffering mirrors the struggles of his ancestors—though family history is lost, the discrimination and oppression he faces during his two enslavements echo their experiences. In this way, the legacy of racial injustice that affected H's ancestors persists well beyond the formal abolition of slavery; therefore, the family history newly initiated with H is marked by loss, disconnection, and struggle. H's daughter, Willie, inherits the trauma of H's experiences through communicative memory, which shapes her understanding of their family history around the painful legacies of slavery, convict leasing, and racial injustice, leaving her with no knowledge of the family history predating H.

When Willie moves from Alabama to Harlem in search of better opportunities, she encounters racial discrimination that crushes her dreams, as she struggles to secure stable housing, a fulfilling career and quality education for her son, Sonny. Her situation worsens when her light-skinned husband, seeking to escape racial marginalization, chooses to pass as white, abandoning both Willie and their infant son. This intentional estrangement starkly contrasts with the previous involuntary family separations in *Homegoing*, highlighting yet another way racial oppression destabilizes African American families. This, along with many other social injustices Sonny experiences as a Black man, leads him to embrace the philosophy of Pan-African activist Marcus Garvey, who advocated for the return of descendants of enslaved Africans to the African continent to escape the racial oppression they faced in the United States, reconnect with cultural roots, and reclaim their heritage. Sonny's deep desire to reconnect with his lost

-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> It must be noted that, in addition to racial discrimination, Willie also faces gender-based marginalization. Her aspiration to sing professionally is thwarted when the owner of a jazz bar tells her that only men are allowed to perform. This reflects the broader oppression of African women and the destruction of opportunities to achieve self-reliance. Their efforts to assert their existence and influence within society are obstructed by a patriarchal system that has historically commodified them, much like during slavery (Jweid 2023, 34).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Early 20th-century Pan-Africanism was deeply shaped by the racial experiences of Black communities across various regions. However, these experiences, along with concepts of race, racism, and Black identity, were influenced by distinct historical and social contexts, making them far from homogeneous. By overlooking these differences and assuming race represented universal meaning for all Black people, Pan-Africanism, despite its noble aims, failed to capture the complexities and diversity of Black experiences, limiting the movement's ability to fully unite people of African descent under a singular ideology, weakening the movement's overall impact (M'Bayo 2004, 20).

heritage—"What Sonny wanted was Africa" (Gyasi 2016, 244)—reflects a need to recover a family history lost to slavery and its enduring legacies. For Sonny, Africa, in its entirety, represents a vision of cultural and spiritual healing, embodying the potential for identity restoration that he and countless other descendants of enslaved people have been denied. Although unaware of his Asante origins—and even though physical proximity to the African continent would not provide him with a detailed understanding of his family history—Sonny perceives Africa as a source of heritage and identity reclamation, a way to bridge the genealogical dead-end many African Americans experience. Inspired by Marcus Garvey, Sonny envisions Africa not only as a place free from racial discrimination but also as a site where he and the broader Black community can find a sense of belonging and resilience.<sup>11</sup>

Sonny's mental and emotional health deteriorates under the weight of racial oppression, economic hardship, and societal neglect; influenced by his girlfriend Amani, he ultimately succumbs to heroin addiction. Indeed, Sonny's condition mirrors what Saidiya Hartman (2007) describes as "the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration and impoverishment" (6). Without access to a support network or adequate healthcare, Sonny struggles to overcome drug dependence. His path to recovery begins when Willie shares her own experiences, revealing the identity of Sonny's father and the extent of the racism and discrimination she endured. This insight into his family history allows Sonny to grasp the profound impact of racism on his and his ancestors' lives, providing him with new self-awareness and the strength to confront his addiction. Reclaiming this piece of his family's history restores Sonny's sense of purpose and hope, empowering him to take a critical step toward healing and breaking free from the destructive cycle in which he was trapped.

-

<sup>&</sup>quot;Sonny's girlfriend rejects her given name and adopts the name "Amani," which means "harmony" in Swahili. Sonny criticizes Amani for using an African name while not being "into the 'Back to Africa business'," to which Amani responds, "We can't go back to something we ain't never been to in the first place. It ain't ours anymore. This is" (Gyasi 2016, 255). Her words express a profound disillusionment with the idea of reconnecting with her African heritage. Amani's response underscores her acceptance of the inability to fully reclaim their heritage while grappling with the legacy of displacement and systemic oppression.

### Nicole Bernardi |

The profound disconnection from family history that Sonny suffers, grounded in H's genealogical isolation, sparks in him a deep desire for a sense of rootedness. Yet, as illustrated in *Homegoing*'s chapter focusing on Sonny's son Marcus, this longing can only be partially fulfilled through broader windows opening onto the past, such as history, which provides context for the experiences and hardships likely endured by their ancestors. While Sonny, Marcus, and countless other descendants of fractured families cannot trace their exact lineage, they can find meaning in a shared—albeit less personal—historical narrative. This broader historical understanding helps Sonny and Marcus fill the void left by their lost family history, offering a sense of connection to the African American experience.

# REDISCOVERING ROOTS: HISTORY AND JOURNEY AS PATHWAYS TO RECONNECTION

Like Sonny, Marcus is profoundly affected by the irretrievable loss of his family history, which drives a "need for studying and knowing his family more intimately" (Gyasi 2016, 290), prompting him to pursue a PhD in sociology. Initially, his research focuses on the convict leasing system—a subject inspired by his great-grandfather H's experiences, preserved in the family through communicative memory. Marcus's project is thus deeply interwoven with his personal family history, eventually evolving into an epistemological quest fueled by both academic and personal stakes. However, as he delves deeper into his investigation, Marcus confronts H's genealogical isolation, recognizing that tracing his lineage beyond H is impossible. This realization brings his research—and his quest for familial roots—to a dead end, forcing him to face the painful reality that much of his family's history will remain inaccessible.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. (2009) explains that African Americans started being included in national censuses in 1870, after the abolition of slavery granted them legal recognition as citizens (chap. 1, par. 12). While this offers descendants of enslaved people some official records to reconstruct their family trees, tracing lineage before emancipation remains challenging, often resulting in unbridgeable genealogical dead ends. Even more complex is tracing the first generations of Africans forcibly transported to

the Americas. As Gates notes, while slave ships kept records of details of the 'human cargo' they carried, these documents rarely included the names or other personal details of the captives. Consequently, "there is no way to know what happened to those people once they stepped onto and off the boat," leaving their personal histories obscured and often lost forever (par. 13). Nevertheless, Gates highlights that enslaved Africans retained one indelible legacy: their DNA. Passed down through generations, this genetic material represents a link to the past, providing a connection to ancestral roots. In this sense, it might be argued that a genetic test could help Marcus reconnect with his ancestry and family history; since the early 2000s, with the rise of genetic ancestry testing companies, personalized DNA testing has been marketed in the United States as a valuable tool for descendants of enslaved Africans seeking to trace their heritage (Abel 2018, 1). Living in this era, Marcus might see DNA testing as an option to gain awareness of his family history. Yet, while genetic testing can reveal general ethnic background, it cannot uncover the personal identities of enslaved individuals whose names and other information were omitted from official archival documents. The extensive displacement, loss of records, and cultural disruption caused by slavery mean that genetic testing can offer only broad insights, such as connection to African regions or ethnic groups, rather than specific personal histories of enslaved ancestors. For Marcus, a genetic test would thus fall short of resolving his genealogical dead end.

Lacking the names or any information of those who preceded H, Marcus has no access to his genealogy. However, studying history offers him a glimpse into the past, providing a partial remedy to the otherwise insurmountable genealogical loss. Reflecting on his research, Marcus realizes that "what he wanted to capture with his project was the feeling of time, of having been a part of something that stretched so far back,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup>Comparisons between Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* are inevitable, as both novels are family sagas in which the institution of slavery plays a pivotal role in shaping the histories of their lineages. Yet, as Scacchi (2022) emphasizes, a significant difference exists in their depiction of how family history is transmitted. In *Roots*, the most distant descendant reconnects with his origins through knowledge of some ancestors' identities and words in the Mandinka language that have been passed down through the generations without hindrance, forming a family narrative and a lasting legacy. This unbroken transmission in *Roots* stands in stark contrast to the gradual and relentless erasure of the family history in *Homegoing*.

was so impossibly large, that it was easy to forget" (Gyasi 2016, 295). Although history cannot restore the intimate details of his lineage, it becomes essential for Marcus, as it allows him to link his personal epistemological quest with the broader experience of African Americans. Through his studies in sociology and social history, Marcus uncovers moments that may have shaped his ancestors' lives, positioning their experiences within a larger narrative of a collective past. Historical knowledge thus compensates for the loss of Marcus's family history, even though his ancestors' names and personal stories remain beyond reach.<sup>13</sup> Yet, history also bears the weight of past traumas, which Marcus internalizes. Gyasi vividly depicts how these "invisible inheritances" manifest as unconscious fears in her characters (Chicago Humanities Festival 2016). Despite his genealogical distance from Esi and the fractured transmission of family history, Marcus inherits a deep, instinctual fear of water. Though not based on any personal experience, his visceral reaction—"There was something about the smell of the ocean that nauseated him. That wet salt stink clung to his nose and made him feel as though he were already drowning. He could feel it thick in his throat, like brine, clinging to that place where his uvula hung so that he couldn't breathe right" (Gyasi 2016, 248)—originates from the historical truths passed down by Sonny, who explained "that black people didn't like water because they were brought over on slave ships. What did a black man want to swim for? The ocean floor was already littered with black men" (285).

Drawing on French historian Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of 'lieux de mémoire'—sites, both natural and artificial, where memory crystallizes around significant historical moments—Anissa J. Wardi (2011) observes that in African American literature, bodies of water frequently serve as 'sites of memory,' where history and memory converge (6). In this context, water symbolizes the Middle Passage, which marked the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup>In his study of the cultural trauma of slavery and its role in forming African American identity, Ron Eyerman (2004) argues that intellectuals play a crucial part in mediating and shaping the representation of such a trauma. In this sense, Marcus, as a scholar himself, takes on this responsibility, by not only reconstructing history with his academic project, but also interrogating history's omissions and silences. While he cannot recover his ancestors' personal histories, he pieces together a broader historical framework that contextualizes their erasure. By tracing historical patterns and social structures, Marcus illuminates the enduring consequences of slavery and colonialism, recognizing how these forces continue to shape contemporary African American identities.

end of freedom and the beginning of bondage for countless Africans forcibly taken to the American continent. As the embodiment of the Middle Passage, the Atlantic Ocean becomes a quintessential site of memory, evoking in Marcus sensations that mirror the terror Esi experienced as she left the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle ("The scent of ocean water hit her nose. The taste of salt clung to her throat" [Gyasi 2016, 49]). This inherited fear connects Marcus to the collective trauma of the Middle Passage (Asempasah, Aba Sam, and Abelumkemah 2022, 8), establishing a connection to his unknown family past and ancestry.<sup>14</sup>

Salamishah Tillet (2012) highlights that, unlike earlier Back to Africa movements—in which "Africa" represented a potential site for political sovereignty and racial equality for African Americans—the post-civil rights era does not view the continent as a substitute homeland. Instead, Africa is repositioned within the African American consciousness as an extension of the memory of American slavery and a site of shared historical trauma (97). This shift is reflected by Marcus's visit to Cape Coast Castle; though he cannot uncover specific ancestral ties in Ghana, he gains a broader perception of collective heritage. Overwhelmed by the Castle guide's recounting of the conditions endured by the enslaved Africans in the dungeons, Marcus experiences a panic attack and rushes to the beach to escape the suffocating atmosphere. Here, Cape Coast Castle, like the Atlantic Ocean, serves as a site of memory, embodying the collective trauma that has shaped Marcus's and countless other family histories. While he cannot pinpoint his exact lineage, he understands that his roots are inextricably linked to Africa, and the weight of this shared history becomes undeniable.

Not knowing whether his ancestors were held in the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle, Marcus reflects on the broader suffering endured by countless displaced people and their descendants. This contemplation connects him to a larger historical narrative,

<sup>-</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Marcus's trip to Ghana is encouraged by Marjorie, a descendant of Effia. Although they cross paths, neither is aware that they share the same ancestral matriarch, Maame. Unlike Marcus, who struggles with the fractured transmission of his family history, Marjorie is well aware of her lineage, as her family did not suffer any forced separations. Through these two characters, Gyasi highlights the contrast between the successful transmission of family heritage in Marjorie's lineage and the lost connections in Marcus's.

# Nicole Bernardi |

enriching his sense of identity through empathy and historical awareness. In this regard, Marcus's experience echoes Saidiya Hartman's journey to Ghana, where she retraces the routes of the Atlantic slave trade, as recounted in her memoir *Lose Your Mother* (2007). Hartman reflects, "I had come to Ghana in search of strangers," (6) emphasizing her realization that recovering her lost family's history is impossible. This sentiment mirrors Marcus's own condition, where his lineage's past remains elusive; in this light, Hartman and Marcus can only bear witness to a collective suffering entwined with their ancestors' past. Ultimately, they both come to understand that, although their family histories may be irretrievable, the shared trauma of the Middle Passage and slavery remain inextricable from their—and many other descendants of enslaved people—identities.

Marcus's reconciliation with such fragmented, yet meaningful heritage is further symbolized by his immersion in the Atlantic Ocean after leaving the castle. In confronting his deep-seated fear of water, Marcus overcomes his panic, realizing that he can control his dread. This moment represents the empowerment he gains by acknowledging how the absence of a connection to his family history has shaped his identity. In *Homegoing*, the element of water, therefore, takes on an ambivalent role, symbolizing both the traumatic event of the Middle Passage and the possibility of healing.<sup>15</sup>

Marcus's journey of self-discovery also mirrors Sonny's inner transformation, as he begins his own process of healing from heroin addiction upon uncovering part of his family's history. Both characters' emotional and psychological recovery are profoundly intertwined with their engagement with ancestral memory. However, this does not necessarily involve reclaiming what has been lost; rather, it requires accepting the impossibility of fully recovering their lineage's history and coming to terms with the fact that

٠

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> This complex symbolism is deeply explored in African American literature, as Wardi (2011) highlights in her analysis of this recurring trope. A recent and striking example of this duality appears in Jesmyn Ward's *Let Us Descend* (2023), where the protagonist, Annis, experiences water in contrasting ways. As she is marched, chained to other slaves, from the South Carolina rice fields to the New Orleans slave market and eventually to a Louisiana sugarcane plantation, the rivers they are compelled to cross evoke fear and suffering. However, later in the novel, the same element that once symbolized death and terror becomes her means of escape, as Annis floats down the Mississippi River to freedom. Ward masterfully captures this ambivalence, where water serves as both a conduit toward bondage and a path to liberation. This echoes Marcus's own experience of this element, as he transitions from fearing water to mastering his fear and actively engaging with it.

their lives have been shaped by the irretrievable experiences of their ancestors. As descendants of individuals whose identities remain unknown—like many others whose ancestors' histories were erased by slavery and its legacies—Marcus and Sonny are indelibly marked by the suffering, sacrifices, joys, and struggles of their forebears. Although these histories may be inaccessible, their enduring impact continues to shape the present. Confronting this fragmented heritage, along with the broader narrative of loss and survival that comes with it, provides a path to personal healing, offering Marcus and Sonny a deeper sense of self and belonging, despite the irretrievability of their family histories.

While Marcus's ancestral past remains largely inaccessible, lost in the violence of slavery and its legacies, studying history allows him—and more generally, others confronting genealogical dead ends—to gain insights into the societal forces that shaped his ancestors' lives and, by extension, his own. Although specific identities and narratives may never be uncovered, history provides a crucial framework for situating one's lineage within a broader, shared past. Furthermore, as Marcus's journey to Ghana illustrates, travel can also play a vital role in this process—not as a means to recover ancestors' identities, but as a way to establish an emotional and symbolic connection to historically significant sites. In this way, the act of traveling extends historical understanding, offering a pathway for personal reconciliation with an irretrievable past.

### **CONCLUSION**

This analysis has illustrated how exploring the disrupted transmission of family history in novels like *Homegoing* reveals the profound and enduring impacts of slavery on contemporary identities. Gyasi's work highlights the challenges faced by descendants of enslaved individuals in their efforts to reclaim their heritage.<sup>16</sup> While a complete

\_

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Annette Gordon-Reed (2021) notes that "One of the many deep tragedies of American slavery is the anonymity that was forced upon the vast majority of the people who lived under the strictures of that system. Denied education—except in the rarest circumstances—and kept outside of legal marriage, property ownership, and the capacity to contract, the overwhelming majority of enslaved people left no documents that could tell us about their lives. Instead, we are left to the self-serving records of the people who enslaved them or to analyzing documents related to court

# Nicole Bernardi |

understanding of family history may often be out of reach due to the fragmentation of genealogical ties, *Homegoing* demonstrates that engaging with historical knowledge and visiting significant sites of memory can foster a deeper awareness of the shared contexts that have shaped both ancestral experiences and contemporary lives, forging emotional bonds that enrich historical understanding.

Historian Ira Berlin (2004) argues that, while history aims to reconstruct a comprehensive and coherent narrative of the past, personal memories and emotions reflect the lived experiences of those who endured it and are, therefore, indisputable (1265). In line with this, Annette Gordon-Reed (2021) emphasizes the importance of examining slavery through the eyes of the enslaved, as this offers a powerful means of understanding how a pivotal aspect of the past continues to shape our present (chap. 1 par. 5). Through critical fabulation, novels like *Homegoing* create narratives for those whose voices have been silenced, offering a more holistic and inclusive representation of a shared history. Together, these perspectives underscore the significance of emotions and personal narratives in studying the past, as they bring subjectivity and authenticity to the fore of our analysis, counterbalancing the detached objectivity of official records. Significantly, in *Homegoing*, Gyasi not only challenges the silence surrounding the lives of enslaved individuals imposed by official historical narratives, but she also sheds light on the history of a region profoundly shaped by colonialism. The novel reveals how, long before Ghana's independence in 1957, European imperialism and its legacy deeply impacted the political, economic, and cultural structures of modern Ghana. From the very outset, Gyasi illustrates the infiltration of colonial forces into Ghanaian society: Effia's family, for instance, actively participates in the transatlantic slave trade, collaborating with British traders by capturing and selling slaves. In return, the British supply firearms, exacerbating inter-tribal warfare and perpetuating the cycle of enslavement.

cases—civil and criminal—over which the enslaved had only minimal, if any, influence. So the thoughts, feelings, and words of the people most directly affected by the myriad day-to-day cruelties of an institution that treated human beings like property are underrepresented in the historical record" (chap. 1, par. 1).

Even after the abolition of the slave trade, colonial influence persisted through religious, linguistic, and economic transformations. *Homegoing* depicts how Christianity was used as a tool of ideological control, as British missionaries established churches and schools in the Asante region, teaching children that "all people in the black continent must give up their heathenism and turn to God. Be thankful that the British are here to show you how to live a good and moral life" (Gyasi 184). Language, too, became a site of colonial erasure, with English gradually establishing itself as the dominant medium of instruction. The novel also illustrates how colonial economic interests reshaped the natural environment: the introduction of cash crops like cocoa altered local agricultural practices to meet global market demands, further embedding Ghana within capitalist systems of exploitation. By depicting these historical entanglements, Gyasi reveals how colonial powers not only shaped Ghana's past and present but also influenced the recording of history, often reinforcing biased representations of events. Yaw, one of Effia's descendants, articulates this distortion when he reflects:

"Whose story do we believe, then? We believe the one who has the power. He is the one who gets to write the story. So when you study history, you must always ask yourself, Whose story am I missing? Whose voice was suppressed so that this voice could come forth? Once you have figured that out, you must find that story too. From there, you begin to get a clearer, yet still imperfect, picture." (Gyasi 226-27)

Yaw's words underscore the tendency for historical narratives to be shaped by those in power, often marginalizing the voices of the oppressed. His acknowledgment of these silences calls for a conscious effort to recover the histories that colonialism sought to erase, reinforcing Gyasi's commitment to amplifying voices long excluded from official historical accounts. In this sense, *Homegoing* illustrates the deep entanglement of colonialism and slavery. The novel's structure and narration highlight this connection by juxtaposing the experiences of Effia's and Esi's lineages. While Effia's descendants initially benefit from colonial rule and the transatlantic slave trade, Esi's lineage suffers its horrors. Yet, despite not enduring slavery, Effia's lineage is deeply affected by European imperialism, becoming complicit in the slave trade, experiencing family separations, and witnessing the transformation of their culture. Gyasi illustrates how the long-term

# Nicole Bernardi |

consequences of colonialism and racial oppression extend to both the displaced and those who remain in Africa, as imperial rule destabilizes the country's inherent equilibrium. In this way, *Homegoing* reveals how racism and its structures of oppression leave no community untouched, whether through the brutality of slavery or the enduring effects of colonialism, becoming intricately woven into the histories of countless lineages.

Using critical fabulation, Gyasi gives voice to "the lives of the nameless and forgotten" (Hartman 2008, 4), crafting stories untainted by the biases and omissions of official historical records and offering a counter-narrative that resists the subjugations of slavery, racism and colonialism. The characters analyzed in this paper embody emotions rarely documented in official records, yet these fictionalized emotions foster a deeper understanding and empathy in readers. They also illustrate—albeit through fiction—how contemporary identities can suffer from the absence of personal histories and ancestral details, revealing the emotional impact of historical silences on present-day lives.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Abel, Sarah. 2018. "Of African Descent? Blackness and the Concept of Origins in Cultural Perspective." *Genealogy* 2 (1): 11. https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy2010011.

Alexander, Michelle. 2020. The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. The New Press.

Asempasah, Rogers, Christabel Aba Sam, and Bertrand Azagsizua Abelumkemah. 2022. "A Postcolonial Ecocritical Reading of Yaa Gyasi's 'Homegoing' (2016) and Kwakuvi Azasu's 'The Slave Raiders' (2004)." *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 9 (1): 1–13. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2022.2145669">https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2022.2145669</a>.

Assmann, Jan. 2011. "Communicative and Cultural Memory." In *Cultural Memories - The Geographical Point of View*, edited by Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan, and Edgar Wunder. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-8945-8\_2.

Berlin, Ira. 2004. "American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice." *Journal of American History* 90 (4): 1251–68. https://doi.org/10.2307/3660347.

Bordin, Elisa. 2014. "Looking for Kunta Kinte: Alex Haley's Roots and African American Genealogies." *Iperstoria* 4:3–9. <a href="https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.13136/2281-4582/2014.i4.426">https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.13136/2281-4582/2014.i4.426</a>.

Butler, Octavia E. 2004. Kindred. Beacon Press.

Chamberlain, Mary, and Selma Leydesdorff. 2004. "Transnational Families: Memories and Narratives." *Global Networks* 4 (3): 227–41. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2004.00090.x">https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2004.00090.x</a>.

Chicago Humanities Festival. 2016. "Yaa Gyasi: Homegoing." December 6, 2016. YouTube, 54:47. <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LoEAWvTvFus&t=1095s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LoEAWvTvFus&t=1095s</a>.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2019. *The Water Dancer*. One World.

Davis, David Brion. 2006. *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*. Oxford University Press.

Dawkins, Laura. 2023. "They Are Not Only One; They're Two, and Three, and Four': Building a Trauma Community in Toni Morrison's Beloved and Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing." In *Legacies and Lifespans in Contemporary Women's Writing*, edited by Gina Wisker, Leanne Bibby, and Heidi Yeandle. Springer. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-28093-1">https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-28093-1</a>.

Douglass, Frederick, and David W. Blight. 2014. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Yale University Press.

Erll, Astrid. 2011. "Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory." In *Memory in Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan UK. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230321670">https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230321670</a> 6.

Eyerman, Ron. 2004. "Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity." In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey C Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka. University of California Press. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520235946.003.0003">https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520235946.003.0003</a>.

Gates Jr, Henry Louis. 2009. *In Search of Our Roots: How 19 Extraordinary African Americans Reclaimed Their Past*. Crown. Kindle.

Gordon-Reed, Annette, Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller. 2021. "Foreword to the 2021 Edition." In *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation*, Revised Edition. The New Press. Kindle.

Goyal, Yogita. 2020. "An Interview with Yaa Gyasi." *Contemporary Literature* 60:461–90. <a href="https://doi.org/10.3368/cl.60.4.471">https://doi.org/10.3368/cl.60.4.471</a>.

Gyasi, Yaa. 2016. Homegoing. Random House.

Haley, Alex. 1976. Roots: The Saga of an American Family. Hachette UK.

Hartman, Saidiya. 2007. Lose Your Mother - A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route. Serpent's Tail.

\_\_\_\_\_\_. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12 (2): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2008. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today* 29 (1): 103–128. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019">https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019</a>.

Jweid, Abdalhadi Nimer Abdalqader Abu. 2023. "Mind of Darkness: Social Equality and Self-Autonomy as Feminist Premises of the Concept of Courageous Code in Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing." *English Language and Literature Studies* 13 (3): 29–40. <a href="https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v13n3p29">https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v13n3p29</a>.

Kellaway, Kate. 2017. "Yaa Gyasi: 'Slavery Is on People's Minds. It Affects Us Still." *The Guardian*, January 8. <a href="https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jan/o8/yaa-gyasi-slavery-is-on-peoples-minds-it-affects-us-still-interview-homegoing-observer-new-review">https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jan/o8/yaa-gyasi-slavery-is-on-peoples-minds-it-affects-us-still-interview-homegoing-observer-new-review</a>.

M'Bayo, Tamba E. 2004. "W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Pan-Africanism in Liberia, 1919–1924." *The Historian* 66 (1): 19–44. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0018-2370.2004.00062.x">https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0018-2370.2004.00062.x</a>.

Mikić, Marijana. 2022. "Race, Trauma, and the Emotional Legacies of Slavery in Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing." In *Ethnic American Literatures and Critical Race Narratology*, edited by Alexa Weik von Mossner, Marijana Mikić, and Mario Grill. Routledge. <a href="https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003261186-9">https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003261186-9</a>.

Morrison, Toni. 1987. Beloved. Alfred A. Knopf Inc.

Nora, Pierre. 1989. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations* 26:7–24. https://doi.org/2928520.

Patterson, Orlando. 2018. *Slavery and Social Death - A Comparative Study*. Second Edition. Harvard University Press.

Price, Joshua M. 2015. *Prison and Social Death*. Rutgers University Press.

Raboteau, Albert J. 2004. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. Oxford University Press. <a href="https://archive.org/details/SlaveReligionTheInvisible-InstitutionInTheAntebellumSouthBYAlbertJ.Raboteau">https://archive.org/details/SlaveReligionTheInvisible-InstitutionInTheAntebellumSouthBYAlbertJ.Raboteau</a>.

Reena Saini Kallat. 2018. "Woven Chronicle." Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

Rens, Dirk van. 2023. "'This Ain't the Way It's S'posed to Be': Negotiating Trauma Through Postmemory and Implication in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*." *English Studies* 104 (5): 766–88. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2023.2234218">https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2023.2234218</a>.

Scacchi, Anna. 2022. "Intrecci Diasporici: Homegoing Di Yaa Gyasi." Ácoma - Rivista Internazionale Di Studi Nordamericani 22:98–119.

Smith, Clint. 2021. How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America. Hachette UK.

\_\_\_\_\_\_. 2021. "Stories of Slavery, From Those Who Survived It. The Federal Writers' Project Narratives Provide an All-Too-Rare Link to Our Past." *The Atlantic*, February 9. <a href="https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/03/federal-writers-project/617790/?utm\_source=feed">https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/03/federal-writers-project/617790/?utm\_source=feed</a>.

Tillet, Salamishah. 2012. *Sites of Slavery*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391869.

Wardi, Anissa Janine. 2011. Water and African American Memory - An Ecocritical Perspective. University Press of Florida.

Ward, Jesmyn. 2023. Let Us Descend. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Weil, François. 2013. Family Trees. A History of Genealogy in America. Harvard University Press.

**Nicole Bernardi** holds an MA in American Studies from Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy), earned in 2022. Currently based in Sydney, Australia, she teaches Italian at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura and serves as deputy manager at an international language bookstore. Her research interests focus on American migration literature and family sagas, particularly the transmission of cultural heritage within diasporic and displaced lineages. Email: <a href="mailto:nicole.bernardi@outlook.it">nicole.bernardi@outlook.it</a>

# INHERITED PRAGMATISM: RACE, REPRESENTATION, AND TECHNOLOGY IN RALPH ELLISON'S INVISIBLE MAN

# Jeremy Dennis

St. Louis Community College

### **ABSTRACT**

Scholars who turn to Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* to address issues of race and representation often employ the thinking of American pragmatists such as John Dewey. However, Dewey's record on race and that of other classical pragmatists have been shown to contribute little on the topic. As a result, some scholars have suggested that Ralph Ellison brings critical attention to the idea of race in pragmatism in ways thinkers before him do not. This interdisciplinary study challenges this view, revealing how the philosopher Immanuel Kant brings attention to race in pragmatism. In fact, Charles S. Peirce, considered the originator of American pragmatism, often credited Kant as the source and inspiration for his development of the concept and its supporting principles. As such, this study explains why illuminating Kant's philosophy, his troubling views on race, and their continuity in the sociology of Robert Park warrant a revaluation of race as a form of technology, particularly as it is explored in contemporary scholarly assessments of a missing chapter from Ellison's novel. Ultimately, a technological revaluation of *Invisible Man* helps to advance it as a refutation of the racialization of black identity in Enlightenment thought, an intellectual legacy many writers in the African American literary tradition have challenged long before and after Ellison.

**Keywords**: American literature; pragmatism; racial representation; technology.

Then scholars discuss the ways in which pragmatism and technology overlap conceptually, they seldom consider how their theorizations might be enriched or advanced by African American authors who use their literary texts to challenge racism and its Enlightenment heritage (Bella et al. 2015; Garnar 2020; Gates 2014, 2024; Hickman 2001, 2007). Similarly, when scholars appropriate the novels of Ralph Ellison to index Emersonian or Deweyan pragmatism, they seldom consider the role that technology plays in the substantiation of racism. Yet, such studies are often informed by genealogical recalibrations that ask us to value Ellison as a pragmatic philosopher rather than a literary artist steeped in an African American literary tradition that is just as significant scholastically and historically (Albrecht 2012; Gates 2024; Magee 2004; Posnock 2005; Rasmussen 2020). As a result, the reproduction of Enlightenment values

in our preoccupation with Ellison and his writings seem to signal the need for a (re)conceptualization of pragmatism, technology, and race that facilitates an understanding of how they intersect. Therefore, my goal in this study is to advance this effort by offering an alternative view of pragmatism that recalibrates the roles that Ellison and *Invisible Man* often play in its incessant rearticulation.

### **CONTEXTUALIZING PRAGMATISM**

The term *pragmatism* is permeated by diverse and often complex descriptions. Therefore, our interpretations and appreciations will depend on the context in which pragmatism is used. For some, the concept is considered a philosophical approach that values the connection between theoretical and practical judgments and how they are informed and operationalized by the rational use of experiences, concepts, and language for intentional results (Peirce 1955; Rydenfelt 2019). For others, it is valued as an antifoundational form of inquiry that accounts for actionable meaning in the pursuit of logical responses to complex phenomena or problems (Garnar 2020; Richardson 2014). As a philosophical impetus or world view, pragmatism and its various characterizations are inseparable from the orientations and aims of its progenitors and their advocates. Most scholars agree that the originators or *classical pragmatists* include philosophers such as Charles S. Peirce, John Dewey, William James, and George Herbert Mead (Lawson and Koch 2004). Peirce is generally credited with inaugurating pragmatism and his contributions are essential to Dewey's development of the term. In fact, Prawat (2001) argues that Peirce's thinking in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century paved the way for Dewey's complex elaboration of pragmatism and other subjects. He claims that "any attempt to develop a comprehensive view of what Dewey was about [...] must take into account Peirce and the influence he exerted on Dewey's thinking after the First World War" (669).

However, in assessments of pragmatism as a *uniquely* American contribution to philosophical thought, Peirce's contributions tend to get overshadowed by the valorization of Dewey. In their examination of how black scholars engage pragmatism to address the legacy of slavery and the racism left in its wake, Stemhagen and Hytten (2022)

largely overlook the contributions of Peirce. They report, "Pragmatism, the philosophy most associated with John Dewey and American democracy, is a philosophical tradition that has waxed and waned in prominence over the past century" (134). For Stemhagen and Hytten, pragmatism is a philosophical way of life in which inquiry and reflection can help us live and learn in the present. It runs parallel to the American experiment in democracy. As a leading iconoclast in pragmatic philosophy, West's (1989) evaluation is more measured. He argues, "American pragmatism is a diverse and heterogeneous tradition. But its common denominator consists of a future-oriented instrumentalism that tries to deploy thought as a weapon to enable more effective action" (5). As such, Hickman (1990, 2007) draws attention to the significant role that *instrumentalism* plays in Dewey's thinking. To distinguish his brand of pragmatism from Peirce and others, Dewey (1938) adopts terms such as instrumentalism and technology to emphasize the importance of the use of tools in influencing how we think and what we do. Therefore, the problems of philosophy and technology become entwined in Deweyan pragmatism, as he considered ideas, goals, and language to be artifacts as well as tools that condition knowledge and behavior (Dewey 1916a, 1916b).

In other words, the key to understanding Dewey's view of pragmatism is his contention that all inquiry that involves tools and artifacts, whether they are tangible or intangible, are inherently instrumental and valued as a form of technology. Since its earliest inception, the term *technology* has been interdefined with the use of tools and instruments (Hickman 1990). However, like philosophers of technology such as Heidegger (2013) and Foucault (1995), Dewey uses the concept to characterize the development and production of material and non-material things. He understood that technology, as a concept, involves tangible tools and machines as well as abstract thought and cultural practices (Hickman 1990). Based on Dewey's understanding of technology, Hickman (1990, 2001) argues that novels would also be considered a form of technology. However, critics such as Feenberg (2003) suggest Hickman overstates Dewey's philosophy of technology, minimalizing the ways in which technology can be configured by those in power to maintain their prerogatives and privileges. However, Hickman insists, "What a novelist is doing is a kind of technology. There are tools, there

are raw materials, there are intermediate stock parts, and there are skills, all of which enter into the finished product. What's not technological about that?" (Bella et al. 2015, 4).

This question suggests that the musings of scholars may be as technological as those of novelists. For example, Albrecht (2012) introduces a pragmatic genealogy of individualism beyond classic liberalism by turning to several influential American thinkers. In this lineage, Albrecht includes philosophers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, and John Dewey. He also includes writers such as Kenneth Burke and Ralph Ellison, thus repositioning them and conflating them with the classical pragmatic philosophers in American intellectual culture. These thinkers are all influenced by Emerson, who Albrecht (2012) considers a precursor for American pragmatism. He claims, "The notion that Emerson is a seminal figure or precursor for American pragmatism is no longer new or controversial" (18). For Albrecht, the tradition of American letters that runs from Emerson to Ellison provides a uniquely pragmatic approach to democratic selfhood. More specifically, he argues that Ellison revises and extends this influence in *Invisible Man*, placing Emersonian individualism within the context of modern race relations in the United States (Rasmussen 2020). In his reading of Emerson, Magee (2004) also challenges the traditional genealogy of pragmatism. Like Albrecht (2012), he situates Ellison firmly within the pragmatic philosophical lineage that he also claims is inaugurated by Emerson. Using Emerson's philosophy, Magee reveals how African American culture, literature, and jazz embody American pragmatism. For Magee, Ellison's Invisible Man represents a key manifestation of this interrelationship. The connections that Magee makes are rooted in Emerson's commitment to abolition, which helps to situate him as a pragmatist and the spiritual ancestor of the classical pragmatists and black writers such as Ellison. In fact, Magee finds Dewey's idea of democracy lacking because his philosophy "never exactly admits race or ethnicity as a category relevant to the expansion of democratic designs that he calls for" (21). The implication is that Emerson is a more radical pragmatist than his descendants since he contemplated race in America in ways the classical pragmatists often did not (Fallace 2017; Rasmussen 2020; West 1989). Magee (2004) claims that one of the compelling aspects of Ellison's

# Jeremy Dennis |

thinking on the topic of pragmatism is that "he is the first person since Emerson to offer an insistent and sustained description of the pragmatist method that relates it causally to the struggle by Americans (both empowered and disenfranchised) to make sense of their cultural identity vis-à-vis the symbolic agency of their founding documents" (22). This assertion might be the reason some reviewers of Magee's study have claimed that he believes that Ellison brings the idea of race, as it is exemplified by Emersonian philosophy and abolitionism, to pragmatism (Harris 2006, 106). However, it appears that few studies have been introduced to challenge this claim or consider what a revaluation of Ellison and *Invisible Man* using the philosophy of Immanuel Kant can teach us about the overlap among pragmatism, technology, and race (Carter 2023; Conner and Morel 2016; Germana 2018; Muyumba 2009; Rasmussen 2020; Roynon and Conner 2021).

### INTRODUCING KANT

Below, I argue that the writer who brings critical attention to the idea of race in pragmatism is not Ralph Ellison or his namesake, Ralph Waldo Emerson. It is Immanuel Kant, the Enlightenment philosopher whose racial worldview has been directly and indirectly challenged by writers in the African American literary tradition long before and after Emerson and Ellison (Gates 2014, 2024). This claim troubles the view that pragmatism is an inherently American or democratic philosophical contribution inaugurated by classical pragmatists such as Peirce, Dewey, James, and Mead. Although Peirce is considered the originator of pragmatism in the United States, his inspiration and founding ideas are derived from Kant's philosophy. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant ([1787] 2007) characterizes pragmatism as a way of actualizing the means to certain actions. As humans, he claims that we have to make judgments and choices in life that ultimately shape the ways in which we understand and interact in the world. In this sense, one might say Kantian pragmatism denotes the different imperatives or beliefs that inform our judgments, actions, and their consequences (Henschen 2011; Rydenfelt 2019). It is informed by the basic view that our minds construct and condition our understanding of concepts and the representations of objects. Without the cognitive structure provided by the categories in our minds and reason, Kant ([1787] 2007) argued that our

thoughts represent nothing more than the play of representation, prohibiting us from achieving the clarity that we need to inform our judgements and actions (Gava and Stern 2016; Prawat 2001). While Peirce (1955) admired Kant's thinking in this area, he did not agree with Kant's structure of the mind and his separation of theory from practice or perception from conception. Prawat (2001) notes, "Where Kant had drawn a firm line between perception and conception, Peirce sought to connect the two" (689).

Therefore, Peirce (1955) developed a triadic conceptualization of cognition and logic or semeiotics to explain the interrelations between empirical consequences and human agency. In clearer terms, Peirce intellectualizes perception by developing ways to help us to understand how our concepts and representations influence our practices (Dennis 2022; Gava and Stern 2016; Prawat 2001). To recognize the intellectual debt that he owed to Kant, Peirce appropriates the term pragmatisch, initially preferring this word over practicalism or technicalism (Rydenfelt 2019). Peirce (1955) reports, "Suffice it to say once more that pragmatism is, in itself, no doctrine of metaphysics, no attempt to determine any truths of things. It is merely a method of ascertaining the meaning of hard words and of abstract concepts" (271). Prawat (2001) argues, "Peirce was adamant about the essential role that Kant played in his thinking and development as a philosopher" (685). While Peirce's admiration for Kant is well known, many of the scholars mentioned above tend to focus on Dewey and absent Kant's contributions to pragmatism along with Peirce's development of the concept. West (1989) would agree that scholars often undervalue how significant Kant was to Peirce's philosophical achievements. He reports that Peirce's "lifelong struggle with Kant is well known. What is less noted is that Peirce saw Kant as a 'scientific man beneath the skin,' as one who came to philosophy from physics" (West 1989, 50). What attracted Peirce to Kant, according to West, was Kant's methods and his effort to model philosophical thinking on approaches used by scientists.

As a leading philosopher of the Enlightenment, Kant is considered one of the most influential thinkers in the Western intellectual tradition (Dennis 2020; Gates 2024; Roberts 2011). According to Andrews (2021), "Kant is just one philosopher, but he is an important starting point because his work has all the ingredients that are so potent in

the regimes of knowledge that underpin and maintain the current unjust social order" (7). In fact, his contributions to scientific or biological racism are foundational to some of our most aggressive and ubiquitous stereotypes about the image, culture, and capacities of people of color around the world, particularly those of African descent. Furthermore, Kant's declarations about different races are not easily separated from his philosophical views discussed above (Andrews 2021; Kleingeld 2007). In Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, Kant ([1798] 2006) explains how reason acts as a regulatory force in cognition. But he also establishes it as a priority for assessing the intellect and character of the races. For instance, during the Enlightenment, philosophers such as David Hume, Thomas Jefferson and Kant were notorious for ranking different humans on their ability to reason, particularly through writing (Jefferson [1785] 1999). To contemplate the protocols and limits of reason, "Kant writes off those who are not White" (Andrews 2021, 4). More specifically, to explain the intellectual inferiority of people of African descent, Kant relies on biological differences and racist ideologies. Andrews (2021) reports, "To think rationally is what separates man from beast, and the whole basis of the Enlightenment is that rational thought is the sole possession of the White man" (10). Kant and his contemporaries used what Gates (2014) calls the absence and presence of reason and writing ability to circumscribe and differentiate the humanity and intellectual capacities of different people—particularly men and women of African descent.

In many ways, Kant's views give the idea of *race* the veneer it needed to legitimate the enslavement, colonization, and marginalization of those considered Others (Andrews 2021; Fredrickson 2002). According to Kleingeld (2007), "Kant himself saw his race theory as significant" (579). He defined his understanding of the concept in terms of inheritable characteristics and what he perceived as intellectual and physical differences among different people. In fact, race would also become the primary way that Western thinkers categorize and organize humanity according to metrics that often include physical characteristics, ethnicity, culture and customs, and religious affiliation. As the coextension of race, the term *racism* is used in many countries and communities to characterize the hostility and discrimination directed against a group for any number

of reasons (Fredrickson 2002). Although the term is caustic and sometimes employed loosely, it is generally used to characterize an attitude of superiority. It also signifies a set of beliefs about human differences and the institutions, structures, and practices through which they are overtly or covertly operationalized and politicized. As such, power and difference are the key elements that give racism life and drive its mercurial character (Fredrickson 2002).

Moreover, what makes race and racism in the West so conspicuous and paradoxical for many of us is that they are often advanced alongside Enlightenment ideas that champion individual liberty and democracy (Andrews 2021; Fredrickson 2002; Gates 2024). For example, Gates (2014, 2024) claims that the pernicious combination of rationalism and biological racism were imprinted during the Enlightenment by philosophers such as Kant. As such, his views have iterated through the centuries in a variety of traditions and forms, particularly as it relates to the representation of people of color. Gates (2024) reports, "This unscientific and historically dangerous conflation of character with 'characteristics' was born in the eighteenth century, precisely when Europeans were attempting to justify the slave trade even in the discourse of philosophy" (18-19). In referencing Kant's contributions to the discourse on race, he reveals that Kant tended to speculate rather freely on the nature of different groups and their character and capacities, usually based on conjecture more than the scientific method that many Enlightenment thinkers often championed (Andrews 2021).

Nonetheless, Kant's troublesome views on race appear to reverberate across space and time, helping to legitimate many of the racist views that classical pragmatists in the United States advanced and/or failed to refute (Stemhagen and Hytten 2022). In many ways, scholars have indicated that Peirce's sentiments on race and slavery are not too distant from the thinking cultivated by Kant. Raposa (2021) argues that Peirce "embraced and defended discernibly racist beliefs and attitudes" about slavery and its abolition (32). This might explain why critics often argue that classical pragmatists have contributed very little on the topic of race and its correlates (Eldridge 2004; Neville 2018). More specifically, Lawson and Koch (2004) report that the founders of pragmatism express minimal interest in giving prominence to the question of race in their

writings. The authors claim, "The writings of the founders of pragmatism do not reveal much interest in racial questions. This omission reflects an older consensus account of American history and culture in which problems of race are not given prominence" (3). In his assessment, Carter (2023) accuses pragmatism—historically and presently—of being deficient on the question of race, particularly with respect to the African American intellectual tradition. For Neville (2018), Peirce and the other classical pragmatists did not pay enough attention to racism for their views to be sufficiently relevant to the topic today. Therefore, he and others would agree that racism should inspire a change in our understanding of pragmatism and a recognition of its Kantian origins (Stemhagen and Hytten 2022; West 1989).

Paradoxically, Ellison (1995a, 1995b) has also been critiqued for his contradictory positions on racial reform in the United States (Bland 2023; Purcell 2013). The historian John Hope Franklin contends, "I always felt that Ralph was an artist in the purest sense, and this precluded his rolling up his sleeves and getting into the action that was necessary to reform our society" (quoted in Rampersad 2007, 473). Some critics suggest that Ellison's prominence rested on his status as an iconic writer and intellectual—but also his role as a member of an anti-communist vanguard with an often paradoxical allegiance to the prerogatives of the American ruling class (Purcell 2013; Rampersad 2007). However, according to Ellison's supporters, Ellison used literature as an art form and intellectual tool to challenge discrimination and racism in the United States and abroad (Conner and Morel 2016; Roynon and Conner 2021). Scholars such as Magee (2004) and Rasmussen (2020) claim that this also entailed challenging the intellectual legacy and contributions of classical pragmatists such as Dewey and the hollowness of their democratic ideals when it came to race. With that said, few scholars have considered how Ellison's criticisms might also apply to Kant. Therefore, it raises the question, What are some of the ways that Ellison's *Invisible Man* challenges the legacy and logic of Kantian philosophy and its substantiation of race as a biological construct?

To address this question, I describe Kant's ([1777] 2000) hierarchical conception of race in works such as "Of the Different Human Races" and other writings. Then I reveal how the famed American sociologist Robert Park (1919) echoes Kant's racial logic

in "The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro," a text that espoused the kind of racial ideas and biases that would influence the field of sociology and the textbook used by Ellison as a college student (Ellison 1995a, 1995b; Wiley 2006). I explain why Ellison's lifelong aversion to sociology is triggered by his rejection of Park's racialized and gendered views of blacks. More significantly, I also show how the character known as Professor Woodridge functions as a literary tool that Ellison uses to challenge the thinking of iconoclasts such as Kant and Park. Ironically, most readers may not recognize this character from Ellison's novel because the chapter was not included in the final version of the book. However, we are indebted to the scholarship of Ferguson (2004) because it helps readers to recognize how Ellison's instrumentalization of Woodridge supports the work of Dewey (1938) and Hickman (2001, 2007). Dewey and Hickman encourage us to reimagine what novelists do as a form of instrumentalism or technology. However, I revalue their appreciation of the term *technology* to account for the significant role that race plays in Kant's philosophy and how it continues to function as a tool for securing, legitimizing, and reproducing the values and privileges of those in positions of power and authority in society. I reimagine the term to highlight the multidimensional character of race as an instrument or tool for exercising power and enabling anti-democratic practices across space and time. More significantly, in privileging race as a form of technology, I illustrate how the African American literary tradition emerges largely as a refutation of the Enlightenment values and thinking promulgated by thinkers such as Kant and his ideological heirs in classical pragmatism and beyond. In this context, we discover that Ellison's Invisible Man represents another instantiation of the ways in which African American literary artists refute Enlightenment racism—making it more challenging to argue that Ellison or Emerson brings critical attention to the idea of race in pragmatism in ways thinkers before them do not.

### KANT AND PARK ON RACIAL IDENTITY

In "Of the Different Human Races," Kant ([1777] 2000) identifies four different races based on climate, geography, and biological characteristics. They include the *White* race, the *Negro* race, the *Hun* (Mongol or Kalmuck) race, and the *Hindustani* (Hindu)

race. According to Kant, the races are considered deviations that are consistently preserved across generations. As such, the landscape of all humanity and its diversity can be understood within these four categories. Humans were developed to withstand life in a variety of climates and geographical locations. Therefore, the identifying traits and predispositions that Kant associates with each group are either advanced or held back by climate changes, making the race fitted to its particular place in the world. For instance, he argues that extreme heat and humidity explain why people of African descent have thick noses and fatty lips. Moreover, the climate in which they develop also explains why their skin is oily, which helps to prevent heavy perspiration and the harmful absorption of foul and humid air. The climate also accounts for other identifying factors, such as the strength, fleshiness, and agility of blacks. Consequently, Kant ([1777] 2000) claims that, since blacks were so well supplied by their motherland, they are inherently lazy, indolent, and dawdling. Andrews (2021) reports that Kant's description of people of African descent was not only used to disparage them but also to legitimate their enslavement and brutalization.

In other writings, Kant ([1764] 2011) claims that the nature of blacks makes them unable to exhibit feelings that rise above the ridiculous. He challenges his readers to find a single instance in which a person of African descent has demonstrated talents or great accomplishments in the arts or sciences. Unlike blacks, Kant argues that there are always members of the white race who can rise from the lowest rabble and gain the world's respect. Though Kant had second thoughts about his views on race later in his career, Kleingeld (2007) reports that he did promulgate the idea that the white race is superior or non-deficient, exhibiting the kind of ingenuity and talents the other races do not. In fact, Kant claims that Hindus were also "superior to the Negroes, because they can be educated, but they can be educated only in the arts, not in the sciences and other endeavours that require abstract concepts" (Kleingeld 2007, 577). Kant also imagines the differences in the skin color of the black race and the white race to be as different as their mental capacities. To exact this point, he accuses blacks of being vain, talkative, and superstitious. Kant also critiques their religious practices or *fetishes*, which he claims are widespread among the race. He reports that objects such as bird

feathers, cow horns, or other common objects are often consecrated with words and venerated through oaths. Kant ([1764] 2011) likens these religious practices to a form of idolatry that sinks into a level of ridiculousness that is antithetical to human nature.

In "The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro," Park (1919) echoes Kant's views when he describes Negroes in the United States or African Americans. He observes them for his study on the ability of different racial groups to assimilate into American society, a process that he deemed slow, cumbersome, and not always complete. Park and other aspiring scholars in the emerging field of sociology wondered how one could Americanize and domesticate the different cultural populations and their particularities, especially the large influx of immigrants pouring into the country during the Progressive Era (Ferguson 2004; Wiley 2006). For Park, the temperament of racial groups could help him determine how successfully they could acculturate in the United States, particularly with the assistance of educational institutions. The Negro population was considered an ideal test case for determining how successfully immigrant groups could assimilate. Park (1919) reports, "For a study of the acculturation process, there are probably no materials more complete and accessible than those offered by the history of the American Negro" (115). He contends that Negroes brought few traditions and little intellectual baggage with them from Africa, making them unique in the American population. Park (1919) claims, "It is, however, in their religious practices that we have the nearest approach to anything positively African" (121).

In his observations of the religion and character of black people, particularly those in fairly isolated communities, Park offers assessments that further reflect a Kantian racial ethos. For instance, he attributes the superstition and conjuring associated with some of the religious practices of blacks a consequence of their living in an *intellectual twilight* on isolated plantations. Park (1919) determines, "On the whole the plantation Negro's religion was a faithful copy of the white man's" (123). While Park considered the average intelligence of the races to be nearly the same, he reports that it is expected that different races will exhibit certain traits and tendencies that are a manifestation of biological rather than cultural distinctions. For example, Park compares Negroes and Jews. He considers Jews to be sophisticated, possessing racial traits and

Jeremy Dennis |

aptitudes that are apparently lacking in the black population. By comparison, Negroes are considered primitive, lending credence to Park's suggestion that different racial temperaments and innate characteristics often manifest in the objects of attention, tastes, and talents of different racial groups. This explains why Park wonders if the Negro's interest in music and bright colors could be attributed to race or merely a feature of a primitive people.

In his analysis, Park reports that the temperament of Negroes may very well predispose them to interests and attachments to "external, physical things rather than to subjective states and objects of introspection; in a disposition for expression rather than enterprise and action" (129). He goes on to claim that blacks are more interested in life itself and not its reconstruction or transfiguration. Park concludes that Negroes, by nature, are not *intellectuals* or *idealists* like the Jews. Moreover, they are not pioneering or adventurous like the Anglo-Saxons. According to Park, the Negro is "primarily an artist, loving life for its own sake. His métier is expression rather than action. The Negro is, so to speak, the lady among the races" (130). In other words, the racial temperament of blacks in the United States feminizes them in ways that the logical, contemplative, and adventurous nature of other races do not. Not only would Park's racists views of blacks go on to shape the emerging field of sociology but also the textbooks that college students such as Ellison used as an introduction to the field, black culture, and black representation in scholarship (Ferguson 2004; Lawrie 2016).

## ELLISON'S LITERARY INSTRUMENTALISM

The *Invisible Man* is considered one of the most iconic texts in American literature. The work remains a mainstay of scholarly interest in a variety of fields and disciplines (Baldwin 2021; Conner and Morel 2016; Lawrie 2016). In the novel, the unnamed narrator elaborates his sense of alienation and invisibility as a black man living in the United States. In his attempt to establish a sense of identity and belonging, the narrator moves through a social odyssey that challenges him academically, physically, and ideologically. Interestingly, Ferguson (2004) evaluates an unpublished chapter of Ellison's novel found in his collected papers at the Library of Congress in the United States. Though

readers may never know why the chapter was excluded from the final version of the book, Ferguson notes that the existence of the chapter is seldom discussed. However, it can add a new dimension to our understanding of how Ellison instrumentalizes characterization in the novel to challenge the racial world views of Kant and his ideological heirs. As discussed earlier, the term *instrumentalism* is used by Dewey (1938) to distinguish his brand of pragmatism from that of philosophers such as Peirce. He claims that ideas and language are instruments or tools that we use to make sense of the world and determine our actions. For Dewey, instrumentalism empowers us to identify and transform social processes in ways that can alter and improve the lives of human beings and their cultural conditions. When Dewey's logic is applied to the work of novelists such as Ellison, we can discover how the novel itself functions as a form of inquiry set up to address problems and transform our perspectives (Bella et al. 2015; Hickman 1990). In this context, the character named Woodridge in the unpublished chapter of Ellison's *Invisible Man* illustrates what instrumentalism looks like as a literary strategy that challenges the racial logic of thinkers such as Kant and Park.

For example, Ferguson (2004) describes the character Woodridge as a black queer man who teaches at the college that Ellison's narrator attends. He is an outspoken intellectual who finds literature, philosophy, and sociology to be areas of knowledge production that promote illusions against life. Ferguson writes, "The lost character named Woodridge haunts the college and exists as an internal reminder of the college's proximity to nonnormativity" (61). As a respected professor, Woodridge rejects the idea that sociology is an objective science, particularly when its substantiation is predicated on the exercise of power, the operationalization of racism, and the weaponization of masculinity or lack thereof. As such, Woodridge would also reject Park's formulation of African Americans. For him, Park's views reduce the complexity of human life and its heterogeneity to serve the larger goal of Americanization, which is ultimately a form of social control for the maintenance of hierarchical power (Baldwin 2021; Ferguson 2004). Moreover, Woodridge's specific critique of sociology demonstrates Ellison's interest in the ways in which sociologists such as Park (1919) exercise power through their production of knowledge about African Americans. In some respects, Woodridge embodies

many of Ellison's own reservations about sociology as a scientific enterprise. In this sense, Woodridge's characterization acts as the literary tool that Ellison uses as a novelist to signify and critique the racialized practices of sociologists and their formulations of African American identity and culture (Ferguson 2004). With that said, we cannot fully appreciate the creation of the character Woodridge and his disposition without understanding why Ellison is critical of sociology as a social science.

In the period before World War I, sociology was considered the preeminent science for racial inquiry in the United States. For sociologists such as Park, race and its frictions were inseparable from world problems (Lawrie 2016). According to Wiley (2006), pragmatism contributed significantly to the establishment of sociology as an emerging academic discipline. During the formative years of sociology in the United States, several thinkers known as The Chicago School began the work of legitimating sociology as an academic field built on scientific methods. According to Wiley (2006), "Peirce's ideas are very close to those of the 1920s Chicago School generally, which was the first paradigm in the history, at least the American history, of sociology" (44). Sociologists such as Robert Park and Ernest W. Burgess are often recognized as prominent members of this group. They would go on to author the sociology textbook that Ellison (1995b) used during his time at Tuskegee University. Unsurprisingly, Ellison finds their book entitled *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* to be deeply offensive and consequential. In fact, it reiterates and advances many of Park's views in "The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro" (Ferguson 2004). Ellison (1995b) reports that, before taking the path that led to writing, he faced the irony and humiliation of being taught at a Negro college by a Negro instructor who used Park and Burgess's sociology textbook for the course.

Ellison (1995b) is particularly angered by their claim that black Americans are considered the lady of the races. He is also alarmed by his instructor's disinterest in refuting the textbook's racist arguments about black culture. In this case, *culture* describes the beliefs, social forms, and practices that contour the image and representation of blacks in the imagination of Park and Burgess, which is repugnant to Ellison. Their depiction of blacks in the United States locates them outside of normal human

relations by distorting their history and diverse experiences then reducing them to caricatures. Rampersad (2007) claims that Ellison disliked "the idea that separate races existed with distinctly separate endowments, but believed instead in the fertility of culture and the dynamic of cross-cultural change" (78). Consequently, Ellison resents sociology, finding it dogmatic, arrogant, and unwilling to recognize its limitations and questionable practices (Rampersad 2007). Ultimately, Ellison determines that the demeaning representations of black life by sociologists such as Park and Burgess would not limit him as a writer. As such, he determines that "nothing could go unchallenged; especially that feverish industry dedicated to telling Negroes who and what they are, and which can usually be counted upon to deprive both humanity and culture of their complexity" (Ellison 1995b, xx). These experiences inspire him to become more aware of craft, technique, and the nature of the culture and society out of which literature emerges. For him, literature is a by-product of a writer's imagination. However, Ellison (1995b) also discovers that it is a confrontation with the realities of the world as well as a way to convert experience into symbolic action. He claims, "Negro Americans have a highly developed ability to abstract desirable qualities from those around them, even from their enemies, and my sense of reality could reject bias while appreciating the truth revealed by achieved art" (Ellison 1995b, xx).

With this in mind, Woodridge appears to exemplify the kind of critical consciousness that Ellison (1995b) values as a way to combat the racial logic and identity formation advanced by sociology and its pioneers. After Ellison's narrator is banished from the university, he turns to Woodridge. The narrator recognizes Woodridge as a figure of curiosity and a scholar with ideas and deep insights about culture and the workings of the world. As an outspoken intellectual and educator, Woodridge becomes an academic resource for the unnamed narrator (Ferguson 2004). While Woodridge's homosexuality is often perceived as threatening, the narrator values him as an intellectual with critical insights about the real purpose of education and sciences like sociology and how they appropriate and devalue black humanity. He states that there were "certain rumors whispered about Woodridge and though I admired his knowledge of books and parlimentary [sic] strategy, I had always avoided his quarters. But now I had to talk"

(quoted in Ferguson 2004, 61). Ferguson (2004) elaborates, "In Woodridge's room, the main character can claim an alternative humanity constituted outside of hierarchical arrangements that hark back to slavery and that make up the social relations of the university campus" (62). Ferguson might also agree that Woodridge's character is antithetical to the idea of blacks as a race incapable of education or lacking in talent, ingenuity, or the ability to think abstractly. As a professor, Woodridge frustrates claims that people of African descent are incapable of being intellectuals, idealists, or pioneers. Moreover, his status as an intellectual undercuts arguments that suggest blacks are preoccupied with religion, idolatry, and bright colors—and therefore—doomed to a life of expression rather than one of action. Ellison crafts a fully realized human being in Woodridge, one who is the exact opposite of the kind of black person conjured in the writings of Kant and Park and Burgess. In Woodridge, our notions about identity, sexuality, and intellectual capacity become fluid and too complicated for categorization or racialization as Kant or Park and Burgess imagined. In many respects, Ellison's instrumentalization of Woodridge establishes him as a technology for dismantling the racialization of knowledge about people of African descent, particularly in the United States (Ferguson 2004; Foucault 1995).

As we discussed earlier in this study, Hickman (1990, 2001) treats the terms *instrumentalism* and *technology* as synonymous concepts in Deweyan pragmatism. In advancing Dewey's philosophy, Hickman has argued that what novelists do is a kind of technology. By extension, this assessment by Hickman would also include Ellison's instrumentalization of Woodridge to challenge the logic of racism that operates in sociology and its substantiation by pragmatists who might think like Kant. According to Hickman, Dewey was writing about the philosophy of technology and power long before many of the icons associated with these areas—such as Heidegger and Foucault (Bella et al. 2015; Feenberg 2003). However, their insights also deserve consideration because they enrich our understanding of how pragmatism, technology, and race entwine and why African American writers have often instrumentalized their work to challenge and dismantle the kind of beliefs that Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers promulgated about people of African descent.

### TECHNOLOGY AND AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

In his assessment of technology, Foucault (1981, 1995) assigns a central role to power. He claims that power is a form of action in a field of other potential actions. It is exercised rather than possessed, creating agents in some contexts and subjects in others. Power may operate according to a set of public or hidden rules, fixed norms, strategies, or techniques that are valued as tools or technologies for realizing a course of action or goal (Garnar 2006). For Foucault, the term *technology of power* describes the various means and mechanisms through which power is exercised for control. For example, the categorization and normalization of human beings are key indicators of its operationalization in society (Foucault 1995; Garnar 2006). Like Foucault, Heidegger (2013) employs the term *technology* to characterize the use of ideas and objects as a means to an end. He claims, "Instrumentality is considered to be the fundamental characteristic of technology" (12). However, what is distinct in Heidegger's conceptualization is that he argues that technology is also a way of bringing-forth or revealing. When we imagine technology as a form of revealing, the essence of technology can be illuminated. Exploring the essence of technology helps us to understand its different meanings and historical significance. According to Heidegger (2013), the term technology originates from the Greek word technikon, which is often associated with the word technê. This term is generally used to describe the art, technique, or craft associated with a particular activity or skill. However, technê is also used to refer to the arts of the mind and the fine arts, describing a process of making, creating, and bringing-forth. Heidegger's characterization highlights the fact that technology is more than simply the manifestation of human and non-human culture. Our understandings of its dimensions are entwined in the constructive nature of language and discourse. Heidegger suggests that it is through these mediums that the essence of technology as a tool and form of power can be examined and comprehended (Achterhuis 2001).

Therefore, in the Heideggerian sense of the concept, technology provides us with a framework for questioning and meditating on the construction of ideas, artifacts, and social reality. As such, Heidegger's (2013) work has influenced the perspectives on technology advanced by scholars such as Chun (2009). She claims that Heidegger's views of the relationship between humans and technology resonate with the historical

experiences of many people of color. In fact, Chun and others have used Heidegger's philosophy of technology to substantiate and advance race as a form of technology (Sheth 2009). Chun argues that race, like tools and equipment, is inherently instrumental, producing the kind of social, political, and economic conditions that reproduce inequality. In addition, race has been privileged in Enlightenment thought and beyond as a set of visible and invisible biological traits and unchanging characteristics that signal one's proximity to humanness. However, when race is treated as a form of technology, we can problematize "the usual modes of visualization and revelation, while at the same time making possible new modes of agency and casualty" (Chun 2009, 28). Such efforts are important because, traditionally, race has operated as an organizing and management principle for registering the identities and capacities of different people. It also produces and configures social relations across space and time in ways that often enable those in power to sustain and reproduce the privileges that accrue to them and those in their particular social and economic strata (Chun 2009; Coleman 2009; Sheth 2009). In her effort to explain how race functions as a technology, Thomas (2021) characterizes it as "the set of knowledge practices involved in the construction, legitimation, and enforcement of social categories—in this case, identity categories" (1887). Her broadening of our consideration of technology accounts for the ways in which race produces, legitimates, and enforces social beliefs and categories that essentialize racial differences in ways that distort the complexity of human identity and limit the synthesizing effect of culture. In this context, we move from cultural and biological considerations of race to how it is weaponized over time to benefit some at the expense of others. Chun (2009) argues, "At a certain level, the notion of race as technology seems obvious, for race historically has been a tool of subjugation" (10). Therefore, technology must be seen in broader terms to account for its material and non-material modes and pragmatic dimensions (Allen and Hecht 2001; Pitt 2000; Roberts 2011). As such, no understanding of technology is complete without both tangible and intangible understandings of the concept and attention to the ways they have been used throughout time to organize raw materials, knowledge, and people for the ends of others (Pitt 2000; Thomas 2021).

This (re)conceptualization of technology can help to explain why Ellison's novel and characterization of Woodridge represent another instantiation of the refutation of race and racism in the African American literary tradition—making it more challenging to argue that Ellison or Emerson brings critical attention to the idea of race in pragmatism when many writers before them have troubled the Enlightenment thinking on which race and pragmatism are substantiated and advanced in the writings of thinkers such as Kant and Park. Ellison's characterization of Woodridge recognizes and illustrates how, as a technology, race is a continuously applied practice that is always implicated in a greater objective, which is typically reinforcing the social, political, and economic control of diverse populations (Andrews 2021; Fredrickson 2002; Thomas 2021). Therefore, when we posit race as a form of technology, we move from a meditation on what race is to a focus on how it functions as a pragmatic tool. For example, Chun (2009) claims that considering race as a technology serves as an illustration of a simile, but one that encapsulates the logic of comparison, differentiation, and marginalization in society. She argues, "Race as technology reveals how race functions as the 'as,' how it facilitates comparisons between entities classed as similar or dissimilar" (2009, 8).

However, to appreciate how race operates as a form of technology in the practical philosophy of thinkers such as Kant, we have to consider how these concepts overlap in Enlightenment thought, the philosophical and historical context in which Kant's thinking manifests then iterates over time. In his writings on Kant and the Enlightenment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Wellmon (2015) associates this period with scientific and intellectual advancements and concepts like *freedom* and *equality*. However, the term *enlightenment* also refers to a wide array of technologies like philosophical systems, racial taxonomies, and various kinds of texts designed to explicate, organize, and manage knowledge as well as people. Wellmon reports that these technologies were not simply tools. They were pragmatic instruments that functioned as material extensions of the "humans who controlled and determined their use" (Wellmon 2015, 6-7). In other words, these technologies or tools were imbued with the general ethos, beliefs, and values of those who operationalized them to serve their philosophical needs and those in charge of emerging nation states whose growth and

advancement often depended on racial chattel slavery and colonialism (Andrews 2021; Gates 2024). Rydenfelt (2019) reminds us that pragmatism, for Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, is rooted in the imperatives and beliefs that inform our thinking and condition our actions. The racism that permeates Enlightenment thought and actualization aligns with Rydenfelt's assessment. This might explain why Enlightenment philosophy is often associated with racial logics that are flawed but invariably handy in helping to legitimate the human subjugation, marginalization, and exploitation of people who are deemed different or Others. To clarify this point, Gates (2014) argues that we tend to characterize the Enlightenment by its preoccupation with the categorization and systematization of all knowledge and humans. He claims that this disposition led directly to the relegation of black people to the lowest rung on the Great Chain of Being, a popular conceptual tool and metaphor used during the Enlightenment to value and stratify all creation—particularly humans.

As evidenced by Kant ([1777] 2000) and Park (1919) above, normative and descriptive accounts of racial groups and their ability to reason were often conflated and categorized according to racialized schemes. For example, Kleingeld (2007) reminds us that Kant's definition of race is built on his perception of the heritable differences in physical appearances. Moreover, she notes that Kant also connects "his understanding of race with a hierarchical account according to which the races also vary greatly in their capacities for agency and their powers of intellect" (574). According to Ferguson (2004), Ellison's depiction of Woodridge threatens Enlightenment normality and the forms of systemization often associated with Kantian philosophy. In many respects, the practices and regulations used to organize and manage the campus environment and academic structure in which Woodridge must function have their roots in Kant's architectonic notion of reason for man as well as education (Dennis 2020, 2024a). Ferguson (2004) claims, "Woodridge strikes at the very heart of American education by frustrating its claims to national ideals of equality and its promise of upward mobility" (63). He casts aspersions on these claims and the interpellating agendas that he associates with the sociology of Park and Burgess. The narrator in Ellison's chapter reports, "Woodridge was the teacher mentioned when there was a question of ideas and scholarship. He was

the nearest symbol of the intellectual to be found on the campus" (quoted in Ferguson 2004, 61). Woodridge recognizes that academic institutions organized around Enlightenment discourses that proclaim to advance equality are paradoxical in the sense that they are often more invested in the management and reproduction of racial differences and social class than critiques of these areas (Ferguson 2004). As such, Wellmon (2015) would agree that it is difficult to disassociate Enlightenment technologies from the systems of thought and paradigms that Kant and others have used to articulate their racial theories and social hierarchies. For Wellmon, technology is a way of revealing, but it also describes how humans and their various artifacts and tools interact, including different forms of texts and institutional practices. Wellmon (2015) claims, "Technology refers to this complex environment of interactions, replete with its own norms, practices, and emergent properties" (12).

In his study on the role of signification in the African American literary tradition, Gates (2014, 2024) identifies racism as a defining feature and interactive practice in Enlightenment thought. This dynamic has had a lasting impact on African American writers who often used literature to challenge and refute the ways racism and white supremacist ideologies manifested and advanced notions of black inferiority. Racism and its correlating logic are rooted in both the interpretation and exploitation of Enlightenment philosophy. Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant imagined that science and reason were the keys that could help determine who was and was not fit to be considered human or rightful citizens (Fredrickson 2002; Gates 2014). Gates (2024) has mentioned how Enlightenment philosophers would use writing as a technology to calibrate the reasoning ability of people of African descent. For such arbiters, writing and texts supported their normative conceptualizations of human beings as well as those forms and displays of knowledge that they considered legitimate. Philosophers such as Hume, Jefferson, and Kant have claimed that black writers were imitators rather than authors of original script. Their doubts likened the literary contributions of blacks to that of a parrot or mockingbird, often based on what they deemed to be a lack of originality or the ability to excel at mimicry or *mindless imitation* (Gates 2014, 2024). This Enlightenment skepticism is echoed centuries later when Ellison (1995b) questions why writers such as

Ernest Hemingway often failed to recognize the humanity of black people in their fiction. Ellison (1995b) claims, "Thus it is unfortunate for the Negro that the most powerful formulations of modern American fictional words have been so slanted against him that when he approaches for a glimpse of himself he discovers an image drained of humanity" (25).

The African American literary tradition and its aesthetics largely emerge as a response to the draining of black humanity and racialized thinking promulgated by Enlightenment thinkers and their intellectual and literary heirs. They often doubted the value, intellect, and abilities of people of African descent such as Olaudah Equiano, James Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, and Phillis Wheatley (Gates 2014, 2024). Masterful revisionary strategies and intertextuality would come to define the signification at the heart of the African American literary tradition, particularly in the works of writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and Ellison's literary mentor, Richard Wright. To be original for African American writers, according to Gates, was not to mindlessly imitate one's literary ancestors but revise and extend prior literary contributions in ways that were revelatory and powerful bulwarks against Enlightenment ideologies about race and its afterlife in contemporary intellectual thought (Dennis 2024b; Gates 2024). If people of African descent could reason and master writing and the sciences so prized by Enlightenment philosophers, then this capacity would trouble the differentiation, categorization, and racial hierarchies that race and racism were used to develop and legitimate. What is undeniable in Gates's assessment is that the literary contributions of writers in the African American literary tradition represent a space in which black authors could establish and redefine their place in the human community, where they had been largely excluded by Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and the instrumentalization of conceptual tools such as the Great Chain of Being.

Gates (2014) and other scholars locate Ellison and his work firmly within this long tradition of African American literary resistance and those who sometimes helped to finance it (Lewis 1984; Purcell 2013; Rampersad 2007). In this tradition, many writers before Ellison (1995b) sought to challenge and dismantle the Enlightenment logic that underpins Kant's practical philosophy as well as the racist taxonomies, ideologies, and

other technologies that it helped to reproduce. Gates (2014) reports that even Ellison had to recognize the debt that he owed to his literary ancestors and relatives, which includes writers such as Wright and Emerson. In the African American literary tradition, this influence is often demonstrated through the repetition of tropes or the use of vernacular language. It is also initiated by forms of literary instrumentalism as it is exemplified by Ellison's characterization of Professor Woodridge (Ferguson 2004; Gates 2014). Therefore, when we imagine Woodridge's characterization in Ellison's novel, we can more clearly recognize the ways his creation enriches the African American literary tradition as a technology that challenges the kind of Enlightenment thinking that distorts race and sets the stage for the misrepresentation and marginalization of black humanity (Ferguson 2004; Gates 2024). In this sense, Ellison and Woodridge stand on the shoulders of a long list of writers of African descent who have resisted and refuted race and racism in Western thought and far beyond it.

#### **CONCLUSION**

This study reconsiders the significance of Immanuel Kant's philosophical contributions to pragmatism. When we recognize Kant as a key progenitor of pragmatism, we can more clearly see that race is implicated in the pragmatic philosophical school of thought long before its consideration and refutation by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Ralph Ellison. This finding suggests that, in order to enact a thorough evaluation of race in the genealogy of pragmatism, we might start with Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and not classical American pragmatists or Ellison. The problem is that Kant's views are deeply problematic and reductive, thus setting the stage for the proliferation of race and racism that Emerson and Ellison later challenge. However, we find that Kant's thinking about race continues to have a long afterlife, reverberating in the writings of sociologists such as Robert Park and many classical pragmatists such as Peirce. This pattern inspires an appreciation of race as a technology and continuous practice that operates across space and time. As a technology, the concept of race illuminates and recalibrates our understanding of pragmatism and its Kantian inheritance. This alternative conceptualization invites us to consider new ways to contemplate and explicate the

#### Jeremy Dennis |

character and representation of racial representation in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, particularly as we gain more insights about why certain material was left out of his novel. However, it would be a mistake to try to understand Ellison's novel or his characterization of Woodridge without understanding how both are situated in a long tradition in which black writers and their literary contributions have continuously pushed against some of the darkest recesses of our Enlightenment heritage.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Achterhuis, Hans, ed. 2001. *American Philosophy of Technology: The Empirical Turn.* Translated by Robert P. Crease. Indiana University Press.

Albrecht, James M. 2012. *Reconstructing Individualism: A Pragmatic Tradition from Emerson to Ellison*. Fordham University Press.

Allen, Michael, and Gabrielle Hecht, eds. 2001. *Technologies of Power: Essays in Honor of Thomas Parke Hughes and Agatha Chipley Hughes*. MIT Press.

Andrews, Kehinde. 2021. The New Age of Empire: How Racism and Colonialism Still Rule the World. Bold Type Books.

Baldwin, Zebulah. 2021. "Dialogically Destabilizing Discourses of Power/Knowledge in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*." *JAm It! Journal of American Studies in Italy* 5:99–129.

Bella, Michela, Matteo Santarelli, and Larry Hickman. 2015. "Interview with Larry A. Hickman." European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy 7 (VII-2): 1-10.

Bland, Jr., Sterling L. 2023. *In the Shadow of Invisibility: Ralph Ellison and the Promise of American Democracy*. Louisiana State University.

Carter, Jacoby A. 2023. "Pragmatism and Race." In *The Routledge Companion to Pragmatism*, edited by Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse. Routledge.

Chun, Wendy H. K. 2009. "Introduction: Race and/as Technology; or, How to Do Things to Race." *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 24 (1/70): 7-35.

Coleman, Beth. 2009. "Race as Technology." *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 24 (1/70): 177-207.

Conner, Marc C., and Lucas E. Morel, eds. 2016. *The New Territory: Ralph Ellison and the Twenty-First Century*. University Press of Mississippi.

Dennis, Jeremy. 2020. "The Kantian Effect: Reconceiving the Integration of Knowledge in Interdisciplinary Theory." *Journal of Interdisciplinary Sciences* 4 (2): 1-14.

Inherited Pragmatism: Race, Representation, and Technology
2022. "Peircean Architectonics in the Discourse and Digitalization of Interdisciplinarity." <i>Journal of Interdisciplinary Sciences</i> 6 (2): 1-20.
2024a. "Ralph Ellison and the Scientific Management of Slavery and Education." <i>Journal of African American Studies</i> 28 (3): 315-30.
2024b. "Slavery's Afterlife in Black Education: Foucauldian Architectonics and the Discourse of Racial Surveillance and Pedagogy." <i>Journal of African American Studies</i> 28 (2): 136-53.
Dewey, John. 1916a. Essays in Experimental Logic. The University of Chicago Press.
1916b. "The Pragmatism of Peirce." <i>The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods</i> 13 (26): 709-15.
1938. Logic: The Theory of Inquiry. Henry Holt.
Eldridge, Michael. 2004. "Dewey on Race and Social Change." In <i>Pragmatism and the Problem of Race</i> , edited by Bill E. Lawson and Donald F. Koch. Indiana University Press.
Ellison, Ralph. 1995a. <i>Invisible Man</i> . Second Edition. Vintage Books.
1995b. Shadow and Act. Vintage Books.
Fallace, Thomas. 2017. "The Paradox of Race and Culture in Dewey's <i>Democracy and Education</i> ." <i>The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era</i> 16 (4): 473-87.
Feenberg, Andrew. 2003. "Pragmatism and Critical Theory of Technology." <i>Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology</i> 7 (1): 29-33.
Ferguson, Roderick. 2004. Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique. University of Minnesota Press.
Foucault, Michel. 1981. "The Order of Discourse." In <i>Untying the Text: A Post-StructuralistReader</i> , edited by Robert Young. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
1995. <i>Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison</i> . Translated by Alan Sheridan. Vintage Books.
Fredrickson, George. 2002. Racism: A Short History. Princeton University Press.
Garnar, Andrew. 2006. "Power, Action, Signs: Between Peirce and Foucault." <i>Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society</i> 42 (3): 347-66.
2020. Pragmatism, Technology, and the Persistence of the Postmodern. Lexington Books.

Jeremy Dennis | Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. 2014. The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism. Oxford University Press. \_\_\_\_. 2024. The Black Box: Writing the Race. Penguin. Gava, Gabriele, and Robert Stern, eds. 2016. Pragmatism, Kant, and Transcendental Philosophy. Routledge. Germana, Michael. 2018. Ralph Ellison: Temporal Technologist. Oxford University Press. Harris, William J. 2006. "Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing." William Carlos Williams Review 26 (1): 104-107. Heidegger, Martin. (1977) 2013. *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. Translated by William Lovitt. Harper Perennial Modern Classics. Henschen, Tobias. 2011. "Kant's Pragmatism." British Journal for the History of Philosophy" 21 (1): 165-76. Hickman, Larry A. 1990. *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology*. Indiana University Press. \_\_. 2001. Philosophical Tools for Technological Culture: Putting Pragmatism to Work. Indiana University Press. \_\_\_\_. 2007. Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism: Lessons from John Dewey. Fordham University. Jefferson, Thomas. (1785) 1999. Notes on the State of Virginia. Edited by Frank Shuffelton. Penguin Books. Kant, Immanuel. (1777) 2000. "Of the Different Human Races." In The Idea of Race, edited by Robert Bernasconi and Tommy L. Lot. Hackett Publishing Company. B. Louden. Cambridge University Press.

\_\_\_. (1798) 2006. Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View. Translated by Robert

\_\_\_\_. (1787) 2007. Critique of Pure Reason. Translated by N. K. Smith). Palgrave Macmillan.

\_\_\_\_\_. (1764) 2011. "Observations of the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime." In Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings, edited by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer. Cambridge University Press.

Kleingeld, Pauline. 2007. "Kant's Second Thoughts on Race." The Philosophical Quarterly 57 (229): 573-92.

Lawrie, Paul. R. D. 2016. Forging a Laboring Race: The African American Worker in the *Progressive Imagination*. NYU Press.

Lawson, Bill E. and Donald F. Koch, eds. 2004. *Pragmatism and the Problem of Race*. Indiana University Press.

Lewis, David Levering. 1984. "Parallels and Divergences: Assimilationist Strategies of Afro-American and Jewish Elites from 1910 to the Early 1930s." *The Journal of American History* 71 (3): 543-64.

Magee, Michael. 2004. *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing*. University of Alabama Press.

Muyumba, Walton M. 2009. *The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism*. The University of Chicago Press.

Neville, Robert C. 2018. "How Racism Should Cause Pragmatism to Change." *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 39 (1): 53-63.

Park, Robert E. 1919. "The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro." *The Journal of Negro History* 4 (2): 111-33.

Peirce, Charles S. 1955. *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, edited by Justus Buchler. Dover.

Pitt, Joseph. 2000. *Thinking about Technology: Foundations of the Philosophy of Technology*. Seven Bridges Press.

Posnock, Ross, ed. 2005. *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*. Cambridge University Press.

Purcell, Richard. 2013. *Race, Ralph Ellison and American Cold War Intellectual Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Rampersad, Arnold. 2007. Ralph Ellison: A Biography. Knopf.

Raposa, Michael L. 2021. "Peirce and Racism: Biographical and Philosophical Considerations: Presidential Address." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 57 (1): 32-44.

Rasmussen, Johs. 2020. "Pragmatic Strategies of Resistance: Ralph Ellison's Radical Second Act." *Aspeers* 13:59-77.

Richardson, Joan. 2014. *Pragmatism and American Experience: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press.

Roberts, Dorothy. 2011. Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-create Race in the Twenty-First Century. The New Press.

Roynon, Tessa, and Marc C. Conner, eds. 2021. *Global Ralph Ellison: Aesthetics and Politics Beyond US Borders*. Peter Lang.

Jeremy Dennis |

Rydenfelt, Henrik. 2019. "Kant and Peirce on Pragmatic Maxims." In *Pragmatist Kant: Pragmatism, Kant, and Kantianism in the Twenty- First Century*, edited by Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński and Sami Pihlström. Studies in Nordic Pragmatism.

Sheth, Falguni A. 2009. *Toward a Political Philosophy of Race*. SUNY Press.

Stemhagen, Kurt, and Kathy Hytten. 2022. "Pragmatism, Antiracism, and New Democratic Possibilities." *Philosophy of Education* 78 (3): 134-48.

Thomas, Chantal. 2021. "Race as a Technology of Global Economic Governance." *UCLA Law Review* 67:1860-895.

Wellmon, Chad. 2015. Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University. Johns Hopkins University Press.

West, Cornel. 1989. *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. Macmillan.

Wiley, Norbert. 2006. "Peirce and the Founding of American Sociology." *Journal of Classical Sociology* 6 (1): 23-50.

**Dr. Jeremy Dennis** is a Professor in Liberal Arts & Humanities at St. Louis Community College. His scholarly work has appeared in journals such as *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, Planning and Changing Journal, Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education, Journal of African American Studies, i.e.: Inquiry in Education, Critical Questions in Education, and Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology. E-mail: <a href="mailto:jdennis@stlcc.edu">jdennis@stlcc.edu</a>* 

#### THE PROBLEM OF FREE WILL IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

#### **Paolo Pitari** (author)

New York: Routledge, 2024, pp. 271, ISBN: 9781032676678

## Reviewed by Ali Dehdarirad

The overreaching argument of Paolo Pitari's book is that David Foster Wallace ultimately failed in his aspiration to write a kind of fiction that would meaningfully deal with and "redeem despair" (1) in US society. This idea is suggested right from the outset in the book's title that characterizes free will as a "problem" in the novelist's oeuvre. Pitari suggests that this existentialist contradiction throughout Wallace's work stems from the fact that he found himself at a fork in the road, seeking to reconcile the meaningfulness of life with free will. Observing that such an attempt, whether in philosophy or fiction, is inevitably doomed to fail, the author posits that Wallace's works, precisely because of their insightful failure, encourage us to reconsider our interpretation of the world as one that inherently entails despair.

Indeed, the novelist's project aimed at finding a way to redeem our fundamental terrors of life—including loneliness, solipsism, and self-judgement—which eventually lead to despair. Nevertheless, his attempt bore no fruit insofar as he looked for redemption within the very framework of our existing beliefs such as free will, which itself involves despair. In other words, the book argues that free will cannot be considered a fundamental truth, prompting the possibility of creating meaning in life, because assuming free will to be true also implies the fact that all the intolerable problems which Wallace wrote about are irredeemable.

The book is divided into three parts with chapters that might be read independently or in relation to one another. One of the merits of Pitari's book is that it effectively draws on a vast number of philosophical sources to spell out his argument. He analyzes the question of free will versus determinism across Wallace's works, from his first published story "The Planet Trillaphon" (1984) to his final writings, such as the

posthumously published *The Pale King* (2011), where the characters often struggle with existential issues originating from the impossibility of exercising free will.

Section one sets in motion the book's investigation of Wallace's oeuvre by offering up an analysis of the nature of truth in his works and its potential to unravel meaning. Here, the author usefully addresses the influence of Tolstoy's and Sartre's ideas about art and literature, respectively, to illustrate Wallace's deep concern with literary truth. Having established a helpful theoretical framework, in section two Pitari transitions from Wallace's non-fiction to his fiction in order to demonstrate that his literary commitment was essentially founded upon an ethical basis. Therefore, understanding the causes, means, and objectives underlying his literary project, through the aid of his non-fiction, helps the reader navigate Wallace's fiction, especially when confronting the tangible challenges arising from the problem of free will.

Regarding the novelist's non-fiction, the book presents several theoretical discussions to explain the conceptualization of the writer's literary ideal. At the heart of the argument here is the idea that Wallace's non-fiction can be described as a sociology that provides a diagnosis of the widespread loneliness in the world as well as an attempt to solve this contemporary predicament through fiction. Further elucidating such a sociological analysis is the author's discourse about Lasch's influence on Wallace concerning narcissism as a manifestation of self-hatred rather than self-love in American society.

If chapters three and four focus explicitly on Wallace's work from a sociological viewpoint, the following three concentrate on cultural, economic, and ontological issues, respectively, to better delineate the sociological foundation of Wallace's preoccupation with truth in literature. Thus, the reader comes to learn that: a) Wallace's and Bauman's existentialism result in the impossibility of affirming free will and an ethics of compassion, leading to a nihilistic individualism that both are wary of; b) insofar as existentialism and neoliberalism refer to the same philosophical perspective established on free will, Wallace's project of existentialism as a corrective to neoliberalism is contradictory, much similar to Becks's idea of individualization understood as a corrective to capitalism; and c) Wallace profoundly shared Giddens'

existentialist point of view on free will, and a comparison between the two reveals the consequences of believing in it: despair and ontological insecurity.

Finally, section three propounds a comparative examination of Wallace's and Dostoevsky's critical thoughts. Chapter eight throws light on the battle between good and evil in their works all along while the following chapter draws on Bakhtin's dialogism to amend a number of misinterpretations of Dostoevsky and Wallace, proposing that they share a fundamental unity in existentialism. Delving into the belly of the beast by analyzing the problem of free will in *The Pale King* and *Crime and Punishment*, the final chapter heralds the struggles of Wallace's characters to show that the result of the existentialist contradiction is the same in both writers' works. For Pitari, Wallace and Dostoevsky intended to find a redemption for despair and evil in the world but eventually did not succeed because they could not renounce free will and submit selfhood to destiny.

Pitari thoroughly engages with the problem of free will, leaving room for further research as to whether such a "failure" might have bred insights into the best next thing after postmodernism. In fact, he brings up Kelly's characterization of the "New Sincerity" which, read in the context of free will and determinism, opens up new avenues of exploration into attempts to represent what has supplanted postmodernism, usually pieced together under the banner of post-postmodernism as a descriptor for contemporary US fiction. On that note, for instance, one might wonder if the sincere expression of one's personal thoughts, "may sometimes be […] vicious" (3).

All in all, the book courageously offers an original interpretation of free will in Wallace's oeuvre by recourse to the works of significant thinkers in the Western tradition, including Severino, Nietzsche, and Leopardi. In doing so, it sets a valuable precedent for a work that tackles the novelist's contested ideas about freedom and truth in a rigorous manner, not only through literary and philosophical lenses but also from the novel standpoint of literary sociology, making *The problem of free will in David Foster Wallace* a well-executed interdisciplinary investigation in Wallace studies.

Ali Dehdarirad |

#### **WORKS CITED**

Pickett, Howard. 2017. *Rethinking Sincerity and Authenticity*. University of Virginia Press.

Ali Dehdarirad is the author of From Faraway California: Thomas Pynchon's Aesthetics of Space in the California Trilogy (2023). He is a postdoctoral researcher and currently teaches American Literature and Culture at the University of Rome "La Sapienza," where he obtained his PhD in English-language Literatures with a focus on American literature. He has published a number of essays on Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, William T. Vollmann, Cormac McCarthy, Paul Auster, John Edward Williams, and Stephen Markley. His main research interests include (post)postmodernist and contemporary American literature, urban humanities, California literature, the Anthropocene, and the encyclopedic novel. Together with Giorgio Mariani and Sascha Pöhlmann, he is currently co-editing a special issue of RSAJournal titled (Re)Reading Encyclopedic Narratives in the Digital Age. E-mail: ali.dehdarirad@uniromai.it

## AMERICAN MASS INCARCERATION AND POST-NETWORK QUALITY TELE-VISION: CAPTIVATING ASPIRATIONS

**Lee A. Flamand** (author)

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022, pp. 311, ISBN: 9789463725057

Reviewed by Ginevra Bianchini

A s I write in January 2025, Lee A. Flamand's book American Mass Incarceration and Post-Network Quality Television: Captivating Aspirations (2022) is scarily rendered more relevant by the approach of Donald Trump's second presidency. In an era in which businessmen become all-powerful political personalities, Flamand's lucid explanation of how mass incarceration has, indeed, turned into a business in the US, brings to light a twisted evolution of enslavement entrenched in local American politics. The volume crucially investigates the topical phenomenon of mass incarceration in the US and its most recent depictions in post-network quality television, which in simpler terms can be defined as TV that advertises itself to be more complex, nuanced, and engaged in contrast to other televisual productions. But how is this quality construed? Is it fashioned by the amount of money invested in the production of a show? Or by its writing and the engagement it establishes with contemporaneous real-life issues? Flamand is interestingly quite critical of what should be considered of quality in the televisual land-scape, and presents 'quality' as a construct rather than a factual, tangible reality of the TV he examines.

Divided into six chapters that, as the author states in the introduction, should also serve as standalone articles (confirmed by their own structures and the presence of abstracts and keywords at the beginning of each of them), the volume sets out to retrace the representation of mass incarceration in recent shows, from the late '90s until the present day in American television. After two introductory chapters that appropriately frame the sociological phenomenon at the centre of the study, the book continues with three chapters that, in chronological order, illustrate the development and evolution in

the last thirty years of this type of television. These explore the representation of the book's main topic by different American networks and through contemporary methods of television production by reviewing the series *OZ*, *The Wire*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *Queen Sugar* and the Netflix documentary 13<sup>th</sup> as case studies.

The first chapter following the introduction, "Mass (Mediating) Incarceration," provides a strong historical and sociological framing to the topics later discussed, contextualizing them and outlining the concept of "punitive realism" that foregrounds the study. From the beginning, Flamand points out how his intent is to *problematize* the shows—despite the very high praises they have all received throughout the years—in order to prove how even "very good shows" often end up reaffirming stereotypes or beliefs they had set out to dismantle, especially when these series have run for several seasons. He nevertheless credits them for having depicted—although not always entirely successfully—carceral life, in order to combat its mythicization and to spotlight structural social issues that are pervasive in American society.

Chapter two, "How Does Violent Spectacle Appear as TV Realism? Sources of OZ's Penal Imaginary," focuses on the TV series OZ (1997-2003)—an HBO production set in an experimental unit of a fictional prison, echoing Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in its name and thematic framing. This type of quality TV, however, appears to be fashioned for affluent white viewers, in order for them to experience the carceral environment and the violence within it from a safe distance and through a distorted reality. In fact, Flamand crucially affirms how "the prison itself is a hyper-real institution, reproduced and legitimized through the circulation of often nightmarish images disseminated through the field of popular culture; these images permeate our media landscape to such a degree as to saturate it completely" (201). These images and narratives have become so powerful that they have been subverted to become authentic and accurate for prisoners who picture their reality through a fictional lens. However, from his compelling analysis, the show appears to push the carceral reality to its limits, bringing the series' claim to realism to collapse on itself:

in its attempts to continuously one-up and rejuvenate its own spectacle of prison drama and hyper-violence over the course six seasons, *OZ* turned to increasingly

unrealistic, strange, and even gothic tropes, figures, and forms. Eventually the veneer of realism begins to crumble, and *OZ* ends up making the very notion of realism – and, by extension, the prison itself – seem hauntingly bizarre. (201)

As in relation to OZ, when discussing *The Wire* (2002-2008) in chapter three, "If It's Not TV, Is It Sociology? The Wire," Flamand expresses how the show has been incredibly lauded as a piece of great television. Its fame and claim to realism have interestingly turned it into a case study for several sociological studies and courses. Yet, Flamand illustrates how its use as a sociology case study has created an issue—common within the realm of realist visual products—with the blurring of boundaries between storytelling and real life, while he rightfully points out how the TV series remains a piece of fiction and should only be considered as such. He outlines how The Wire tried to transcend the common police procedural formula—and succeeded in some way, as for example it is said to have a faithful reproduction of the environment and language of Baltimore, where it is set—but due to its highbrow form of knowledge-making, it eventually came to reproduce the "same capitalistic commercial structures it aims to critique" (162) as its ideologies of visibility were often used to denigrate the lives of the people they aimed to represent and give voice to. This proves how the show's core problem was connected to its employment of inherently capitalistic tools and, despite its efforts, it eventually harmed the ones it wished to depict and put under the spotlight in the first place.

The Netflix production *Orange Is the New Black* (2013-2019) also failed to impress, according to Flamand in chapter four "Is Entertainment the New Activism? *Orange Is the New Black*, Women's Imprisonment, and the Taste for Prisons." Being one of the first original Netflix productions that heralded and led its contemporary success as a streaming platform and producer, the show started with a strong innovative streak, as it focused on a female prison. *Orange*'s core themes were developed around the concept of intersectionality, and therefore the show discussed how gender interlocks with sexuality, queerness, and violence within the carceral environment. Due to this intersectional framing, Flamand states it had what he calls an 'activist imprint,' meaning that it wanted to promote social causes through this form of art. However, the show failed to deliver and remained entrenched in the corporation's money-making scheme, as its

activist element was not fully developed throughout the seasons. Although it retained an innovative element, it still played into stereotypes and has not failed to go through several controversies in the years.

In chapter four, "Can Melodrama Redeem American History? Ava DuVernay's 13th and Queen Sugar," Flamand focuses on the pedagogic and didactic use of documentary and televisual work in DuVernay's depictions of mass incarceration. According to Flamand, these two works are particularly interesting because of the director's established black auteur status, solidified by her show When They See Us (2019) too, which depicts wrongful incarceration. However, he identifies from the start how the use of melodramatic television in both fiction and documentary form reinforces stereotypes around the depictions of blackness in the US and the evolutions of enslavement into present-day mass incarceration, not only in DuVernay's work. Nonetheless, 13<sup>th</sup> (2016) especially remains a relevant and informative piece of television, despite being a Netflix production like Orange.

The concluding chapter is a general reflection on how American politics, the COVID pandemic, and the digital era have shaped a new breed of viewers often influenced by online radicalization that eventually feeds into the type of content each user watches, because of how the algorithms used by streaming or video platforms work. Here, Flamand gives in-depth consideration to the rise of new streaming platforms and how today these giants constantly compete with each other for a bigger pool of viewers. The development of this plethora of websites has turned TV elitist and expensive again, while also producing works that follow specific business models that compete with one another and therefore must produce set quantities each year. This approach is inherently capitalistic and consumeristic and feeds on quantity rather than quality, despite the majority of these productions being marketed as such by these corporations. Within this reflection, Flamand intriguingly connects his considerations on the evolution of TV and its contemporary issues to Trumpism and right-wing politics. From his words it appears that America cannot truly change, since even cultural products have become a form of lip service, when they disguise themselves behind supposedly activist agendas. He ironically (?) comments that "perhaps Americans are only fond of serious political

themes when they take the form of entertainment, yet all too willingly forget those issues in the privacy of the ballot box" (273).

To conclude, the main overarching argument of the book is that majority (if not all) of the works he carefully selected, which depict prisons or mass incarceration, tend to subscribe to the mythology around the carceral systems, those who are in jail, and the stereotypical characteristics that would usually define them in this context. In the author's eyes, America appears to be declining from a cultural and creative point of view, when its artistic televisual production is at its peak in terms of quantity, but its quality progressively dissipates to give space to works with unclear aspirations. This ends the book on relatively grim horizons, stating as well how "American society seems to find collective dreaming progressively more difficult" (270). However, despite its strong sociological and historical background and its very-well-argued theories, the backbone of the book could benefit from a few adjustments and integrations. For example, the author could further consider how other TV shows examine American prisons, while avoiding melodramatic tropes and perpetuating stereotypes. Flamand only nods at this possibility but does not really explore it. In addition, the single chapters that make up the volume are not entirely standalone (contrary to what the author affirmed in the introduction), as they seem to depend on each other. Also, the end to the study itself suggests further considerations but does not develop a reflection and summary of what has been presented throughout the volume. In conclusion, with a different structure the book would have stood out from more traditional academic work. This being said, the book remains an important and valuable publication as it largely contributes to the discussion on a topic not often surveyed, both in academia and cultural representations.

**Ginevra Bianchini** (she/her) is a final year PhD student in the School of English at Trinity College Dublin working under the supervision of Dr Melanie Otto, on the intersectional and interdisciplinary representation of sexual violence in three contemporary case studies from North America and the UK. She is funded by Research Ireland. She teaches at Undergraduate level at TCD and UCD and has taught until 2024 for the Trinity Access Programme. She is one of the Postgraduate caucus co-chairs of the IAAS and the Language Editor for the online platform Decolonial Subversions. She has presented her research internationally at several conferences in Europe and the US. In February 2024, she co-organized a Postgraduate conference with her colleague Elena Valli at the

### Ginevra Bianchini |

Trinity Long Room Hub, titled "AfterWords: Reconsidering Narratives of Trauma and Violence in the Humanities." Her last academic publication was in the Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Gender Research (2023). Her first short story written in English was published in the fall of 2023 in *Stone Quarterly*, an online Literary Arts Journal. E-mail: <a href="mailto:bianchig@tcd.ie">bianchig@tcd.ie</a>

#### ADRIENNE RICH. POESIA E POETICA DI UN FUTURO DIMENTICATO

### Marina Camboni (autrice)

Firenze: Effigi, 2022, pp. 256, ISBN: 9788855244442

#### Recensione di Livia Bellardini

Tel terzo volume dei suoi *Quaderni del carcere* (1934) Antonio Gramsci elabora, a partire dalle parole di Francesco De Sanctis, un pensiero critico di stampo sociopedagogico circa il ruolo educativo dell'arte nella formulazione di una cultura inclusiva e partecipativa; di una cultura che attinga alla vita vissuta e che, a partire da questa, sia capace di immaginare e articolare altri possibili modi, non-gerarchici, di abitare il mondo condiviso. Si tratta, per dirla proprio con Gramsci, di "una filosofia che [nel diventare] 'cultura' abbia generato un'etica, un modo di vivere, una condotta civile e individuale" (2186). Le parole del pensatore marxista riecheggiano nella poetica di Adrienne Rich, da cui emerge una maniera di concepire l'arte come uno dei mezzi per intraprendere la lotta culturale, nonché come luogo e mezzo di dialogo tra le due dimensioni essenziali dell'esperienza umana: il piano del reale, o del quotidiano, e il piano del desiderio, o del possibile, affrontate in maniera non dicotomica, ma nella loro doppia convergenza estetica e sociale, come l'una capace di integrare, lumeggiare o di mettere in gioco l'altra. Nell'opera di Rich realtà e desiderio costituiscono le coordinate tematiche e formali attraverso cui il linguaggio poetico ci restituisce l'immagine di un mondo "in preparazione", vale a dire di un mondo che si sta preparando al cambiamento. Compito della poesia, secondo Rich, è quello di diffondere un altro modo di percepire la realtà, così come Gramsci aveva delegato alla cultura il compito di offrire una nuova intuizione della vita.

È proprio con la conversazione ricostruita a posteriori tra Rich e Gramsci che Marina Camboni apre *Adrienne Rich. Poesia e poetica di un futuro dimenticato* (2022), sua più recente monografia dedicata all'evoluzione di una carriera e di una poetica votate, fin dagli albori, alla ricerca e alla scoperta del nuovo. La scelta di introdurre il proprio studio con un richiamo intertestuale a due riprese, se non tre – l'autrice cita due

righe di un saggio della poeta che a loro volta citano Gramsci – è particolarmente significativa sia rispetto all'evoluzione poetica di Rich sia come esito di un lungo confronto tra Camboni e la poeta, coltivato nel corso di circa cinque decenni e riproposto nel libro sotto forma di racconto critico multi- e interdisciplinare. Il dialogo con Gramsci è quindi uno degli aspetti più originali della monografia, dal momento in cui ci restituisce un'immagine inedita di Rich: non solo scrittrice e pensatrice statunitense, ma intellettuale internazionale e attualissima nell'articolazione di una visione sociale dell'arte come promotrice di una cultura non egemone, anticapitalista e profondamente umana. Un ulteriore elemento innovativo del libro, rispetto a una tradizione critica che si è già ampiamente dedicata a descrivere l'evoluzione politica, sociale e tematica della sua poesia, è l'attenzione che l'autrice riserva alla forma – o meglio, alle molteplici forme – con cui Rich sperimenta nell'arco di una vita. In questo senso, Camboni affronta l'indagine stilistica con grande esperienza e tatto, collocando l'analisi testuale all'interno di un più ampio e cangiante processo di crescita e cambiamento che vede Rich in continua trasformazione: la conclusione degli studi universitari nei primi anni Cinquanta e il successivo allontanamento dal contesto letterario accademico; il matrimonio e l'esperienza della maternità; il trasferimento a New York e l'incontro con una dimensione politica della vita; la rivendicazione della propria sessualità lesbica; l'assidua partecipazione alle proiezioni dei film di Jean-Luc Godard; il lavoro come traduttrice; un secondo spostamento, questa volta verso ovest, permeano il testo poetico, influenzano l'estensione del verso, così come ispirano le riflessioni di carattere più prettamente personale dei suoi saggi critici. Per Rich, il personale è sempre politico. In questo senso, la sperimentazione di nuove espressioni poetiche si fa parte integrante di un processo di ricerca volto, sì, a scoprire e praticare nuovi approcci alla scrittura "in versi", ma anche a partecipare alla costruzione di una cultura fondata sulla differenza e sulle relazioni come valori democratici per eccellenza (131).

In "Poetry and the Forgotten Future", titolo di una lezione plenaria tenuta in Scozia nel 2006 e ora inclusa come saggio in *A Human Eye. Essays on Art in Society,* 1997–2008, Rich si serve della forza evocatrice della poesia per proporre un nuovo modello relazionale finalizzato a costruire rapporti umani solidali. Con un intreccio di voci,

testi poetici e pensieri provenienti da luoghi e tempi diversi, il saggio assolve una duplice funzione: da un lato costruisce una rete internazionale di poeti che vedono nella poesia uno strumento di intervento politico all'interno di un tessuto sociale indebolito dalla forza coercitiva e divisoria esercitata da dinamiche di potere più o meno istituzionalizzate. In questo senso, l'accostamento di vari componimenti consente a Rich di rilevare e rivelare il punto in cui le voci del passato e del presente convergono: nel desiderio inaudito di reclamare la portata politica della poesia dando voce, in unisono, a ciò che, poco più avanti nel saggio, definisce "a manifesto of desire for a new and conscious organization of society" (Rich 2009, 125), con cui guardare a un futuro (ancora non troppo) dimenticato. Dall'altro lato, invece, la scelta di restituirci un compendio globale di testimonianze inedite permette a Rich di mostrare come la costruzione di un dialogo testuale derivi dalla volontà più grande di prefiggere una nuova configurazione sociale radicata nell'umano, oltre che di riconoscere il proprio impegno etico e sociale nelle dichiarazioni di poeti provenienti da tutto il mondo (è proprio in questo saggio che cita Gramsci).

Il testo di Camboni compie anche due notevoli operazioni, tra loro complementari: da un lato ci propone di leggere le poesie di Rich in ordine cronologico, inserendole dunque all'interno un *continuum* per descrivere, componimento dopo componimento, "la storia subita, immaginata, costruita, di un unico personaggio [...] in continua metamorfosi" (19). Identificato come l'alter-ego di Adrienne Rich, questo personaggio sembrerebbe accompagnare la poeta stessa, così come noi lettrici e lettori, lungo quello che si rivelerà essere un cammino di assidua ricerca identitaria, linguistica e formale, volto prima "alla sperimentazione di modi poetici sempre adeguati al percorso costruttivo e immaginativo di un soggetto in processo" (92), poi al consolidamento di una voce pubblica socialmente posizionata, in grado di parlare al proprio paese e sempre più aperta nei confronti dell'alterità. Seppur presentati cronologicamente, nei capitoli emergono rimandi testuali e accenni biografici relativi a più momenti nella vita e nella scrittura di Rich.

Attraverso la ricostruzione di una carriera e di una vita, Camboni compie una seconda operazione, a mio avviso importantissima nella dialettica del processo creativo

ed esegetico, di ri-focalizzazione critica – dell'opera di Rich, del ruolo sociale delle arti e del lavoro culturale dell'intellettuale nella sua doppia valenza etica (educativa) e politica. Da un punto di vista metodologico, l'autrice si avvale del metodo ermeneutico – un approccio interpretativo di ampio respiro, radicato nella ricerca e nella tessitura di un *fil rouge* che colleghi arte e vita – per precisare i due aspetti più salienti dell'opera di Rich. Radicata nella storia degli Stati Uniti, la sua poesia si configura tanto come una critica verso l'incapacità della nazione di sostenere la propria visione democratica, quanto come un invito aperto ad immaginare, con l'ausilio della parola, un modello relazionale globale. Destreggiandosi tra discorsi solo apparentemente divergenti, l'autrice rileva e rivela punti di contatto tra discipline quali la filosofia etica e politica, le scienze umane, la poetica, la semiotica, la teoria letteraria e la psicologia per creare continui ponti tra la poesia, le nostre vite e il mondo; tra gli stati di paura e confusione suscitati giornalmente dal linguaggio retorico e guerresco della politica e stati di lucidità e consapevolezza circa i prossimi passi da compiere per creare ed esperire una maggiore giustizia umana e sociale.

Quanto alla struttura, il testo si articola in tre parti, le prime due suddivise a loro volta in altri tre capitoli. La terza parte, invece, è un'intervista a Rich condotta dall'autrice nel 1979, in lingua inglese con traduzione a seguire, e riproposta oggi per un pubblico e contesto italiani. La prima parte del volume ricostruisce le tappe iniziali di una vita dedicata quasi interamente alla poesia, luogo di sintonizzazione tra un mondo interiore in profonda evoluzione e un mondo esterno contrassegnato da grandi trasformazioni culturali e politiche. Camboni mette in luce come, dalla fine degli anni Quaranta, Rich sia ricorsa alla poesia per dare forma coerente prima a un contesto storico ideologicamente diviso dal clima glaciale della guerra fredda—nell'estetica modernista dei primi componimenti si cela un io poetante neutro e universale che guarda il mondo da lontano descrivendone le intemperie – poi al desiderio non solo di esplorare e conoscere il mondo che la circonda, ma di farne parte come donna, madre, insegnante e poeta, intimorita ma determinata nella ricerca e nella sperimentazione dei mezzi espressivi più adeguati alla realizzazione di una poesia il più possibile aderente alla (sua) vita. Nel passaggio dagli anni Cinquanta agli anni Sessanta il testo cambia

funzione per Rich; da rifugio in cui custodirsi e custodire quei valori umani sempre più minacciati dal mondo del capitale e della tecnologia, a strumento conoscitivo di sé e del mondo. Di fatto, gli anni Sessanta testimoniano l'inizio di una nuova fase poetica, scaturita tanto dalla realizzazione che leggere e scrivere poesia significa fare i conti con l'inconscio - tappa del processo conoscitivo che funge da trampolino di lancio per l'autoconoscenza – quanto dalla messa in discussione dell'adeguatezza degli strumenti del modernismo nel dare voce a una sofferta vita personale sempre più incompatibile con i ruoli di donna e di artista ritenuti idonei dalla cultura dominante di quegli anni. L'abbandono del blank verse a favore di un verso ricercatamente più libero aprirà la strada a nuovi processi di re-visione formale e tematica, dalla valenza dichiaratamente culturale e politica, a cui Rich si appellerà per comprendersi nel profondo (si servirà, per esempio, della metafora, per nominare e conoscere l'ignoto) e poi posizionarsi nel solco "di una tradizione di poesia [americana] socialmente impegnata di cui si vuole continuatrice" (32). L'incontro, o lo scontro, tra il personale e politico segnerà la poesia degli anni Settanta: linguaggio e azione sociale convergono nella volontà di Rich, così come di molte altre intellettuali, di utilizzare la lingua per destrutturare, ridefinire e poi ricreare la cultura.

A questo punto, Camboni ripercorre i momenti di svolta che hanno portato Rich a maturare una coscienza politica e a scrivere due delle sue raccolte più innovatrici: Diving into the Wreck (1973) e The Dream of a Common Language (1976) costituiscono due dei suoi manifesti poetici più noti, l'uno di stampo più politico, l'altro più linguistico e filosofico, in cui Rich formula un'idea di convivenza sociale alternativa all'egemonia maschile e oltre la logica separatista del femminismo degli anni Settanta. Per citare direttamente le parole dell'autrice, "Rich è sempre più convinta che attraverso la lingua, e nelle lingua come nella cultura che questa modella, si debbano creare le condizioni perché non solo le donne ma tutti coloro a cui è stato negato il riconoscimento di soggettività distinta rispetto al cosiddetto umano generico, vi apportino il loro contributo (92)". Particolare attenzione è poi dedicata a Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976) un progetto autobiografico dove Rich racconta, analizza e indaga l'esperienza della maternità nelle sue molteplici sfaccettature (personali, culturali,

#### Livia Bellardini |

politiche quindi istituzionali), accostando e intrecciando più generi all'interno di un'unica opera. Passando dal diario, all'autobiografia, dal saggio storico a quello antropologico, *Of Woman Born* instaura una forma di scrittura volutamente eterogenea e *sui generis*. Camboni riconduce l'ibridismo discorsivo dell'opera al suo obiettivo ultimo: attivare un'identificazione emotiva "della donna che legge" con "la donna che scrive contribuendo quindi alla formazione di un mondo comune di donne" (104). Nei decenni successivi, l'attività poetica di Rich troverà ulteriore spazio di investigazione e formulazione teorica all'interno di una ricca produzione saggistica.

La seconda parte del volume è dedicata alla produzione più matura, alla sperimentazione formale e al dialogo con poeti e artisti di altri tempi e luoghi. La ricerca di nuove forme d'espressione e l'esperienza della traduzione introducono Rich al *ghazal*, una forma poetica classica persiana in lingua urdu che Rich conosce nel 1968, quando legge, nella sua versione tradotta, il canzoniere di Mirza Ghalib.¹ L'incontro con il poeta indiano, ricorda Camboni, rappresenta un ulteriore momento di svolta nel percorso evolutivo di un'intellettuale che continua a confrontarsi con un mondo, interiore ed esterno, in trasformazione. Se di fatto Rich "aveva ripudiato la poesia formalista [non aveva rinunciato alla] *ricerca* formale. Sentiva [però] di essere all'interno eppure estranea alla tradizione americana. La sua era una condizione di transizione. Nella storia e nella poesia si collocava ai limiti fra vecchio e nuovo, come Ghalib" (157, enfasi aggiunta). Rich fa proprio l'insegnamento del suo mentore per creare una poesia personale e americana costruita, in questa fase, sull'accostamento di pensieri, immagini e visioni radicate nel contesto di protesta del '68, nel desiderio di riconoscere e far valere il contributo unico delle donne alla costruzione di una società più equa; un gioco di

\_

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Considerato il primo poeta moderno urdu attivo tra la prima e la seconda metà dell'Ottocento, Ghalib entra a far parte del contesto poetico statunitense grazie agli studi di Aijaz Ahmad, teorico della letteratura e filosofo marxista che, nel 1971, pubblica trentasette delle sue poesie in *Ghazals of Ghalib*. La raccolta comprende una traduzione letterale annotata dello stesso Ahmad e include ulteriori proposte di traduzione elaborate da diversi poeti, tra i quali figura anche Rich.

"immagini-pensiero", come propone accuratamente l'autrice, per fermare, almeno per un po', i moti della mente. La giustapposizione spontanea di immagini risentirà, in "Blue Ghazals", del codice cinematografico della *Nouvelle Vague*, in particolare della camera discontinua e rapida di Jean-Luc Godard. Nei ghazals di Ghalib, così come in quelli di Rich, si registra una tendenza tanto all'introspezione quanto alla proiezione (del pensiero) verso un cambiamento futuro, reso metonimicamente nelle poesie attraverso l'immagine reiterata dello sguardo, ora imprigionato, ora liberato; ora sconvolto ora promettente. Ai versi di "Homage to Ghalib", "A pair of eyes imprisoned for years inside my skull/is burning its way outward, the headaches are terrible" (161) seguono quelli di "Planetarium", "What we see, we see/ and seeing is changing" (ibid.). Come strumenti conoscitivi, i ghazals di Rich sembrerebbero proprio riportare i lettori ai propri sensi, chissà, svegliare le loro menti all'immaginazione creativa, un intervento fondamentale per "progettare il mutamento" (162).

La ricerca formale, linguistica e politica di Rich si estende, negli anni Ottanta, alla sperimentazione con il codice pittorico. Il dialogo con Emily Carr (1871-1945), pittrice canadese a cui dedicherà l'omonimo componimento, coinvolgerà Rich nella formulazione, teorica come poetica come politica, di una "differente americanità", dialogica e relazionale, elaborata attraverso lo sguardo di chi, da fuori, guarda la propria terra con lucido distacco prima di reimmergervisi. Due saggi, "Bread, Blood, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet" (1983) "Notes Toward a Politics of Location" (1984), pongono gli Stati Uniti, la loro storia ed estensione geografica, al centro di una poetica che, ancora una volta mira a consapevolizzare, a ingaggiare il lettore in trame di suoni e significati. Il trasferimento in California e un viaggio in Nicaragua ispirano Rich a ripercorrere e descrivere il concatenamento dei processi storici, economici e politici che hanno coinvolto gli Stati Uniti in un esercizio di potere rispetto all'America Latina e al mondo intero. In questa fase i suoi punti di riferimento, poetici e non, includono Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Muriel Rukeyser, ma anche Pier Paolo Pasolini, Antonio Gramsci e Karl Marx, di cui recupera gli scritti giovanili. Sarà proprio il Marx umanista a consolidare una nuova svolta, radicale e trasformativa, verso l'elaborazione di quello che Camboni definisce "cosmopolitismo relazionale" (182): un modello complesso, declinato al

#### Livia Bellardini |

plurale e ampio abbastanza da coinvolgere il mondo intero. È proprio la ricerca di un linguaggio poetico capace di costruire connessioni oltre le frontiere di razza, classe, nazionalità e cultura a trasformare Rich in una poeta e cittadina del mondo, la cui opera resta profondamente rappresentativa dei timori e dei desideri che, a livello individuale e collettivo, hanno attraversato più di una generazione.

"For poetry makes nothing happen", scriveva W. H. Auden in una poesia del 1939 dedicata a W. B. Yeats per sostenere che la poesia, da sola, non può generare il cambiamento sociale. Tuttavia, Auden le conferisce il potere di sopravvivere nel tempo, di insinuarsi nella memoria (individuale e collettiva) e per questo di educare e rieducare l'immaginazione. Come ci ricorda Camboni, i poeti (e la poesia) possono essere un "riferimento indispensabile nel confuso presente, diviso tra nostalgia del passato e ansia per un futuro compresso" (13), perché, come scrive Rich (2009) nel saggio che dà il titolo al volume in questione, "poetry has the capacity – in its own ways and by its own means – to remind us of something we are forbidden to see. A forgotten future: a stilluncreated site whose moral architecture is founded not on ownership and dispossession [...], but on the continuous redefining of freedom" (143).

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Gramsci, Antonio. (1934) 1975. "Quaderno 23." In *Quaderni del carcere*, volume terzo, a cura di Valentino Gerratana. Giulio Einaudi editore.

Poetry Foundation. "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/161870/in-memory-of-w-b-yeats.

Rich, Adrienne. 2009. "Poetry and the Forgotten Future." In *A Human Eye. Essays on Art in Society, 1997–2008.* W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Livia Bellardini holds a doctorate in Foreign Languages, Literatures and Cultures from Roma Tre. Her research concentrated on the relation between poetic language, the self, and society in the works of US contemporary poets Adrienne Rich and Claudia Rankine, enlisting the use of archival materials. Her MA thesis, "Reconsidering the Lyric in a Quest for Inclusivity: Claudia Rankine's *Nothing in Nature Is Private*," was awarded the 2021 edition of the "Agostino Lombardo" prize from the Italian Association of American Studies (AISNA). In 2022, she received a dissertation grant from Schlesinger Library and in 2023 was a visiting researcher at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Her

areas of interest include feminist poetry and poetics, Caribbean notions of relationality, lyric theory, and the relation between poetry and pedagogy. She is now teaching English Language and Translation at Universitas Mercatorum, in Rome. E-mail: <a href="mailto:livia.bellardini@gmail.com">livia.bellardini@gmail.com</a>

# TWENTY YEARS OF ART OF ETHNICITY: A RETROSPECTIVE HOMAGE TO THOMAS J. FERRARO'S FEELING ITALIAN

## **Stefano Morello** CUNY Graduate Center

In May 2005, NYU Press published Thomas J. Ferraro's *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America* as part of its "Nation of Nations: Immigrant History as American History" series co-edited by Matthew Frye Jacobson and Werner Sollors. By exploring how Italian American cultural production stroke the right chords at the right time across twentieth-century America, Ferraro's second monograph built on the tradition championed by Sollors of recasting the boundaries between American Studies and Ethnic Studies, reshaping both fields in the process—as Sollors wrote shortly before *Feeling Italian*'s publication, "joyfully formulating its heretical provocations, this book turns the tables on traditional acculturation studies by pursuing the question of what it is that has attracted the world's largest 'host' population so thoroughly to the culture of a relatively small European immigrant group."<sup>2</sup>

Across its ten case studies, Ferraro focuses both on the usual suspects of Italian Americana (*The Godfather* and Sinatra, of course) and the lore of cultural icons that, by the late twentieth century, had largely receded from mainstream visibility. In doing so, he makes visible the porosity of America's structure of feeling, while convincingly making the case for employing ethnicity as a hermeneutic to read the nation's cultural imaginary. Ferraro's ten vignettes are all but self-contained—answers posed in one chapter seep into another, as do his evocations of honor, aesthetics, spirituality, food, gender, sexuality, and race. Likewise, the subjects of his inquiry are never presented in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> NYU Press catalogues list the series as "Nation of Newcomers" in 2005; since 2014, it appears as "Nation of Nations."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Werner Sollors, "Rationale for Feeling Italian," unpublished, 2005, shared with the author on October 24, 2024.

a vacuum but rather serve as launching points for reverse engineering America's systems of signification and the intertextuality of Italian American cultural production. By framing tradition and modernity dialectically rather than dichotomously, Ferraro's comparative readings yield unexpected parallels, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson with Lucanian-American painter Joseph Stella—a pairing as improbable and generative as Martino Marazzi's recent juxtaposition of Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli's sonnets with Bob Dylan's lyrics (2022, 11–30). Ultimately, Ferraro's ways of engagement with the subjects of his study—which, as often happens with popular culture, aren't just attuned to his sensibilities, but also constitutive of his identity—strike an exemplary balance between affective investment and scholarly inquiry. As Mitchell Breitwieser writes in this issue, "Tom's talk on Joseph Stella helped me to see that one might bring one's engagement into one's writing without sacrificing objective argumentation" (204).

In light of the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Feeling Italian, I invited five scholars from various spheres of literary studies to consider the legacy of and their relationship with the book. Their contributions are complemented by Ferraro's own retrospective, presented here as a masterclass in identifying "texts" worthy of scholarly investigation within our lived experiences. Publishing this critical homage in JAm It!, a journal oriented toward approaching American Studies through an Italian sensibility, intends to highlight how Ferraro's work challenges facile understandings of how a national culture constitutes and exerts itself in domestic and global hegemonic struggles. It also compels us to reconsider not only how Italian (American) culture has contributed to America's self-understanding—suggesting a reciprocal if uneven exchange—but also how Italians may "feel" Italian as a mediated experience, shaped through a dialectic between lived realities and the consumption of American cultural artifacts imbued with Italian (American) sentiments. This last point remains relevant in light of recent studies on the forces at play in transatlantic cultural transfers, and the multi-directional exchanges at play in the making of (trans)national cultures at different iterations of modernity (Marazzi 2022; Averna et al. 2023; Bonsaver 2023; Carocci et al. 2023; Conte and Dantini 2024; Cinotto and Iuli 2024; Iuli and Cinotto 2024; Iuli and Morello 2024; Iuli et al. 2025). Well before those interventions, Feeling Italian

#### Stefano Morello |

anticipated the imperative not only to examine the paradigmatic shifts that facilitate transatlantic exchanges but also to probe the iterative sedimentation of cultural undercurrents, including those generated by the Italian diaspora in the United States.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Averna, Marta, Gennaro Postiglione, and Roberto Rizzi. 2023. *The Italian Presence in Post-war America*, 1949-1972: Architecture, Design, Fashion. Mimesis.

Bonsaver, Guido. 2023. *America in Italian Culture: The Rise of a New Model of Modernity,* 1861-1943. Oxford University Press.

Carocci, Enrico, Ilaria A. De Pascalis, and Veronica Pravadelli. 2023. *Transatlantic Visions: Culture cinematografiche italiane negli Stati Uniti del secondo dopoguerra*. Mimesis.

Cinotto, Simone and Maria Cristina Iuli, eds. 2024. *Italian American Review* 14 (1). Special Issue "Transatlantic Modern Consumerisms: Italian Goods and Commercial Cultures in Postwar America."

Conte, Lara and Michele Dantini, eds. 2024. Narrazioni atlantiche e arti visive 1949-1972. Sguardi fuori fuoco, politiche espositive, identità italiana, americanismo/antiamericanismo. Mimesis.

Iuli, Maria Cristina and Simone Cinotto, eds. 2024. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 29 (2). Special Issue "A Second Renaissance: Italian Literary Cultures in the USA after World War II."

Iuli, Maria Cristina and Stefano Morello, eds. 2024. *Trame transatlantiche: Relazioni letterarie tra Italia e Stati Uniti*, 1949-1972. Mimesis.

Iuli, Maria Cristina, Aaron Jaffe, and Stefano Morello, eds. 2025. *Modern Language Notes* 140 (1). Special Issue "Modernist Lives, Transatlantic Italian Crossings, 1949-1972."

Marazzi, Martino. 2022. Through the Periscope: Changing Culture, Italian America. SUNY Press.

## FEELING ITALIAN AT 22: WHAT NEW HAVEN HAD TO TEACH ACADEME IN THE 1980S

## **Thomas J. Ferraro**Duke University

Feeling Italian has a long complex history, in terms fungible across racial and ethnic minorities, as a delayed response to the accumulative effect of small doses of what I once called the "double curse" of the minority intellectual—who is disdained by the mainstream for being too ethnic, at least for the big leagues, and suspected back at home of fawning assimilation, at risk for excommunication from the tribe (should it pay attention). I wanted to demonstrate that its aesthetic genealogy and iconic sensibility had long impacted Americans at large, even their self-knowledge; and that an analytical history of its arts, especially its popular arts, including "invented" ethnicity, could serve Italian/American Studies, whether by sponsoring, enabling, or challenging the formulations of its emergent intelligentsia. In the broadest sense, then, Feeling Italian was an intuitive expression of its writer's double consciousness—"stuck in the middle, again"—yielding, it was hoped, a studied reflection upon the prodigious accomplishments of Italian-American artists, bedeviled yet exhilarated in their doubleness.

But, with 20/20 hindsight, I am beginning to sense that Du Bois's formula of double-consciousness, useful though it be, is too generic, that is, neither Italian-flavored nor intellectually soulful enough, for the materials I explored or even perhaps the way I explored them.

Feeling Italian was written for the academy in the early 2000s, therefore caught up somewhat in its debates, both enabling and vexing. Italian-American Studies proper had taken the lead, forcefully, in conceptualizing and charting how those swarthy "guineas, dagos, and wops"—contract labor from the Mezzogiorno who were once paid less even than the offspring of enslaved peoples to build and clothe and feed America

and who were once lynched, too—had "become white." Racial identity traversal was incontrovertibly true but only part of the story, I felt. I pondered the converse, obverse, inverse: Hadn't we also seen, and in huge measure, in the arts if not elsewhere, resistant forms of upward mobility, even transformative modes of "assimilation"—that is, cultural syncretism par excellence?

Already in the early 1990s, on the edges of the literary academy, scholar-writers of marked Catholic descent had "the limits of critique" in their sights; each in his or her own way, not only called out both the obviousness and obliviousness of poststructuralism—but also, as importantly, weighting show over tell, demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt how else art-and-culture criticism could be done. In the meantime, the new social historians were unpacking "the lived religion" of the United States from the pews, at the tables, and on the city streets—at the movie theaters and in the sports arenas, too—utterly transforming US historiography (the myriad immigrant Catholics were offered and received as exemplifications) whether the pezzonovante of the American Studies Association (forget the MLA!) cared to take notice, or not. By the early 2000s, younger scholars had started to probe America's Italy at its African-American edges, that thick history of Italian-black interaction and coproduction, love-and-theft in both directions. I was intrigued and increasingly drawn in, learning and affirming and wondering, what then the big picture? What are the ramifications, "theorized" and "instantiated," of a century-plus of the Italian/ate imagination in America?

A long-time mentor, Werner Sollors (a forerunner in so many ways, including the literary entwinement of black-and-Italian), asked me if I might have a book in me for his new series on "a nation of newcomers." Fate had just intervened, and I don't mean only Professor Sollors, whose subsequent editing (as that of Eric Zinner) were generative nonetheless. For, despite my professed wariness of monocultural studies, I had been experimenting with a lecture course on US Italian-descent and/or Italian-themed materials, to which I brought the unrepentant Romanticism of my New New-Critical training. I contextualized the archive, synthesized the most convergent of its lessons, but above all, induced and, where necessary, performed the close reading and

listening and viewing of ethnically rooted, ethnically performed, ethnically impactful sublimity. America's Italian sons of Emerson and Melville; its Italian daughters of Hawthorne and Dickinson. Their conjuring of the universal by means of the parochial (think Faulkner, then think Puzo-and-Coppola) was as much the telos for my course as it was its donnée, to be enacted for all and sundry—or at least for the students so gathered and immersed!

What really gave *Feeling Italian* flight, and now I hope legs, was the pleasure I took from leaning into what I thought of as "the great Italian-American stuff," outing and exploring and re-enacting the knowledge and even wisdom it induced, which I found Italian-American in substance *and* in spirit, transformative even transfigurative of mainstream culture, and as often convergent in collective force as it was idiosyncratic in its disparate pieces. The overarching fact of origin-turned-telos is this: my involvement with most of these materials and my interest in sussing out their import were to a large degree formed *two decades earlier*, in what we might reasonably expect had been "another world and time." I hope you find my experience of that place in that moment instructive if not also, for you, semi-reminiscent—at the least, still worth hearing from.

Under very local, yet profoundly resonant, even wholly overdetermined conditions, a simple recognition (Italian American Studies 101!) was brought home to me: that a culture was thriving that the academy at large had scarcely recognized—even when, perhaps especially when, as in my very lucky case, that very culture was operating right under its nose. Or at least a particularly representative manifestation of that culture was operating under a particularly conspicuous university's nose—that university which found itself (through scarcely any fault of its own, it had long been telling itself, given its founding two centuries in advance of "the great migration") located in the densest Italian-descent city in North America. By culture, I mean ways of knowing and making and being, arts of ethnicity that might be studied (worked up, worked upon, worked out) within set academic protocols of evidence and import, but might also, I began to feel, in the early 1980s, illustrate and thus tutor *how* else we might

Thomas J. Ferraro

do "our work" writ large, beyond even the materials themselves, re-inflecting if not reimagining those protocols.

Call me a Yalie then, if you like, but recognize what that meant in the 1980s (a term restricted to undergraduates, with alienation of various sorts attending all graduate students) and ponder, with me, that in learning all I could at Yale I also aspired, increasingly it turned out, to be "graduated," as Nick Carraway once put it (though his faux humility and insider trading be damned), "from New Haven."

Go back with me in time, to the very end of the disco era, when Blondie, Rickie Lee Jones, and Prince are turning the tide, and Jersey bands, including Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes or Clarence Clemons's Red Bank Rockers, not to mention unabashedly Springsteen clones like "Eddie and the Cruisers" (er, Beaver Brown, from Providence), were rock'n'soul-ing to overflow crowds at Toad's Place, which was a few doors down from The Hall of Graduate Studies, where a long dungeon-like corridor lit by feeble 40-watt bulbs led to the sunnier precincts of the offices of the American Studies Program at Yale University.

A 22-year-old fresh out of undergraduate college has arrived there to study for a Ph.D. He comes from a cluster of five children. His parents, of Neapolitan-Calabrian and Neapolitan-Sicilian descent, believe in education, especially professional education, but he has been raised otherwise in a home without serious books or classical music or

\_

¹ The pages that follow were composed originally as a public address—written to an occasion, but the occasion itself spoke volumes. It constituted the first time I had been invited back to give a lecture at Yale University since taking my Ph.D. in 1988. The invitation came not from the English Department (where, disciplinarily speaking, I have landed) or from the adjacent American Studies (where I was trained) but from Italian Studies (where my linguistic as opposed to gestural skills are deservedly suspect), and what occasioned it was the first Rossini Symposium, in March of 2024, funded anonymously by, I suspect, distinguished local entrepreneurs. The annual conference established, or at least formalized, an intellectual conversation with historical bent between cuttingedge Italian/American Studies at Yale (led by the resplendent Jane Tylus, her colleagues and their students, who gathered brilliant Italian-Americanists from nearby schools—Southern Connecticut State University just down the road, New York University and Columbia and Fordham on the trainline, SUNY/Stony Brook by ferry)—and long-time denizens of what in local parlance is still called "greater New Haven" (including a former mayor and the pizza clans!), all of whom found themselves reflecting on the invidious impact of postwar urban renewal while also learning about the Italian diaspora in, among other places, far-off Brazil (where Futurist Marinetti toured in 1926) and truly far-off Wisconsin (mozzarella, asiago, and provolone, to this very day).

original art, where the only arts being practiced were his father's fondness for debate and his mother's great cooking and her adeptness at dressing up. His extended family—all of it, every single one—lives in Bay Ridge and on Coney Island, in Bayonne and Hackensack, in Great Neck and Long Beach, but he has slipped out the back door of his parents' brave distancing to New Hampshire and thrived, curiously, at an Anglican prep school and a Congregationalist liberal arts college. He has now landed not in the grand Yale English department but in American Studies, the right call if ever there were one. He is going to be at Yale, therefore, between '79 and '86, between the opening of Fitzwillies, which melted cheese on everything and baked in crocks, and the opening of L'Aventura, a so-called "Northern Italian" ristorante, where he would eat arugula with balsamic vinegar for the first time—despite being surrounded his whole life, on all sides, by wonderful American Italian cooks, for whom other bitter vegetables—escarole, dandelions, and broccoli di rape—were delectable staples.

That kid, of course, was me. Like Jack Kerouac once said, "this [story] "necessarily'll have to be about myself," which has, hitherto, never been my writing style. But the stakes I hope to explore are well more than personal and involve a bit of exaggeration, in what is my wont. That September, I arrived at Yale and was slammed, in certain ways academically and intellectually, but first and foremost socially and psychologically, and at almost every turn. In part, it was simply being at a particular kind of first-rate research university, one that gathered terrific people, insisted on the highest bars of intellect and integrity, then set them loose to learn under benign neglect, no coddling; indeed, it barely even explained, assuming prior knowledge or osmosis. But that—well—I was in fact prepared for, better than I first realized. But there were several ways in which my alienation accentuated my Italianness and kickstarted affirmation, analysis, and dissemination. In the end, I even learned what it meant that the professors were willing, at Yale at least, to hear what I had to say.

Twenty years later, I would write a book, *Feeling Italian*, that argued and acted against the grain of what academics were doing then and, to a lesser extent, what they are doing now. The book brandished archetypes rather than decrying stereotypes; it luxuriated in iconography and pop culture even as it explored their complexities and

wisdom; and it told the tale of each icon, or at least *tried* to tell it, with the Italian-American tonality and linguistic gestures of the materials themselves, most often with a combination of love and irony, braggadocio and shrugged shoulders, Catholic particularity and universal outreach. *Feeling Italian* got written in part because my students at Duke University, once upon a time mostly from either the South or the mid-Atlantic, were fascinated with the materials I had gathered. But the peculiar shape it took, its edginess legible even today (when discourses of white ethnicity are thought to be purely racial resentment and when we are near the exhaustion point of competitive victimization), *that* was because every single day for six years I made my way across the borders from New Haven to Yale and back—when and where the expressive and ritualistic cultures of Italian America greeted me at almost every turn, in happy lasting provocation.

For it was in New Haven that I learned to ask, first of Yale, and then of the academy in general: to what extent have the offspring of the Italians, third and increasingly fourth generation retained any cultural or social distinctiveness? Why are Americans at large so interested, even invested in Italian-American distinctiveness, more so at times than the hyphenated offspring themselves? What, in other words, does Italian America still have to teach us? About how, for the professors, to think and write, investigate and communicate? About how, for all us, to make art and love and life?

am getting ahead of myself, way ahead of myself.

Yale was, for me, at first, a place called Machine City, because that was where the grad students gathered. Machine City was an underground bunker between the Cross Campus Library and Sterling Memorial Research Library. It had old-fashioned instant coffee, aka Folgers or Nescafé, made in machines that had not been replaced in decades. It was the only place anywhere in and around the library one could smoke, and many of the grad students were compulsive smokers, since it placated stress and stimulated thought at the same time. The vending machines supplied snacks like sugared baby donuts, made of coconut oil and gobs of corn syrup.

Machine City epitomized the idea that, at Yale, you were supposed to be studying all the time; that the academic life was one of ferocious discipline and maximum selfdenial, poised literally between the Yale-approved Commons of the Cross-Campus Library, where was housed the best that had been known and said, and Sterling Memorial Research Library, where was housed almost all that had been thought and written. Machine City was, also, equidistant, non-coincidentally, from two eateries that had the *chutzpah* to call themselves—in New Haven!—pizzerias, one which abutted the Hall of Graduate Studies and the other a way-station in the direction of the graduate housing ghetto. The food was below-mediocre to near-terrible, the karma scarcely better. Yet, for all my despair, indeed because of it, I intuited from the first that the most important kind of academic collaboration in the humanities, at least to me, was conversation in a booth or across a table—what interesting classmates I had and what godawful conditions we were granted to be together! What I did not know in those early years was that solving this particular puzzle—whether to eat at my apartment or elsewhere, how to learn to cook first for myself and then for others, how, after all that, to get my comrades to join me and, indeed, help pay for it—would capture a major part of my *intellectual* imagination and give it a problematic, an archive, and an agenda that would prompt me to stand up to standard-issue critical thinking.

I am not here to whine any more than to indulge in delusive nostalgia or wax triumphant—no more than necessary, anyway. And for that, "Mi dispiace, mea culpa," whichever works for you. But let's get it recorded. At Yale, I did not encounter a single faculty member or graduate student who was of even partial Italian descent—even if Robert Anthony Orsi, five years my senior, was out there somewhere, researching *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*. As importantly, though not coincidentally, hardly anyone, certainly not any in authority, seemed to have anything like my temperament, which, to reference '8os baseball, was a Tony La Russa contemplative-thinker embodied, quite literally, in a Tommy Lasorda gregarious sensualist, a good ol' Marian-Catholic Italian boy with code-shifting multicultural and observational chops. But I was also what my mother would call a "contrarian," with nary an Oxbridge technique in my repertoire.

Allen Guttmann, a scholar of American Jewish literature and a sports sociologist out of Germany who lost family in the Holocaust, pulled me into his office my sophomore year at Amherst College. With immense kindness and some degree of trepidation, he warned me that in the upper ends of the US academy, especially the Ivies (almost all my faculty at Amherst wore Ph.D. robes that were Yale blue or Harvard crimson), and especially in the humanist circles of those institutions, the deep abiding prejudice was against the Catholic ethnics, especially the older "white" ethnics: the Irish, the Italians, the Slavs. Now, I submit, times were already a'changin'. At Yale, I made friends among grad students who were of Polish, French-Canadian, Irish-Cuban, and straight-up Irish descent, not to mention black folks from all backgrounds imaginable (the Jesuit priesthood included), which tells you something about where Yale, the breakthrough Ivy, thought it should be headed at the time, at least intellectually. But at Yale, in fact, I did not encounter a single faculty member *admitting* to Roman Catholic or, for that matter, Orthodox Catholic backgrounds. Nonetheless, it was, of course, the non-Catholic faculty who made the admissions decisions that opened the doors to Ivied credentialing for us all, and that, subsequently, held everyone to the same high standards, thank G-d.

I want to be totally clear about this. On the one hand, the established faculty that was there—old stock Anglo-Protestants and African Americans out of the Black Churches and Ashkenazi Jews from Conservative to Reform to Seder-less were welcoming and supportive—even more so, the more I understood what I wanted to do. Menshes, then, one and all! As my Amherst mentor, Laura Wexler, now distinguished professor at Yale of all places, once said, "Go to Yale. You won't like it there, but you will be very glad you went." The very matter of alienation would turn out—duh—to be an unparalleled opportunity.

The cultural borderline inside Yale in 1980 was as subtly resilient, that is, resistant, as it was open-minded and on the verge of ethnic transformation—on the verge, paradoxically, from the bottom up but also from the top down. It was, after all, the '80s. That is, in 1978, the great A. Bartlett Giamatti arose out of the Yale English Department to replace Kingman Brewster and face down financial disaster. Half Italian

(grandfather from Campania, grandmother a descendent of *The Mayflower*, literally) and bearing the gravitas of intellectuals in Italy, he had nonetheless been raised in Boston, the Calvinist heart of America, and he had attended Philips Andover Academy, modeled on Eton and Harrow. Yes, Professor Giamatti was a superb scholar who had earned his appointment in English and Comparative Literature at Yale. But did you know that he was the son of a medieval lit-and-history scholar who taught at Mt. Holyoke College? and that he had been trained at Yale College and Yale Graduate School? So, in effect, to the manor of the elite academy born. Presumably, President Giamatti spoke Roman Italian (where he had gone to school for a year), surely he read Tuscan Italian perfectly. Yet he went always by the nickname "Bart"—short for Bartlett: Bartlett, so old New England a moniker that Aaron Sorkin brilliantly used it to slip his Catholic TV President (played by Chicano Martin Sheen!) into Exeter Academy, the New Hampshire Governorship, and The White House. Do you know, in fact, what the "A" in his formal name stood for? Angelo! In short, brandishing "Bart" while burying "Angelo" helped to reassure his mates that he was not really that kind of an Italian. I hail this as the cultivation of a necessary persona, importing Italian-ness in semi-disguise, but the fact remains that "Bart" Giamatti was raised in a vaguely Protestant household (his son Paul is spectacular playing an American Jew)—only to call himself, in the light of the university, a "secular humanist."

It would be five more years, by the way, before we would have a real "Guido" in the senior administration at Yale, an ethnically complex tale I will, out of respect and self-preservation, leave Bianca Calabresi to tell. Two more years thereafter, President Giamatti himself became Commissioner of Major League Baseball, the greatest appointment ever, for which we from Yale (united at Modern Apizza, much greasier back then) rooted like hell (the Red Sox-Yankees divide notwithstanding).

All of this social difference might just have been a matter of personal adjustment, a bit of purgatory on the way to a soul-satisfying job for me at, say, Villanova or SUNY Binghamton, if it weren't, curiously enough, for the academic research initiatives of the period. At exactly this time, Yale English had taken the lead in that intellectual movement informed by French anti-philosophers, ideology-historians, and discourse-

Freudians called Literary Theory. The early 1980s version of Literary Theory was an extremely abstract meditation on extremely self-referential forms of poetry and fiction, a method and set of presumptions that transformed any story or poem into a commentary upon its failures to control meaning. In the meantime, the group called "The New Social Historians," housed majorly at Yale, had refocused attention of their discipline from the ideas and politics of white male elites, to the lives under protest of rural and industrial working classes, of women and racial minorities: the method was statistical, their focus extremely local, and the lessons were romanticized and righteous. To put this in terms of Italian American Studies: the historians were already interested, believe in or not, in mapping the damage done to New Haven by urban renewal, but there was no interest in any form of Italian American arts or expression. Period. In Italianate shorthand, that meant either Antonio Gramsci/Umberto Eco or the construction/garment industries, but no food, no music, no immigrant novels or Hollywood blockbusters or charismatic athletes. At the end of the first semester at Yale, I was told I *must* choose: literary theory or social history. Otherwise, no job, no support, no future.

A funny thing happened, however, on the way to feeding body and soul.

Recall my quiet desperation in Machine City. What was a sad and disconcerted boy to do, who didn't yet understand his occupation but also didn't know how he could stand to "get to work," as it were, without real food and companionship? So I began to look right in front of me, at Yale University itself—where, lo and behold, the Italians of New Haven (with African Americans from congregations in the Carolinas) kept the university in business, working almost every kind of support job with skill and pride. I made acquaintances, made friends, among them New Haven informants. I mean the secretaries in the kinder quarters of the University Administration, the gardeners planting the bushes, the masons repointing walls built by their ancestors. I mean the barbers at the university store, who were brothers from Amalfi and grew real vegetables together on a small farmstead in Chesire. And I mean, especially, one Gary Garibaldi, whom I met in a way that is worth pausing over, as it illustrates how these other "Yalies" supplemented my otherwise superb formal education.

Fall 1980, one year in. Three days running, for an art history course, I hunkered down in the Special Collections suite of the Yale Art Gallery researching Winslow Homer sketches. Each day of research, I would get up and go out to stretch, right hand sore from pencil scribbling, and walk into the Museum proper—which happened to be featuring a postwar photographic exhibit by Robert Frank. Black-and-whites of industrial streets and urban crowds, rallies, protests, and festivals, colorfully and intriguingly multi-cultural. The exhibit was kitty-corner yet open to the elevator, and on the near side of the elevator, a security guard stood, well-groomed, back erect and attentive. On the third day, reaching the limit of my ability to decipher the photos, I asked the security guard what he thought of the photographs. Bristling, he gave me a brief look of irritation—what, is this a nerd-asshole pulling my chain?—then he walked me around the gallery, photo by photo, granting me one of the best spontaneous lectures in US Social History—even that Yale kind of Social History—I ever received. Born and raised in New Haven, Gary Garibaldi was a former ward healer for the Republicans (the Irish controlled the Dems) who was, at the time of our meeting, the President of the Service and Maintenance Workers, Yale Union 35. I was taken by him, surely; and he and his family took me in. Every month or so for years, especially in the summers when it was easier for me to get around, I joined the family after Mass for Sunday gravy in their triple-decker—two brothers with their families, also their parents, out towards West Haven. We talked New Haven history, varieties of Italian American family life and culture, and of course, la cucina, including where to go to make it and eat it.

I became, with the guidance of Garibaldi and others, a "walker in the city." I was on a mission, for all the welcome distractions that New Haven per se provided. I found, in exhilaratingly short order, where to get sublimely cut veal (my mother would approve), out on the left side of Grand Avenue, where there was also an excellent selection of the macaronis and spaghettis and pastine that I was learning to call "pasta." I found a deli with store-made sausage and huge barrels of dried beans nestled in an alleyway near Yale Medical School—so embedded in the old Oak Street neighborhood that the store didn't even have a sign! I found a summer veggie stand on lower State

Street which sold gorgeous red peppers for 25¢ (the non-Italians were afraid they were hot!), and my best friend found Pete de Rosa's first veggie stand on Upper State Street. Chattering nonstop, Pete never weighed anything, just looked at your bag and assigned you a reasonable price while entertaining with endless patter; then, after a life-transformative visit to Zabar's in the city, he went from local to international, including—yes!—arugula and balsamic vinegar. Meanwhile, the best bread was way up Dixwell, just before the Merritt overpass, at a bakery called Venice. And for the eateries, we began exploring farther afield. When my parents came to town, we tried a wonderful family-run trattoria in downtown Fair Haven that became our favorite. When I got a girl who got a car, we would set out for the ravioli factory in Derby, which served stracciatella and square spaghetti, and was so reasonably priced it was worth the gas—not to mention the picturesqueness (rural and post-industrial) of the ride and the big boxes of frozen ravioli I came home with!

One place in particular, though, must serve for what I was finding throughout greater New Haven. Very close to the university was a den of relaxation and seeming escape that increasingly became a stimulus to thought and research: a place for debate, an object of study, a challenge to the reigning academic models of art, culture, and society. Just beyond the literal and figurative walls of Yale, on the north side of York Street a couple of storefronts towards Crown, after the iffy not-so-underground sex shop, was a bar-restaurant called The Brass Button. I don't know when the building was built, in the late '70s, I would guess, but despite the angularity, hanging plants, and heavy furniture of the era, it had a slightly Art Deco jazzy feel. My friends and I usually sat in a long dark area on the first floor, towards the back, feeling a bit under-dressed and wallet-light. We had walked less than one block from Yale proper, and we were away for a while. It was one of many places that spurred the book I would later write, but in several ways it might symbolize the whole process.

At the Brass Button, I felt really, really Italian. It engaged my personal interest in the social history of the Italians in New Haven, but mostly it got me thinking about the arts of Italian America, the art of Italianness in America, its achievements, both past and ongoing, and why so many non-Italians were utterly involved in its *gestalt*. The

Brass Button was a site of Italianness near Yale, to get good food and experience camaraderie, but also as a site where Yalies, this Yalie in particular, got to think about the history, the nature, the force of Italianness—thoughts largely against the grain of standard academic wisdom then, later, and even now. Increasingly not a retreat from the library but an alternative site, figuring out what to ask of my studies, the classroom, the university system at large.

I remember the mussels best, whether by themselves or over linguini, the key being to cook the garlic just right, just enough pep, a dry white like Pinot Grigio, and only a few tomatoes. From the scampi and the orecchiette, the ossobuco and the zabaglione, came several immediate lessons. Point 1 was just Italian Identity 101. Point 2 was food and drink as objects of study—why do the rituals here and especially in Italian homes (my family's and those I had been visiting) feel religious, and how is it that Italian identity claims you, reclaims you, as if participating in a rite? So I learned to ask: ought there be a study of food and foodways? There was a more general point 3, moreover, and it had to do with *collaborative* thought. I loved taking my grad-school friends there. See, this is where I come from; I am not making all this Italian stuff up. I also started asking larger questions, a bit more abstract but involving ideas—of the communal and the collective—not much in abundance: Isn't the table where we best enact the togetherness of hospitality, indeed "inclusivity"? Don't Italians, and they are not alone in this, comprehend breaking bread as unofficial sacrament? Doesn't the ritual of eating together harbor a non-catechetical rite of Communion, one in which the quality of the food and the inclusion of the table count mightily?

Most of the time, I didn't have enough money for eating out. But a bottle of Rolling Rock or glass of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo was cheap, the whole restaurant, but especially the downstairs bar, was wonderfully atmospheric, and, well, the jukebox, back of the staircase where we most often drank, was magnificent. Recently crafted to insinuate, to simulate, to stimulate that it had "always" been there, the jukebox was an education in itself. I loved listening to Sinatra, even the early stuff, to his friends and rivals, including his most important mentor, Billie Holiday, who was—tellingly—well represented in the selections. Ella and Louis (especially in duet), Peggy Lee, and dozens

and dozens of Italian American pop singers, from Jerry Vale and Dean Martin to Dion DiMucci and the Rascals, for reasons that seemed both to run in the blood and to call out to almost everyone in reach. Just listen to *this*!

Here is an issue that will resonate with the elders of our profession even if it seems to most of you commonsensical, even banal. Literary Theory, which was all head and no heart, was tone deaf and to my ears massively Protestant, even Judeo-Protestant, in its disdain for the material, the visual, and the theatrical (which were, to my senses, vessels of the sacred). The jukebox at the Brass Button sounded a particular cultural heritage, that of Sinatra and His Fellows, but it also drew out general questions, enabled by Theory but directed against the metaphysics of Theory, its understanding of what art can do, for whom and why. Why doesn't the university care about singing like this, I bluntly wondered. What is the academy not hearing, not primed to hear; not explaining, not able to explain? Isn't this poetry set to music, addressed to the problems of the heart, as English and Scottish and Irish ballads of yore, strengthened by underlying African-American rhythms, Jewish-American minor-key melodies and audacious wit, and most importantly, the luscious yet subtle voices of Italian American urbanity, the guys especially? There was no way then, with the analytical tools then available, that an English prof could justify professionally caring about any of this, never mind explicating and enacting and acting from it. Still, I wondered, Why can't departments of English and Cultural Studies explain the power of the language when "vocalized" with both swing and an uncanny note bending, yielding tonalities of power and nuance? Where is there an attitude anything like that in the literature and arts we take as canonical? It is there, only eluding us because of the approach we are trained to take? New Haven was teaching me questions that would dog me into the digital era, even as I got better and better at figuring out what could and should be done. In particular, the combination of all-in and tongue-in-cheek, love and irony, bravado and vulnerability, that emerged so brilliantly in the Sinatra of the fifties was itself an attitude, an "aesthetic," a way of knowing and being in the world that had NO correlates I could find in the official academic proceedings that eschewed sensuality, performance, conviviality as the object of inquiry, even if they snuck such things into their best writings, sotto voce, despite

themselves. (For the record, the near conservatory quality of Yale Music was cognizant of Sinatra, his composers and arrangers and instrumentalists; while Art & Architecture was aware, too, of Joseph Stella and Robert Venturi.)

"Performance Studies" hadn't nearly been invented yet, but I was hearing and, around me, seeing and even tasting (I mean this literally) a compound achievement, in the bar as on the jukebox: the effect of full presence, the persona that is more theirself in the music, turning microphone into instrument and bending notes into both lyrical enactment and personal style. Of course, the Italianitá of The Brass Button in the 1980s was already multi-generations along and mass-mediated, but knowing that made it no less effective, I began to think, perhaps even the contrary. For the Brass Button was not just a restaurant with a bar; it was a scene, not *my* scene exactly, but one almost out of the movies yet palpable too. From the black fedoras and shoulder-padded suits, from the curve-accentuating, skin-complimenting, color-forward dresses, I started to ask: why do the faculty and grad students dress so badly? More importantly, why is no one talking about dress style as anything other than the hood-winking of the masses? Doesn't performance matter; doesn't *la bella figura* make things happen?

For I also intuited that not only style per se but a particular style was at stake in the clothing and the atmosphere it supported: the bar felt like "a mafia bar," not the scary type where real siddowns in traditional organized crime organizations were presumably held (history tells us that), though there may have been a couple (what did I know?), but of the showy sort that Sinatra made possible in Vegas, where it was requisite that criminality of all sorts be left at the door. It was only good manners, you see, to fellow patrons and to il Padrone, George Montano, owner and grand host of the Brass Button. Why did I like the idea of being in the presence of mobster and moll, whether actual or play-acting or a bit of both, as if for the duration of being in The Brass Button I could rival my very, very Sicilian cousins, especially those in Long Beach, Long Island.

We, the Yalies stepping-out, experienced there a form of media-mafia aesthetic. Certainly, I had no idea whether it was a gathering place for the quietly real or the devoutly wanna-bes, but just as surely mafia typology was at least one of the dimensions

of Italian-ness at play. The lessons were strong and would prove to have legs. From Mario Puzo's book and Francis Ford Coppola's movies to George Montano's trattoria—mob-supported Leon's went untorched in the 1967 riots, yes?—were burnt into my consciousness several things: the interplay of ethnicity and entrepreneurship, ethnicity and the media, ethnicity and self-fashioning, all of which followed from self-knowing that parodied as much as it glorified.

So once again, food and music and style—life as movies, movies as life—at The Brass Button. It engaged my interest in the social history of the Italians in New Haven AND it got me thinking about the arts of Italian America. What I learned at The Brass Button was to take the power of words and images and gestures more seriously; to think of the claim to the universal as rooted in the ethnic, even the parochial; to think of style as content, performance, not as fakery or cover-up but as *made presence*, and the self-parody of stereotype as inseparable, or at least nearly inseparable, from the conjuring/mythic power of archetype. I also learned to take seriously the curiosity, the participation, and the semi-conversions of those not born into cultural codes. I was beginning to understand that while we Americans are all half Protestant, practically no aspect of American culture outside of actual Protestant churches was as Puritan as the Professoriate.

With an advanced mission, I returned to the library. I designed and documented and defended a course for Yale undergraduates, Italian America in Theory, History, and Artifact, with Alan Trachtenberg as advisor and the logistical support of one of the undergraduate film societies (they screened all the movies I wanted to teach in 35 mm, on Sunday nights in the Law School), and another guardian angel caught wind of it, and, before I knew it, I had a very rare opportunity for a Yale graduate student: I was teaching my course, and variations thereof, every summer for the Yale Summer Program and getting paid, too. Amazing things followed. A 23-year-old undergraduate showed up, a Jewish kid with real street smarts, who commuted up two evenings a week from NYC to finish his Yale degree because, in his day job, he was helping the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York (where have you gone, Rudolph Guiliani?) to prepare the case against one John Gotti, the Gambino boss from Howard Beach who styled himself

(shades of The Brass Button!), with Armani's help, after the movie mobsters. For every high school junior who went to Hopkins or Choate Rosemary Hall in my summer classes, there were a dozen grownups, including a postwar ex-Mayor, Irish, of course, and the weather lady at WTNH, who was as smart and generous as she was camera-friendly, and who was the great, great-granddaughter of Enrico Caruso. I kid you not. Italian New Haven, in astonishing variety, teaching me at every turn, even when least expected.

I was beginning to think that instead of debunking stereotypes (whether negative or positive or both), they needed to be contextualized and explicated, re-enacted, even put into action. Lean in rather than disavow. I started writing, with a draft chapter on Mario Puzo's Fortunate Pilgrim and an invited essay on The Godfather. It was a lionhaired, lion-hearted patriarch of Anglo-Yale and the first generation of American Studies, R.W.B. Lewis, who told me one night at HIS house over dinner that "if I had any coglioni I would write the whole dissertation on Puzo." By the time I did get around to Feeling Italian, the rise of Cultural Studies meant the dominant issue in Italian American Studies was the all-ideology question, *Are Italians White?* The timely books were subtitled, *How Race is Made in America*. I thought, "If you must, but oi, veh, what opportunities you miss!" At Werner Sollors' invitation, I decided to take my damn stand, to the consternation of both center and margin, and so I worked to demonstrate, as fetchingly as possible, in the manner of the arts themselves, not "how the guineas got white" but "how America was becoming Italian." I wanted to suggest that, for all its pop mediation, even partial invention, the lived diaspora was somehow still with us and gathering disciples. I wanted to supplement the established histories of victimization and victimizing. And I wanted to show how much more aesthetically compelling, sociologically smarter, and philosophically wiser these Italian-American arts were than credited, each in itself, yes, but also constituting together what I came to call "the Art of Italian America."

At my wife's suggestion—she is one of those converts, not to Catholicism exactly but to Italian-Americanness—I would focus each chapter on a particular icon, its special moment, and the text/performance that gave each respective icon its transformative

#### Thomas J. Ferraro

force (however many I had the stamina for). I procrastinated as usual on finding a cover image, but when I found it, I knew I had it (Figure 1). For the record, I am commenting upon its applicability here in public for the very first time. A cover can't do everything, sometimes it can barely do anything, but I have always believed you should be able to judge *something* of a book by its cover. It captured several things that I wanted to convey in the face of p-c assumptions and generic thinking: to embrace iconography and archetype, in order to contextualize and explicate; to take the senses seriously, even when it is entrepreneurial or consumeristic; and to capture performance as both affirming and self-parodying.

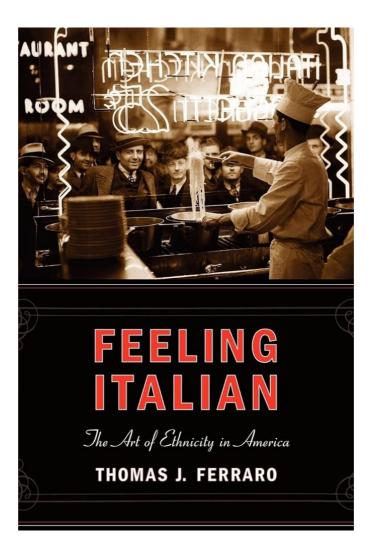


Figure 1. Cover of Feeling Italian (NYU Press), reproducing the 1937 Bettmann/CORBIS photograph "Pedestrians on Broadway look through a restaurant window to watch a cook prepare a pot of spaghetti."

This photo embodies an attitude. It is not frightened by market enticement or consumer success: pasta is being offered here in a hospitality that evokes communion: the gift of an exotic yet particularly yummy and taste-accessible food, the potential for the felt collectivity of the Italian table, a rite of grace in God's name for all comers, not just the pre-select. See here, this is a shadow—or should I say, lighted, even enlightened version of the priest in the post-Vatican II mass, facing the congregation, out of church and before his time. Of course, the pasta has not been pre-cooked and held indefinitely, until ordered, for a finishing stir fry or, an *infamità*!, a dip in hot water. And it matters that the pasta on offer is good ol' spaghetti. My grandmother's non-Italian classmates bullied her for "eating worms" (she was born in 1901), but look where New York is getting to, in the 1930s, before The Depression started to wane! Stanley Tucci's early foodie movie, *Big Night* is wonderful, so exhilarating and so sad, but the dichotomy between the two restaurants, authentic regional cooking vs. the bastardized cuisine of the migrant South, leaves Italian-American home cooking out of the picture. Indeed it leaves New Haven out of the picture, for I ate at Pepe's, Leon's, and Sorrento's too often to think that there wasn't brilliant Neapolitan American cuisine EVEN in the restaurants. So, bring on the calamari fra diavolo! What is being offered here, then, is a consumer's access to identity, a rite of consuming participation, which was then and remains now a helluva different way of conceptualizing multicultural interplay and the transfiguration of the mainstream.

I didn't know at the time that in Naples (Italy, not Florida) the elementary school system teaches all of its kids, so now Italians and Ethiopians and Albanians alike, to sing by heart the infectious ditty, "That's Amore," which is, after all, a "fake" Neapolitan canzone that was composed by the Italian-American Harry Warren with lyrics by an Anglo-American Jew, made popular by Dean Martin in 1953, then put to resplendent use in that female-focused pitch-perfect fakery, Norman Jewison and John Patrick Shanley's *Moonstruck*.

So, *mamma mia*! look what is STILL going on, around the world, even in *Italia*. Stanley Tucci is back in the Italian "food movie" business, composing brilliant little culinary lessons all over Italy with quiet social and political commentary, once again

embodying love and irony—which is how you gotta respond to his line of pots and pans, \$999.95 a set at Williams-Sonoma. The global food industry in Naples (however taxed and terrorized by the Camorra) has gathered up the young men of the Campania countryside with little future (as once they were contracted to Sargent's factory in New Haven), teaching them to make pretty darn good pizza in the tough air and rough supply conditions of the Euro-American diaspora, sending them to set up shop almost everywhere. "The Bear" captures the imagination of the multitudes, as do a dozen brilliant populist Italian cooks on TV or in books, as do the first-rate Italian restaurants run and staffed by Koreans, Mexicans, and Middle Easterners—more "authentic," the food writers say, than the trendy spots in Italy. In the meantime, despite the damage done by MP3s, and the tonally challenged literalness of those running Siriusly Sinatra, there is surely not a singer in creation—not the Beatles, not Ray Charles—who receives more attention these days than Frank: a larger CD and concert DVD catalog, but also dozens upon dozens of contemporary pop stars covering his songbook, of course, the jazz singers like Diane Krall and John Pizzarelli, and of course Tony Bennett with K. D. Lang or Lady Gaga, but also records from Bob Dylan (he gets better and better) and terrific entries from Van Morrison, Rickie Lee Jones, and the late Lou Rawls. No Library of America Volume yet, but several less haughty publishers have finally installed *The* Godfather in their great American novel series, accompanying The Great Gatsby and Huckleberry Finn. Doctor Anthony Fauci, tells us that his philosophical bible is The Godfather, Van Zandt does too, by which they mean Puzo's novel. Despite the history of critical reception, in which the mainstream movie critics averred that it was Coppola and his technical crew who turned a piece of trash into cinematic genius, the facts are several: not only did plot, character, and dialogue come directly from Mario Puzo, so did the book's acute visuality; the recent exhibit in LA showed, beyond a doubt, how Coppola worked not from his screenplay (co-written with Mario), but from the novel itself (annotated to the point where it would give a teacher beautiful dreams), warts and all; and it was the later makers of The Sopranos who leveraged another round of (in)genius storytelling from the parts of the novel that were thought too "trashy" to make it into the 1970s films, constituting (with all due respect to Martin Scorsese, Abel Ferrara, and their mates) the most empathetic and insight debunking of mob masculinity America has ever known! (*White Lotus*, I am told, here we come!)

Feeling Italian began by noting, in its first sentence, in 2004: "One would think, on the face of it, that the Italian Americans whose ancestors came to the United States en masse a full century ago must be coming to the end of their social and cultural distinctiveness." So let me end in the now, 20 years later, when just the other day, a Jersey boy who had always wanted to be an NFL quarterback (first name, Tommy, of course, which is what the Italians and my intimates always call me), who lives at home with a family out of casting central and an agent whose fashion is still the Brass Button, unexpectedly became the starter for the New York Giants—in which capacity, after touchdowns, a gesture with his fingers became the shot seen around the world. I don't care, mind you, whether it was spontaneous or camera-friendly, as so the glorious show of his Jersey family at the tailgates (oh, those chicken cutlets) and in the stands (men smooching men)—after all, among the Italians of the new millennium, what's the difference? Five generations and counting, the good, the goods, of Italian America, are still with us, practically New Haven style!

Feeling Italian *ancora*, everyone? An open question, to each of you individually, but also a rhetorical one, writ large. Michael Corleone averred, in the flawed but spectacularly interesting *Godfather III*, "Just when I thought I was out, they pulled me back in." But it was the vernacular genius of Yogi Berra, more New Haven-Brooklyn-Jersey than Hollywood, who coined the gloss that the stories I have shared today really warrant. Forty years after leaving Yale, twenty years after writing my book, guess what: "It's déjà vu all over again!"

Or, as an audience member intoned, "It ain't over til it's over!"

**Thomas J. Ferraro**, Professor of English at Duke University, is a teacher-critic of US literature and the media arts, with long-standing interest in the interplay of ethnicity, religion, and aesthetics. *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America* (NYU Press, 2005) received an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation; *Transgression & Redemption in American Fiction* (Oxford University Press) was published in 2021. If, admittedly, *Feeling Italian* addresses the iconography of Italianess from the point of view of a traditionally trained Romanticist, *Transgression &* 

## Thomas J. Ferraro |

*Redemption* can be said, only half-facetiously, to return the favor, reading the American novel canon like a paesan from Southern Italy. His recent essay, "It's G-D's Bloody Rule, Ma!" was composed for the American Fragility issue of *JamIt!*, treating the difference the invocation of Hebrew Scripture makes to the Freudian-and-Marxist memory work in E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*. E-mail: <a href="mailto:ferraro@duke.edu">ferraro@duke.edu</a>

### THE CHEERFUL DEFENESTRATOR

# **Carlo Rotella**Boston College

In the 2020 census, over half the white population in America self-reported being of English (46.6 million), German (45 million), or Irish (38.6 million) ancestry, alone or in any combination. These are the Big Three white ethnicities—a term I use advisedly, recognizing all the complications that come from the American habit of blurring immigrant nationality into ethnicity. Down the rankings from the Big Three, you find Polish (8.6 million), Scottish (8.4 million), French (8 million), Swedish (3.8 million), Norwegian (3.8 million), Dutch (3.6 million), and so on down to Australian and Albanian and such.

Sitting in the sweet spot between the Big Three and everybody else, at 16.8 million, are Italian Americans.¹ It's a sweet spot because Italian Americans are much more heavily and disproportionately represented in American culture than the groups below them, while the Big Three above them have mostly merged into the undifferentiated mass of de-ethnicized whiteness and become semi-invisible. Englishness isn't really a recognizable identity in American culture anymore unless you're a first-generation transplant with an accent; the two world wars and the Nazis' obsession with blood and history took much of the vibrancy out of any lingering impulse to sustain Germanness as a living heritage in America; and while some Americans of Irish ancestry have managed to nurture a vestigial sense of Irishness, at this point it's increasingly a form of LARPing abetted by Boston-themed movies, ads, and comedy routines. That leaves Italian Americans as by far the largest white ethnic group that has

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Paul Jacobs, Alli Coritz, and Rachel Marks, "Over Half of White Population Reported Being English, German or Irish," United States Census Bureau (October 10, 2023): https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/10/2020-census-dhc-a-white-population.html.

Carlo Rotella |

managed to retain a strong and widely recognized sense of distinct identity rooted in national origins.

And they've hung onto that identity despite their distinctive success at assimilating into American life, which can be measured by how triumphantly suburban they have become. In an analysis of the 2000 census, the sociologists Richard Alba and Victor Nee found that 73.5 percent of Italian Americans who lived in metropolitan areas lived in the suburbs, a percentage that tied them for first place with Polish Americans, with Irish Americans and German Americans coming in third and fourth. And 91.2 percent of Italian Americans lived in metropolitan areas, a higher percentage than for any other non-Hispanic white ethnic group (Alba and Nee 2003, 85-87). More than a quarter of them are concentrated in and around New York City, where they form the dominant white ethnicity in the suburban heartlands of Long Island and New Jersey.<sup>2</sup> Put those numbers together, and Italian-Americans can make a strong claim to the title of pound-for-pound champions of suburbanization. Since the middle of the 20th century, the conventional path of least resistance to middle-class belonging in America has led outward from the inner city to suburbia, and no immigrant group has followed that path more successfully.

You are no doubt asking yourself right about now why I'm talking about numbers. Thomas Ferraro's "introduction to Italian ways of feeling and ways of feeling Italian in the United States" (7) is not a numbers-intensive book.<sup>3</sup> It's a belletristic inquiry into the most unquantitative of subjects—parsing a suite of feelings loosely arising from the fact that some Americans trace their ancestry to Italy—via interpretive readings of emblematic cultural artifacts ranging from Frank Stella's *Brooklyn Bridge* to Madonna's "Like a Virgin." So why start with numbers? Because they help us understand what makes Ferraro's book so lastingly valuable.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Jacobs, Coritz, and Marks (2023).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> All quotations and page numbers from the paperback edition: Thomas Ferraro, *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America* (New York University Press, 2005).

Ferraro begins from an assumption that the numbers make inevitable: Italians have assimilated into American life, refashioning it along the way in their own image. His book, he explains at the outset, "is not an attempt to turn the clock back, to think of white ethnicity in 1970s terms, as an issue of 'us' versus 'them.' It is not about Italian American community frozen in time but rather about the century-long, often wondrous, at times discordant, Italianate remaking of the United States" (1). The drama of unbelonging—the struggle to force a way against the resistance of nativism and anti-Catholic bias and all the other usual villainous suspects into industrial America, full citizenship, and (though ethnic boosters tend not to celebrate this part) full whiteness—is over. So is the drama of contributions, in which ethnic boosters remind us that a person whose last name ends in a vowel invented or discovered such-and-such, the objective being to amass credentials for inclusion and also grounds to sustain grievance. Ferraro's subject is the far more ironic and symbolic and not so thrillingly adversarial fashioning of white ethnicity in suburbanized, postindustrial America.

Beginning from that assumption gives Ferraro an angle to make headway against the grain of identity politics, Italian American-style. Italian Americans in general, and Italian American scholars in particular, have long been hung up on the notion of Italian American exceptionalism. While German or English immigrants might shed their ethnic markers over the generations and recede into whiteness, Italian Americans accord themselves a special order of authenticity that guarantees their continuing essential Italianness even after becoming every bit as white and middle-class and suburban as those German Americans or English Americans.

Italian Americans have insisted on this exceptionalism so vigorously that lots of non-Italian Americans acquiesce and join them in recognizing it. Growing up in a black neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, I got used to other kids feeling that they were cutting me a break by appending an asterisk to my whiteness because I was "Italian," which they regarded as a special category. Actually, my father was Sicilian and my mother is Catalan—so, like Columbus's voyage, I'm a Spanish-Italian co-production—but American culture offers little to nothing in the way of equipment for being Spanish American. Who would I have emulated? The creepy ventriloquist Señor

Wences? The New York Mets first baseman Keith Hernandez? Charo? In contrast, as Ferraro persuasively demonstrates, there are many widely available and generally recognized ways to feel Italian. Black kids in South Shore were aware of those ways and had no trouble using them as a template to assign a special identity to me, whether I wanted them to or not. (Sometimes I did. That asterisk could come in handy.)

Italian Americans across the ideological spectrum share an investment in the ongoing life of such exceptionalist thinking—from harrumphing Sons of Italy types detecting anti-Italian bias in the eternal popularity of Mafia narratives or the peaking of Mario Cuomo's political career short of the Oval Office (an *infamia*!) all the way over to equally outraged cultural critics who imagine Italian American identity as a site of resistance to late capitalism and whatever else you got. They all subscribe to some version of a model of culture in which bias and stereotypes and other external forces combine with the upwelling of unquenchable ethnic soul from within to shape an ethnic identity that's proof against the homogenization that has processed other immigrant groups into whitebread sameness.

Ferraro's introduction cheerily defenestrates this whole way of thinking without malice or dudgeon. He does it, rather, with the air of a cousin getting himself a beer from your refrigerator, noticing a carton of milk in there that's weeks past its use-by date, and doing you a favor by tossing it. Then he sets out, chapter by chapter, to offer a far more nuanced, ironic, and humanely historicized model of how it works and what it means to feel Italian American. The choice of verb is essential. You can't just somehow magically *be* Italian American because it's in the blood; rather, there are many ways to *feel* Italian American, an identity you can put together not just from equipment for living handed down from Italian ancestors but also from wonderfully recombinant lego pieces freely circulating in the culture where anybody can get hold of them. The lego pieces are all you need, it turns out. All kinds of people, including plenty with no Italian American ancestors at all, know how to put them together.

A beautifully concise sequence of topic sentences—really, half-sentences—in the conclusion of *Feeling Italian* summarizes the cultural history that produced those

lego pieces and put them into such vigorous circulation. "Once upon a time, feeling Italian was the unlooked-for fallout of social history" (202) captures phase one, the struggling-immigrant phase in which feeling Italian is thrust on newcomers as an unavoidably necessary identity. "At mid-century feeling Italian became increasingly a lesson in attitude" (203), the crucial element of what we might call the Sinatra phase, in which assimilation goes hand in hand with the Italianizing of American culture. Finally comes the postmodern phase: "As a self-conscious regime, acknowledging the lessons of experience and adopting the attitudes of art, feeling Italian is now a chosen identity" (203), and all sorts of people can choose to engage it by doing something as easy as, say, obsessively rewatching The Godfather. In 2008, when Barack Obama was running for president for the first time, he told Katie Couric that his favorite movies of all time were The Godfather I and II ("It's all about family")—a politic choice for a middle-aged American man of any ethnic or racial background trying to connect with all kinds of voters.<sup>4</sup> The proprietor of Boston's largest black megachurch told me that *The Godfather* was one of his two favorite movies, noting that he especially liked how everybody brought an envelope filled with money to the wedding.<sup>5</sup> And years ago, when I told Boston College's then-Dean of Arts and Sciences, who is of Irish descent, that I was writing about The Godfather, he pointed at his own bespectacled eye and said, "Best scene of all time—when Moe Greene ..." There was no need to say more. The Godfather's climactic baptism sequence is the "Stairway to Heaven" of movie scenes, perennially ranked at the top of all-time lists.

Feeling Italian features a chapter on *The Godfather*, of course, and the book's conclusion kicks off with an extended riff on *The Sopranos*, which was in mid-run and all the rage twenty years ago. *The Sopranos* exemplifies Ferraro's argument because it "is at once breathtakingly specific to the Jersey mob *and*, paradoxically, reflective of ordinary (non-Italian) lives in the Prozac/Viagra new millennium" (201). That's the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Brian Welk, "President Obama's Favorite Movies and TV Shows in Office," *The Wrap* (January 19, 2017): <a href="https://www.thewrap.com/president-obamas-favorite-movies-and-tv-shows-photos/">https://www.thewrap.com/president-obamas-favorite-movies-and-tv-shows-photos/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Carlo Rotella, "The Kingdom and the Power," *Boston* (August 16, 2006): https://www.bostonmagazine.com/2006/08/16/the-kingdom-and-the-power/.

exacta *Feeling Italian* keeps betting on, and both horses keep finishing one-two, paying off handsomely. And the pitch-perfectly *suburban* comic melodrama of *The Sopranos*—compressed to haiku-like density in Tony's morning ritual of fetching the newspaper from his driveway, his bathrobe affording a majestic view of his water-tower physique as he scans his placid cul-de-sac for incoming threats—makes it a particularly fitting endpoint.

The Godfather movies and The Sopranos offer a reminder that some of our favorite stories about Italian Americans raise serious doubts about the meaning of the journey to suburbia and the assimilative success it implies. The Godfather movies, the most canonical of immigrant narratives, are all about what is gained and lost in the Corleones' journey from Sicily to Little Italy to a family compound in suburban Long Island. An isolated mansion on the shore of Lake Tahoe comes next. By then, they're as far away as they can get from the old neighborhood, that place of festas, aspiration, and tribalism, and from its connection to the old country. As much as the *Godfather* movies fantasize about the generationally sustained potency of Italian American gangsters, they also retell a familiar story in which immigrants must compromise themselves in the name of making it in America. Detailing the damage and bad faith on the dark side of assimilation, they treat the atomization of suburbia as very dangerous business. By the end of Godfather II, Michael has made it by the standard American measures—he owns a big house and his kids can have any material thing they want—but at the cost of divesting himself of any vital bond to other people, including his own family. He's a man without a tribe.

The Sopranos picks up the story right there, with Tony and Carmela anxiously marooned in their suburban McMansion, but restores their tribal affiliation by presenting them as typical not only of Italian Americans but of Americans, period. She lunches and shops and dabbles in real estate, wondering if it's evil to enjoy the good life provided by her successful husband. He pines for a nostalgically idealized old neighborhood and yearns for connection to an even more idealized old country but faints at the sight of capicola (okay, fine: *qabaqool*) in the refrigerator. And by this point

most of the gangsters in Tony's cohort are getting most of their equipment for living as gangsters from the movies, not deep ancestral lifeways.

You still hear the occasional ethnic booster complain that mafia stories perpetuate stereotypes that do harm to Italian Americans, but I think they get it exactly wrong. Those stories have been a boon to Italian Americans in at least two ways. First, the *Godfather* movies and their many imitators have filled our cultural toolboxes with ways to imagine what it means—how it feels—to be of Italian descent, to be an immigrant, to make it in this country. Because they invite us to brood over assimilation and suburbanization, among other things, they afford us opportunities to consider whether it has been worth it to accept the offer of American belonging that so many immigrants have been unable to refuse. Second, like pizza, formulaic stories about Italian-American gangsters have helped Italianness sustain its cachet as a dominant ethnic identity in this country. I never have found much use for Columbus, but "don't ever take sides with anyone against the family" is handy equipment for living that anyone can pick up and put to use. Just ask my Chinese-German-Spanish-Italian American kids.

When I think about what books to class *Feeling Italian* with, John Gennari's *Flavor and Soul* comes to mind first. Above all, in its hilariously insightful chapter on college basketball coaches, it's the other book on Italian Americanness I would point to as an exemplar offering a better model of culture than what's offered by ethnic boosters, the identity police, critique-wielding theorizers, and other usual suspects. But for me, the more resonant analog might be Philip Deloria's books on Native American history, which similarly sweep aside conventional ways of thinking about peoplehood and culture and propose much more interesting ones to replace them. *Playing Indian* (1998) is all about the possibilities and limits of feeling Indian as demonstrated by the long tradition of non-Indians dressing up like Indians, from the Boston Tea Party to Mardi

<sup>-</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> John Gennari, Flavor and Soul: Italian America at Its African American Edge (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

#### Carlo Rotella |

Gras. *Indians in Unexpected Places* (2004) shows how extremely adaptable and creative Indian car enthusiasts, moviemakers, barnstormers, athletes, and musicians helped shape the leading edge of modernity, rather than playing their usual role as noble victims of its inevitable encroachment on their traditional lifeways. *Feeling Italian* makes similarly revisionary moves, with similarly field-redefining implications.

I met and befriended both Tom Ferraro and Phil Deloria when I was in graduate school. Tom was an alum, already a celebrated professor well-launched on his career, who returned for a visit. There weren't many Italian Americans at Yale, and I took note of his success and of the distinctive mix of intellectual firepower and flashes of regularguy affect evident in the style of academic selfhood practiced by Tom (and also, in a different mix, by my atavistically Jersey Irish mentor, Jim Fisher). Phil was a classmate. In my boundless ignorance, I had never heard of his father, the outspoken Indian activist Vine Deloria Jr., nor did I know anything about the generational weave that embeds the Deloria family so deeply in Indian history in general and Sioux history in particular. Honestly, just going by Phil's vowel-rich last name, the way he carried himself, the fact that he was married to a woman with an Irish name, and the feeling of immediate mutual affinity that sprang up between us, I assumed he was Italian American too. And, just by virtue of being American at all, I guess he sort of was.

### **WORKS CITED**

Alba, Richard and Victor Nee. 2003. *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and the New Immigration*. Harvard University Press.

Deloria, Philip Deloria. 1998. *Playing Indian*. Yale University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2004. *Indians in Unexpected Places*. University Press of Kansas.

**Carlo Rotella** is a professor of English, American Studies, and Journalism at Boston College. His next book, forthcoming in September 2025, is *What Can I Get Out of This?*: *Teaching and Learning in a Classroom Full of Skeptics*. E-mail: <a href="mailto:rotellca@bc.edu">rotellca@bc.edu</a>

### ON FEELING ITALIAN

# Mitchell Breitwieser University of California—Berkeley

Having Feeling Italian on the table in front of me, open for slow and close reading, has been a blessing. I had read here and there in it in years gone by but work and family precluded the sort of cover-to-cover attention that retirement and the invitation to write this little piece have finally allowed. Being able to make out the dialoging between its chapters, to savor its cumulative style and passion, and to discern its historical arc has re-awakened and fortified my already considerable admiration. In my comments here I hope I can do justice to the present occasion, since compelling and infectious praise is the major tone of Feeling Italian, and the hallmark of Tom Ferraro's achievement as an author, an accomplishment that invites reply. For me, gratitude is the due response to such a gift, a gift to us as well as a gift for evoking the works that have engaged Tom's attention.

We first met in the Fall 1999, at a small conference at the University of Wisconsin. It had been convened by Gordon Hutner, the editor of the journal *American Literary History*, with an eye to fostering extended conversation among the participants rather than attracting a sizable audience. I remember Tom's presentation, a version of chapter two on the painter Joseph Stella, vividly, not only for his argument and insight, but particularly for his style, which is the key topic in *Feeling Italian*. In his conversation as well as in his presentation, he displayed a wide and swift argumentative reach, referential and methodological eclecticism, startling exegetical acumen, descriptive animation, and a candid expression of his enthusiasm for Stella's work.

In retrospect, I realize that, in the months that followed the conference, Tom had become, for me, a catalyzing example. The previous quarter century had been a time of great methodological and theoretical upheaval in academic literary study, resulting in an exciting stew of critical options. But the question of the critic's personal engagement with what he or she wrote about was often pushed aside, or even regarded as naïve or

impressionistic, as a kind of projection onto the text rather than an excavation of its actual character. By 1999, I had begun to find this aloofness constricting, largely in response to my students' desire to learn why the reading I assigned mattered. Tom's talk on Joseph Stella helped me to see that one might bring one's engagement into one's writing without sacrificing objective argumentation. Memory had turned that first encounter into an episode of Emersonian tutelage, a reassurance that, if one is making an argument concerning a feature of what Tom calls the artifact— presenting evidence, providing context, moving through a step-by-step demonstration of one's thesis—then letting one's passion show can warm up one's teaching and writing without compromising them.

But a masterful teacher like Tom (don't you wish you could take a class from him?) is not limited to explaining why you take an interest in or are moved by an artifact. Rather, he or she explains as well why you might be drawn to one that might otherwise have escaped your interest, or deepens your interest in one that you had previously given only a cursory or casual glance. It's difficult to select a sample of Tom's pedagogical ability from among all the promising candidates in *Feeling Italian* (a wealth, a manifold, a plethora). I'll settle on that woebegone slice of pizza in Spike Lee's film Do the Right Thing. Tom explains what's wrong with it: "Filmed at a distance, this slice is parsimonious by New York or anyone else's standards: it's not vivid, has no oozing milky cheese or tomato red sauce, and above all no bubbles in the crust (a sure sign that Italians have given up the standards)" (167). Then he explains why these failings are worth thinking about: "What is ingenious or insidious about Lee's direction is that he never lets us see the wonder of great pizza. We get paeans to the hard work that goes into it as well as to its happy affect among customers, but we are made privilege to neither the anticipatory sensuality of its production (no dough is tossed) nor to the realized sensuality of its consumption" (167). In other words, we don't get to feel Italian, which turns out to be the defect Tom feels in a movie he greatly admires, a hiatus, the site of a bridge left unbuilt: "Recall the scene in which the Puerto Rican IccyMann scrapes snow-cones from a magnificent block of ice, then loads them with Caribbean syrups for big-eyed kids—and you've got the point" (167). The injustice of this omission

waits about thirty pages for a rejoinder, in chapter ten, "Table: *Cine Cucina*," Tom's hymn of praise to the wonder of Italian cooking and eating as it is depicted in another film:

Big Night is a story about cooking and eating Italian that is told and acted and shot and proffered in the Italian spirit of cooking and eating. On screen Big Night portrays the rhythms of preparation, ex-stasis, and rehabilitation that constitute la buona cucina—an ethos, really a gestalt; the actors and production crew go about the official business of making cinematic illusion with the pleasurable anticipation of delivering, in fact, "the real thing; and we the moviegoers feel we've been given that genuine cucina feeling, if only for the movie moment" (183-84).

Feeling Italian is just such a magnificent performance, itself a wondrous specimen of the art of ethnicity. I've been debating with myself about saying that so directly because the word *performance* often tends to mean putting on a public show, with an accompanying innuendo that the person beneath the makeup is a different story. "No man," as Napoleon is said to have once remarked, "is a hero to his valet." But in *Feeling Italian* Tom rejects the desiccated antinomy that underpins that view of performance: the mode of living and feeling he praises is performative but not therefore false or hollow. Rather, as the book's subtitle announces, there's an art at play in daily Italian-American life that feeds into performative styles such as Sinatra's or Madonna's, a mode of dynamic encounter between the participants in such quotidian locales as a street, a kitchen, a church, or a construction site: "art as equipment for living is an Italian-American attitude ... the kind of art that mattered and continues to matter in America is the kind that counsels and consoles, challenges and enriches people day-to-day" (205, 206). I can also certify that in person Tom does that too.

Tom's close study of such "blueprints for thought and action," and his own inventive recourse to them, challenges another misleading either/or, the supposed opposition between cultural heritage and creative initiative that haunts the writings of Emerson and his gang. He proposes instead a more dynamic notion of tradition, seeing it as an archive of resources that one can draw upon in acts of improvisatory creation, "working in American contexts in significantly Italian ways, using Italian or Italian-

#### Mitchell Breitwieser |

American materials to create an Italianate sensibility in the United States" (207). The early immigrants "knew themselves not as Italians but as members of a particular family, perhaps a town, at most (after arrival) a dialect-defined region, but nothing more" (3). *Feeling Italian*, it turns out, is an epic:

It was not until they had dealt with nativist suspicion and wonder in the United States, so new (ethnically hostile priests, health crusaders, cartoonists drawing them as monkeys) yet so familiar (Sicilians were called Africans in Italy), did they think of themselves as a unit, and it was not until they had committed to stay and acclimated to the urban working classes did they feel they were, in truth, Italians—Italians of an American stripe, Italian Americans. But of course that identity, however emergent, wasn't merely relational: it reflected and reinflected folkways and folk desires shared across Southern Italy, whatever their differences (Calabrians more stubborn than Neapolitans? go figure), then brought to bear upon life in the United States, the medium of social aggregation and cultural convergence. Italian-like feelings were turned into the feeling of being an Italian: this is a historical dialectic of representation and self-representation, yes, but it was lived in the blood, the flesh, the soul. (3-4)

Mitchell Breitwieser taught American literature in the Department of English, University of California—Berkeley, until he retired in 2020. He is the author of Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin: The Price of Representative Personality (Cambridge University Press, 1984), American Puritanism and the Defense of Mourning: Religion, Grief and Ethnology in Mary White Rowlandson's Captivity Narrative (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), and National Melancholy: Mourning and Opportunity in Classic American Literature (Stanford University Press, 2007). E-mail: mitchb@berkeley.edu

## BEING ITALIAN (WHEN YOU'RE NOT)

# Jane Tylus Yale University

For someone who's not even remotely Italian-American, but who spent much of her girlhood in a largely Italian-American community in northern New Jersey: How to think about Tom Ferraro's book, now celebrating its twentieth birthday? For someone who considered taking Italian in high school but given that she said she wanted to go to college, was strongly encouraged by her guidance counselor to take French instead? And who only after college finally acted on her high school inclination and took NJ Transit to Hoboken and then the Path to Greenwich Village three nights a week after work to take Italian classes at the New School?

Yes, I wanted to feel Italian back in the '70s, when my non-Italian parents played Sinatra on the brand new stereo in our living room, when my father talked about *The Godfather* (the book, not yet the movie; I stole the copy out of his closet and read it when my parents weren't home), when my brother started dating (eventually marrying) a De Benedetto girl and marveling over the food he had at her home, when a guy in not-so-far-away Asbury Park named Bruce became an overnight rave. But as it turned out, it took a trip to Italy to make it all, really, happen. And I wonder if what happened to me was a hint of a future that may have seriously kicked in with Frances Mayes' *Under the Tuscan Sun* and has been ritualized (and mocked) in the second season of *The White Lotus*. Or, as my former colleague Alex Cuadrado suggested, given the increased amount of travel and commodified tourism to Italy in the last few decades, perhaps we're no longer as interested in feeling Italian, as in *living* Italian—getting away from the US, even if briefly, to experience what it's like to actually *be* Italian?

What is the pull of Italy, that country that so many members of Tom Ferraro's family left, along with millions of others—some to return, many of them not? And how did Italian-American culture prepare me for that pull, if it did? I wonder about the last part of this last question. Undoubtedly, class distinctions were still very much in the

works in the '70s. Italian was not for the college-bound, but for those Italian-Americans who wanted to stay connected to the land and culture of their nonna, even if their grandmother knew only dialect, even if her culture had already undergone enormous changes since she had arrived in the 1910s or '20s. Like Tom, I was an English major in college, writing not about Emerson but Spenser and the so-called English Renaissance, and so gravitating to the earlier side of the chronological spectrum. My graduation present from my parents was a ticket to Europe, and I traveled to Florence and Rome to bask in the art of the Uffizi and the Vatican. But it was only on a train to Brindisi en route to Greece that I realized I had to learn the language the four women sitting with my friend and me in the 4th-class car were speaking to one another: not so much for its energy and musicality as for the fact that these women hadn't known one another when they boarded that car. (It didn't occur to me at the time that they were probably speaking dialect.) One had a basket of chicks on her lap, another a bag full of freshlybaked goods and fruit, which, by the end of the ride, she was sharing not only with her three new friends but with the two Americans. I'll never forget the comradery that emerged in the course of that long ride south and east to the Adriatic—and I promptly signed up for Italian classes when I returned.

But without Sinatra, Puzo, my brother's girlfriend, and the close-knit nature of those large Italian families I came to know growing up, would I have been so drawn to that conversation of which I understood nary a word? Reading Tom Ferraro's book when it first came out—and then rereading it shortly before he came to Yale last year to give his wonderful, closing talk to a crowd made up of students, faculty, and New Haven's Italian-American community at our inaugural Rossini Symposium —I was, and am, struck by his transparency and utter modesty as regards his work. It's not an easy project. If anything, it has become more difficult over the years to write thoughtfully and sensitively about ethnicity writ large. On the one hand, Tom's ten keywords (from "Honor" to "Table") still provide suggestive ways for thinking about how we might characterize Italian identity, whether in Italy or in the western hemisphere. On the other, Tom's provocative subtitle—"The Art of Ethnicity in America"—suggests that his gameplan isn't limited to Italians. There's much that overlaps with other immigrant

cultures that gravitate, necessarily, around the figure of the Mother, that need to find Jobs in new worlds and so tend to cluster in Cities, that bond through their Songs and around the Table.

For two decades, Tom's lexicon has offered us a powerful starting point for thinking about what separates and brings us together, particularly when considering the many differences within what might be assumed to be a single ethnic identity. As we all know, Italy was a fragmented entity for a millennium and a half, cities and villages separated by mountains and perennial hostilities; hence the still thirty-some dialects spoken today, far down from much larger numbers a century ago (or even four and a half decades ago when I rode that train to Brindisi). At the same time, Italy has begun to recognize itself (and sometimes not) as a home for immigrants from elsewhere, some of whom then go on to places like "America." Can the ever-expanding expansiveness of Italian ethnicity become a way of thinking, expansively, about ethnicities in the plural, with Tom as our guide? Might it not lead us to recognize that what we strive to feel, or "be," constitutes part of who we already are, especially when we dig down deep enough to consider our roots: Somalian, Ukrainian, Irish, Colombian, whatever they might be? And while, as an "Italianist" if not an Italian or Italian-American, I insist on the specificity of my discipline and will defend the autonomy of my department of Italian Studies as long as I'm in the profession, in this precarious political moment it's crucial that we acknowledge what binds us together via our separate stories of immigration and exclusion, and how those shared stories can make us all feel, and be, more included: more Italian.

**Jane Tylus** is Andrew Downey Orrick Professor of Italian and Professor of Comparative Literature at Yale University. Recent publications include *Who Owns Literature? Early Modernity's Orphaned Texts* (Cambridge Elements, 2025) and a translation of Dacia Maraini's *Chiara di Assisi: Elogio della Disobbedienza* (Rutgers University Press, 2024). E-mail: jane.tylus@yale.edu

#### FEELING FEELING ITALIAN

## **Georgios Anagnostou** The Ohio State University

Feeling Italian first captured me for its promise to meditate on the making of "ethnic" feelings. It was 2005 when the notion of ethnicity as choice and feeling—not rarely seen as fleeting and floating on the surface of identity—continued to shape the conversation about a new form of individualized identification among the third and fourth-generation descendants of southeastern European Americans. Linking ethnicity with art and the poetics of cultural identity—"[f]rom ethnicity comes art comes the art of ethnicity" (208), as the author puts it—the book engages with the role of the arts in mediating the making of feeling Italian. "The determination," Ferraro writes, "is to analyze ethnicity-in-transition, warts and all, but also to mediate it, to play it up and run with it" (6). For those of us "outside" Italian American studies, the calling to grapple with processes of feeling ethnic, identity as a choice, and ethnicity as cultural shifting is irresistible.

Asking why and how Italian-inflected art matters in the United States, *Feeling Italian* advances the discussion beyond ethnic identity toward the domain of post-ethnicity, namely how this art has been moving non-Italians, consciously or unconsciously, toward feeling Italian. "The pun in *Feeling Italian*," Ferraro notes, "harbors a double meaning: to 'feel like an Italian' means, first, to feel the way Italians feel, to have Italian or Italianate types of feelings, whether recognized or not; and, second, to feel that one's identity is Italian or Italian-like, no matter the ancestry" (3). Linking the generative power of the arts with both Italian and non-Italian demographics places *Feeling Italian* at the center of American cultural production rather than at the periphery of ethnicity.

Questions about cultural dissemination, retention and reinvention, continuities and ruptures, Old World transplantations, and New World transformations drive the project of American Ethnic Studies. Understanding ethnicity involves confronting enormous complexities associated with (a) multidirectional cultural flows and

transmissions—transnational, intergenerational; (b) the contact zones that animate interactions and exchanges—cross-cultural, interracial, and intra-ethnic; and (c) reinvention connected with redrawing cultural, gender and sexual boundaries.

Ambiguities, ambivalences, and contradictions punctuate this landscape. Engaging with this terrain diachronically, from the era of early 20th-century mass migration to the present, *Feeling Italian* undertakes one of the most challenging assignments regarding the past meandering through the present: probe those cultural pathways, interplays between the old and the new and cross-fertilizations which are the least visible in their form of expression, difficult to trace and articulate, even unrecognizable to many. While the notion of "usable pasts" often entails explicit references to narratives and practices that engage the past to selectively advance or disrupt its ideological work in the present, *Feeling Italian* excavates undercurrents linking the yesterday with today in ways that might elide attention while simultaneously challenging existing analytical categories.

The book inevitably adopts a historical, transnational, transcultural, and transgenerational perspective to trace the conduits of feeling Italian and its dissemination beyond Italian America. Bringing these processes into representation requires reading attentiveness, interpretive virtuosity, sociological imagination, and narrative fluidity—qualities Ferraro performs admirably. It involves deep and broad knowledge of Italian rural culture and religion, American history, cultural studies, the history of US popular culture, and Italian American studies. It requires dexterity in analyzing the philological and semantic attributes of a multitude of languages and idioms: the vernacular of Southern Italy, the diction of working-class Italian immigrants, the vocabulary of street and workplace registers, the language of vocalization and non-verbal exchanges, the lexicon of visual modernism, the theatrics of acting in film and performing on stage, the words of scholarship, the terminology of cultural studies and, given the author's aspiration "to bridge the gap between the academy and serious readers" (247), narrative poetics (alliterations and internal rhyming abound in the text) to animate the cultural corpus.

Ferraro's investment in language is not merely making it an object of inquiry—see, for example, his analysis of Pietro di Donato's syntax in *Christ in Concrete*: the author "[e]lided sentences with squeezed-out articles ... enact[ing] the bodily loss of individual personhood, one man crushed unto the other like the sentences themselves" (61). He also selectively adopts the idioms he analyzes in his writing style, crafting a heteroglossic text interspersed by scholarly, national, vernacular, immigrant, and ethnic accents.

The end product, created by an author enjoying an eminent academic pedigree, offers a superb testament to the power of Italian American scholarship. Ferraro's work contributes significantly to the esteemed tradition of Italian American scholarship. In this capacity, it demonstrates not simply the value of Italian American studies for ethnic self-understanding, but it performs the value—the agency, in fact—of this academic field to contribute answers to broader issues confronting the nation. This scholarly practice defines the book, an example of which foregrounds the cultural valence of Madonna: "What could feminism look like if it came, instead, from a culture where mothers ruled, as everyone knew, behind the scenes, where what the women valued was that everyone valued despite or rather because of the long-standing division of (sexual) labor? What might female self-making look like, in short, if it were to put femininity back into feminism?" (146-47). To put it bluntly, Feeling Italian enhances the currency of Italian American scholarship in the academic marketplace.

This placing of Italian American material in the academy underscores the desire to balance the power distribution between a field of ethnic studies and dominant academic disciplines. Proving the value of Italian-inflected scholarship, *Feeling Italian* makes the case—in fact, demands, albeit implicitly—that academic renderings of Italian America require intellectual and affective critical engagement with Italian histories and cultural transmutations if one wishes to move beyond canonical academic topoi of ethnicity—the neat and convenient categories—and in turn do justice to their complexity.

Because representations of ethnicity matter supremely in shaping the understanding of difference and its significance, Ferraro repeatedly takes to task cultural critics who conveniently revert to existing categories, miss cues, details, meanings,

ambiguities, and relations through time and across space due to narrow analytical probing. The continuity between the agonistic communal performativity of Italians in the American northeast—which Herbert Gans strove to elucidate in connection to Boston's West End—and its reproduction by Sinatra in performances "for a national market-place"—which Ferraro charts—"has so far escaped description and understanding" (101). Hence the praise of critics who go "where no critic has gone before" (188).

Ferraro's superb work demands that American Studies researchers who happen to venture into the domain of ethnicity do so with deep knowledge and attention to historical and cultural nuance. This extends a call for reciprocity, echoing a central thesis in Ferraro's work, the two-way assimilation between the Italians and the Americans: "As the Italians have gotten more American, so the Americans have gotten more Italian" (204). So should Americanist scholars, *Feeling Italian* asserts.

Ferraro's brief yet precious autobiographical disclosure offers a departure point to reflect on the question of ethnicity as a function of choice. A fourth-generation Neapolitan-Calabrian-Sicilian American, Ferraro is removed from the circumstances of the immigrant experience—working class and a foreigner's anguish and toil. With "no direct household connection to Italy" (72), growing up solidly middle class and enjoying first-class education, he nevertheless feels "viscerally familiar" with Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, a novel about "immigration and settlement set in the 1920s and 1930s and 1940s." This autobiographical fiction is more "emotionally immediate or relevant" to him than any other text or artifact he discusses in the book. Consistent with his practice of prefacing each chapter with a puzzling question, Ferraro feels the powerful pulling of ethnic attachments, asking, "How could this be?" (73).

In this framing, feeling Italian for the third and fourth generation presents a question of the how and why of this sensibility, requiring critical probing. Far from being self-evident, the coveted notion of "choosing to being and feeling ethnic" in post-modernity is entangled with processes mediating both this choice and individuals' agency to fashion or refashion it. And if, in the case of Sinatra, it is the strong immigrant and second-generation habitus which shapes the feeling of his performance, it is the third-generation background experience in "a large close-knit middle-class family" (145)

that partially enters in Madonna's spectacular Italian/American power. Thus, if "feeling Italian is now a chosen identity" (203), this is a mode of identification calling for analysis of the cultural, family, social, class, and historical layers shaping "choice." Otherwise, one risks the trap of consenting to the culturally embedded ideology of the self-determining individual operating outside the social milieu.

In capitalist postmodernity, where ethnicity functions as a commodity and spectacle as well as a form of belonging and site of performing identity, the combining and (re)assembling of identities—partially anchored and creatively imagined—mass-mediated ethnicity reigns supreme as a "map for educating desire and (re)conceiving relations" (7). It propels cross-identifications. In this respect, a major contribution of *Feeling Italian* lies in its foregrounding of the arts as a powerful force in mediating feeling and being "ethnic."

Ferraro reconfigures the structure of feeling Italian along political lines, wishing to expand the scale of belonging across racialized boundaries. Tracing with appreciation the historical moments of such crossings, he charts the prevalence of Italian/Black cultural exchanges and mingling in (a) "the contact zone of pop music" and romance—he hails Madonna as "the most accomplished Italian-to-black crossover artist" (177); (b) histories of interracial solidarities—he admires Sinatra's support of Black people in the music industry; and (c) living with biracial identities. This mapping leads Ferraro to cast "cross-racialism [as] a dissenting mode of feeling Italian in the age of post-ethnicity" (179). Recognizing these crossings entails neither "ethnic self-rejection [nor] racial wish projection," he writes, but a "genuine interethnic race work, including, necessarily, the remaking of Italian America" (179). This aligns with Ferraro's interest "in pursuing the interplay between ethos (lived values) and ethnos (sense of belonging)"—of which he advocates its expansion to integrate multiplicity (7).

This gesture toward opening the cross-racial remaking of the Italian American "ethnos" must consider, I believe, the corresponding ethos mediating his envisioned fluidity of boundaries. To this effect, "we" stand to benefit from a critique of whiteness across Italian America as it operates in the present, and, in turn, interrogate those assumptions and ideologies that might obstruct multi-racial acceptance and erecting

boundaries of belonging, reproducing, explicitly or implicitly, racial hierarchies. Ferraro meditates on Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* to enter the conversation about 1970s and 1980s urban "white ethnic" politics, when sizable sectors of the working- and low-middle class descendants of southeastern European American immigrants, feeling alienated and abandoned (by the state and the liberal WASP elites), objected the civil rights gains by African Americans—sometimes expressed as virulent ethnic racism.

When presented with the question, "Have the Italians become white?" Ferraro views the question as misplaced, responding "that's not it. The Americans get to "feel Italian" (204). This has been seen by critics in post-racial terms, as a move "beyond white ethnicity." Yet, whiteness—as a cultural system (re)producing racial hierarchies, often expressed implicitly in race-free language—also connects with the movement of "white ethnics" to the segregated white suburbs in the 1970s, 1980s and beyond.

In an amply told story, middle-class European American ethnics joined the post-civil rights backlash against racial minorities by embracing the proverbial ideology of self-propelled bootstrap mobility—rejecting the power of the social structure and racialized hierarchies to mediate or even determine it—cashing in through this manner admittance to suburban whiteness. Where and how does this mode of whiteness operate within Italian America today? Particularly *today* when a sizable sector of American European "ethnics" embraces anti-immigrant views while sanitizing their own immigrant past. How does whiteness meander in voting behavior, opinions on immigration policy, or interracial marriage? The *Rocky* multimedia franchise, a cultural phenomenon giving voice to white ethnic and racial resentment and animosities in the 1970s and beyond, could serve as a point of departure to chart a genealogy of Italian whiteness in US multiculturalism, tracing its permutations in the suburbs and the feelings it generates now.

Feeling Italian decisively moves the analysis of ethnicity in connection to crosscultural and interracial contact zones where writers, film producers, performers, intellectuals, painters, and artists cross-fertilize cultural expressions, identify across differences, reanimate and reconfigure the past, cross racial and cultural borders aesthetically, socially, romantically. Defying the ethnic identity border police, these practices Georgios Anagnostou |

open social spaces for "race-blind casting" (175), "living poly-ethnicity" (174), moving ethnicity beyond birthright, reinventing and mixing identifications in the cosmopolitan polity.

Ultimately, *Feeling Italian* demonstrates the value of art "as an equipment of living" (205)—the kind of art that enhances the intensity of lived experience and adds depth to it, texturing it. Its immediacy is felt; its power matters when it "counsels and consoles, challenges and enriches people day-to-day" (206). Such art creates sensibilities and attitudes, pulling the next generation and people from all walks of life into feeling Italian, generating Italian American identifications, and inflecting Italian sensibility to non-Italians. In closing, I can do no better than reproduce the final lines of this astonishing book: "The art of ethnicity in America is imagination for everyday life, and feeling Italian is one of its great achievements" (208).

**Yiorgos Anagnostou** is the Miltiadis Marinakis Professor of Modern Greek language and culture at The Ohio State University. His research interests include diaspora and American ethnic studies, with a focus on Greek America. His publications cover a broad range of subjects, including film, documentary, ethnography, folklore, literature, history, sociology, and public humanities. He is the author of *Contours of White Ethnicity: Popular Ethnography and the Making of Usable Pasts in Greek America* (Ohio University Press, 2009), and co-editor of *Redirecting Ethnic Singularity: Italian Americans and Greek Americans in Conversation* (Fordham University Press, 2022). Since 2017, he is the editor of *Ergon: Greek/American Arts and Letters*, an online, multigenre journal (<a href="http://ergon.scienzine.com/">http://ergon.scienzine.com/</a>). E-mail: <a href="mailto:anagnostou.1@osu.edu">anagnostou.1@osu.edu</a>

### FERRARO HIS WAY

# **Richard H. Brodhead**Duke University

Few things seem more natural than to extrapolate from a favorite book to the identity of the author. If *Feeling Italian* is his best-known book, then we surely know who Thomas J. Ferraro is: a man in love with his ethnicity and its improbable saturation of modern American culture; a man driven to write, with breezy erudition and joyous analytical precision, by the endless paradoxes of ethnic "identity." But this is not who Tom is in any simple or inevitable way. It's something he had to find himself as or make himself into, through a process of self-discovery and self-creation. By happy chance, I've known Tom (with interruptions) across every stage of his professional life. Herewith, a few snapshots of this work-in-progress.

I first met Tom Ferraro in the spring term of 1980 when he took my graduate seminar on 19<sup>th</sup>-century American fiction. He was 22 or so (I was 32) and had just graduated as a star student from Amherst. Though by 1980 we were already in a deep recession in the academic humanities, the class was packed with smart young folk. If daunted by graduate school, they were not much inhibited, and my class was like a large litter of puppies climbing over each other in competition and play. Tom wasn't the only obvious talent in this scrum but he did have a distinctive personality. I can only describe him as *molto vivace*: brimming with energy, full of enthusiasm for new turns of thought.

How Italian was he feeling? Well, he had an Italian name and a somewhat Southern European appearance; but whatever may have been going on inside him, nothing about his presented academic identity carried much ethnic mark. He had entered the Ph.D. program in American Studies at a time when Yale's version of that program was still under the dominant sway of very distinguished Humanities programs: History, English, History of Art and Religious Studies. In 1979-80, these disciplines were still quite traditional in their understandings of their fields, though disruptive new questions had begun to gain ground—especially in English, the host site for deconstruction and

literary theory. But the disruption that was to dominate the next decade, the opening of the canon, was at best incipient at Yale at this date. African American Studies, though not yet a decade old, was already fairly well established, but women's writing was scarcely recognized as a legitimate subject. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's landmark *Madwoman in the Attic* was only published in 1979, the year Tom arrived at Yale.

Since we construct ourselves in and against the fields we find around us, when Tom composed his prospective intellectual identity in my class, it was as a student of classical American literature with proficiency in French theory. The seminar paper he wrote in May 1980 was on Melville's *Pierre*; *or*, *the Ambiguities* in the light of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida.

We were always friendly, but in the next few years I did not always know in much detail what was going on with Tom: I only learned of his life-changing encounters with Italian New Haven from his talk delivered at Yale in March 2024 and reworked into the essay published in this issue. But he used to come by my office, and sometimes my house, and one day he came with an idea for a dissertation, on what had until recently been called immigrant fiction.

Literally inconceivable in 1980 and only barely so two or three years later, the envisioned project took the courage of a pioneer, and it took time for it to come clear. Mario Puzo and Anzia Yezierska were in it from the first, as I recall, but it took time to stabilize the body of principal exhibits, later expanded to include Henry Miller's "Tailor Shop" and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Far more challenging was the task of figuring out what these writers added up to, what problem they opened for understanding. Werner Sollers's *Beyond Ethnicity* in some measure legitimized Tom's subject, but the hard questions of dissertation writing—what (if anything) do I actually have to say, what is this new understanding I am purporting to deliver to the world?—remained. Tom attacked the problem by writing and writing. I saw draft after draft of chapters as Tom labored to *express* his insight into being.

In the difficult job market of the 1980s, Tom had the luck to secure a two-year teaching position at the University of Geneva. I visited him there in Switzerland in the spring of 1987. Though the dissertation was now completed, he was still wrestling with

his topic, still did not feel "there." Where would such a person find a job? The answer came from Stanley Fish's English department at Duke, then notorious for its post-traditional bravado and cult of eccentric individual intellect, which hired Tom as a junior Americanist. I saw little of him from then on, but in 1993 I did happily receive a copy of his book *Ethnic Passages*, published by The University of Chicago Press.

One odd by-product of the opening of the canon is that, along with many new recognitions, this development has opened new paths of obsolescence for objects of literary study. Witness the fact that what were exciting and novel choices when this book appeared are virtual unknowns again now. Though Puzo's *Godfather* saga is known by heart by millions (but through films, not the book), it's been years since I met someone who had read Yezierska's *The Bread Givers* or Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, added when Tom turned the dissertation into book. (Roth is now always Philip, never Henry.) But the achievement of *Ethnic Passages* is still impressive. Against the rival reductions of conceptual confinement to ethnic enclaves or "escape" into assimilationist "transcendence," Tom explores how his authors seek to register ethnic backgrounds as a means to win access to a national community of letters, through the work of literary writing.

And so things might have stood—how many academic careers have stalled out after a first book?—were it not that Tom has such driving curiosity.

By the most unforeseen of chances, I was appointed the new president of Duke in December 2003. When I arrived, I knew only a handful of people, including Tom, by then a celebrated teacher. He was his hospitable self, and in my first Durham summer he and Beth had us to their house, where Tom, being Italian, cooked bountifully. There, I saw the work-site for a book Tom had almost finished, whose existence I had only dimly suspected. By the next spring—my inscribed copy is dated April 26, 2005—I had in hand *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America*.

What an extraordinary self-expansion! It would be hard for me to name a book whose progress from its predecessor volume constitutes such a self-liberation. Though the author of *Feeling Italian* is still an alert close reader, he now feels free to range across the entire landscape of cultural creativity: literature, painting, film, popular music, television, cooking, here, there, and everywhere that Italianness has permeated, and to

speak of each with confident mastery, learned yet never stuffy, witty yet never demeaning.

Together with the marvelous treatments of Frank Sinatra, Frank Stella, Puzo, Francis Ford Coppola, and all the rest, there's something like a theory of ethnicity in this book, but there's no dogma, no Ferraro's Big Idea. Instead, we are exposed to a mind endlessly catching new permutations, reminding us that ethnicity is an inherited reality imbibed from a culture of origin; *and/or* an imputed identity, a thing you might be labeled or pigeon-holed as (which does not mean stereotypes are untrue); *and/or* something you can perform in self-presentation, an expressive act that can be strategically shaped and chosen for a great variety of purposes, including contradictory ones. In short, ethnicity is not just a social fact; it's also an art, a projection of creative power into the world.

The great achievement of Tom Ferraro's career is to have made himself the person who could write *Feeling Italian*. It's not easy to think like oneself or write like oneself. By the time of *Feeling Italian*, Tom's prose sounds like the self he is and no other. Through the activity of a mind never at rest, never interested in halting or consolidating a position, he has become not just a great elucidator but a significant practitioner of the art of ethnicity. His key work in college was on Emerson (definitely not an Italian), who wrote in "Self-Reliance:" "Do your work and I shall know you." Do *your* work: do the work only you could do. Well, he did, and we do. Or, if you prefer the lyrics of Frank Sinatra, there's this: "To think I did all that/And may I say, not in a shy way/Oh, no, oh, no, not me/I did it my way."

But good journeys (passages, ways) do not end when they reach high points. Just when we thought we knew the full measure of Tom as a scholar and a writer, he pulled us back. After I stepped down at Duke, Tom sent a copy of the new book he had finished, *Transgression and Redemption in American Fiction* (2021). This is a kind of big, field-spanning book that was written in the generation when American literary study was new but not much in evidence since the '60s, least of all in the field-fragmenting days of the post-canonical. In a way that takes its own courage in modern times, this book frankly embraces the texts once deemed the greatest and most distinctive in American

fiction: The Scarlet Letter, The Wings of the Dove, The Great Gatsby, The Sun Also Rises. Coming after a dozen scholarly vogues and benefitting from them all, this work also returns to an older style of scholarship, classic close reading. Yet it has a profoundly new take, finding within these texts a continuing imaginative engagement not with Christianity but specifically with Marian Catholicism, the semi-pagan merging of sacred sexuality, divine fecundity, holy physical violence, pageantry, transgression, redemption.

Or, to put it another way, having studied how Italianness projected itself from one of the most self-enclosed of American ethnicities into the mainstream of popular culture (think pizza and *The Sopranos*), Tom completes the journey by finding Italianness (of a sort!) inside the very temples of the WASP American literary canon, lodged there as a potent, ever-tempting imaginative alternative. "Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans," Hawthorne writes early in *The Scarlet Letter*, "he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with each other to represent; something which should remind him, but only by contrast, of that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world." The whole point of Puritan Boston, one might have thought, was that there would not have been a Papist in the crowd. A Catholic lens is interpolated subjunctively, through the figural power of language, giving us to see the adulteress and the child of her transgressive sexuality as not sinful but divine, the vessel of holiness itself. It's quickly negated—the pair are the Madonna and Child "but only by contrast"—but not before flashing a glimpse of a radically other ethical and religious universe, one marked Made in Italy, the land of the Old Masters.

The book is a remarkable sequel, continuous with *Feeling Italian* but in no way derivative from it. But why should we presume that even this is Tom's last book? The guy has been on a journey, and, it appears, he still is.

**Richard H. Brodhead** taught American literature and cultural history at Yale from 1972 to 2004, when he became president of Duke. He is the author, among other works, of *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America* (The University of Chicago Press, 1993) and "Strangers on a Train: The Double Dream of Italy in the

# Richard H. Brodhead |

American Gilded Age," modernism/modernity 1:2. He chaired the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Commission on the Humanities and co-authored its 2013 report *The Heart of the Matter.* E-mail: <a href="mailto:richard.brodhead@duke.edu">richard.brodhead@duke.edu</a>