

Number 36

RSAJ JOURNAL

RIVISTA DI STUDI AMERICANI

Reproductive Justice and Its Discontents:
Recent Representations in American Popular Culture



AISNA

Associazione Italiana
di Studi Nord Americani

RSA JOURNAL

RIVISTA DI STUDI AMERICANI

36/2025

Journal of AISNA / Italian Association of North American Studies
Rivista annuale della Associazione Italiana di Studi Nord Americani
Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Venezia n. 686 del 24.7.1981
Direttore responsabile Gigliola Nocera

2024-2026

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Cover art: "Girl" (Simone Leigh and Chitra Ganesh). *My dreams, my works, must wait till after bell...*, 2011, Single-channel video (color, sound), 7 minutes, 14 seconds.

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ISSN 1592-4467

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Editor's Note

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ABSTRACT

Issue n. 36 (2025) of *RSAJournal* features a Special Section on reproductive justice in the United States, edited by Cristina Di Maio and Fulvia Sarnelli. Framed by the post-*Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) landscape, the section examines not only legal and healthcare repercussions but also the cultural and symbolic dimensions of this pivotal shift, from pronatalist rhetoric to popular culture as an ideological battleground. Drawing on the reproductive justice framework developed by African American activists in the 1990s, the opening interview with Loretta Ross – co-author of one of the movement's foundational texts – provides the interpretive key to the section, positioning popular culture as a strategic space for resistance and the imagination of alternative futures. The contributions explore diverse genres and media: historical fiction on forced sterilization, a bestselling novel prompting a redefinition of life and autonomy, screen portrayals of breastfeeding, the evolution of the teen abortion road trip movie, male stand-up comedy's engagement with abortion, and political strategies to involve men in reproductive rights debates.

The *Articles* Section presents essays on Louis Adamic's influence on Carlos Bulosan's immigrant autobiography (Enrico Mariani), the global ramifications of the Thirteenth Amendment's 160th anniversary (Don H. Doyle), and Henry Charles Carey's political economy and gender hierarchies (Matteo Rossi).

The *Forum* Section, edited by Alessandra Bitumi and Matteo Pretelli, marks the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II. Seven leading historians reassess the war's memory, global impact, and contested legacies, questioning the durability of the post-1945 liberal order amid current geopolitical shifts.

The *First Editions* Section, edited by Tess Chakkalakal, introduces William Belmont Parker's reader's report on Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), contextualizing its historical, literary, and editorial significance in confronting Jim Crow's color line. This is the first digital-only issue of *RSA Journal*, now entirely Open Access and indexed in major academic databases.

Questo numero di *RSA Journal* (36-2025) dedica la Sezione Speciale alla questione della *Reproductive Justice* negli Stati Uniti. Curata da Cristina Di Maio e Fulvia Sarnelli, raccoglie contributi che fanno il punto su un tema di estrema attualità sociale e culturale. Il quadro da cui muovono le curatrici è quello inaugurato dalla sentenza *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), che ha rovesciato il diritto universale all'aborto negli USA (*Roe v. Wade*) e ridisegnato la mappa giuridica e politica dei diritti riproduttivi nel paese. A partire da questa cesura, questa sezione monografica indaga non solo le conseguenze legislative e sanitarie, ma soprattutto la dimensione culturale e simbolica di tali mutamenti: la retorica pronatalista e il ruolo della *pop culture* come campo di battaglia ideologico, luogo in cui si producono, negoziano e talvolta si sovvertono le narrazioni dominanti sulla maternità, l'aborto, l'autonomia del corpo.

Il riferimento teorico privilegiato è quello elaborato dalle attiviste afroamericane negli anni '90, che intreccia diritti riproduttivi e giustizia sociale. Il numero si apre con un'intervista di Walter Toscano a Loretta Ross, figura centrale del movimento e co-autrice di uno dei testi fondativi del dibattito. La sua voce, in dialogo con il contesto globale e statunitense, offre la chiave interpretativa centrale: leggere la cultura popolare non come semplice riflesso delle politiche, ma come spazio strategico di resistenza e immaginazione di futuri possibili.

Seguono contributi che attraversano diversi generi e media nell'esplorare le modalità con cui la cultura popolare costruisce, contesta o normalizza l'immaginario riproduttivo. Si passa dalla rappresentazione della sterilizzazione forzata nella narrativa storica, alla rilettura di un *bestseller* che invita a sospendere il giudizio e a ridefinire i concetti di vita e autonomia. Si analizzano le raffigurazioni dell'allattamento sullo schermo, tra presenza simbolica e marginalizzazione, e l'evoluzione del sottogenere cinematografico del *teen abortion road trip movie*. Si affrontano anche le

rappresentazioni dell'aborto nella *stand-up comedy* maschile, tra stereotipi consolidati e tentativi di scardinare il ruolo marginale degli uomini nel dibattito statunitense. Insieme, questi studi – firmati da Beth Widmaier Capo, Isabel Kalous, Serena Fusco, Michele Meek, Tuula Kolehmainen e Sandra Tausel e preceduti da un saggio introduttivo delle curatrici – mostrano come la *pop culture* sia al tempo stesso terreno di consolidamento e laboratorio di trasformazione delle narrazioni sulla riproduzione.

La *Sezione Generale* ospita tre saggi che, pur affrontando ambiti e periodi storici diversi, condividono un'attenzione alla rilettura critica di testi, idee e contesti statunitensi. Don H. Doyle propone una retrospettiva sul 160° anniversario del Tredicesimo Emendamento, evidenziando la portata globale dell'emancipazione statunitense e il suo ruolo di volano per l'abolizionismo internazionale. Enrico Mariani indaga l'influenza di Louis Adamic sull'autobiografia di Carlos Bulosan, mostrando come *America Is in the Heart* sovverta il genere canonico per restituire un'idea di America intrecciata a sfruttamento, resistenza e solidarietà tra lavoratori razzializzati. Matteo Rossi, infine, rilegge l'economia politica di Henry Charles Carey alla luce della storia del lavoro femminile e delle dottrine delle *separate spheres*, mettendo in luce come il pensiero di Carey abbia contribuito a legittimare le gerarchie di genere all'interno dello sviluppo del capitalismo ottocentesco.

La *Sezione Forum*, curata da Alessandra Bitumi e Matteo Pretelli, è dedicata all'ottantesimo anniversario della fine della Seconda guerra mondiale. Dopo essere stata celebrata per decenni come "Good War" e come fondamento dell'egemonia statunitense, la guerra viene riletta da sette storici di primo piano – Raffaella Baritono, John Bodnar, Ruth Lawlor, Andrew Preston, Federico Romero, Emily Rosenberg e Tom Zeiler – che ne indagano la memoria, l'impatto globale e le eredità contraddittorie. Le riflessioni raccolte attraversano temi di genere, razza, violenza, ordine internazionale e governance, mettendo in discussione le narrazioni eccezionaliste e interrogando la tenuta dell'ordine liberale post-1945 in un presente segnato da tensioni geopolitiche e revisioni profonde. Ne emerge un mosaico di prospettive che intrecciano storia militare, memoria culturale e politiche globali, domandando se siamo testimoni dell'ultima stagione di quell'assetto internazionale nato dalle macerie del conflitto.

L'Inedito di questo numero, curato da Tess Chakkalakal, è una

scheda redazionale scritta da William Belmont Parker su *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) di Charles W. Chesnutt, romanzo ispirato al massacro di Wilmington del 1898. Nell'introduzione, la curatrice illustra il contesto storico, letterario ed editoriale in cui l'opera di Chesnutt è venuta alla luce, rivelando il ruolo dell'autore afro-americano nel rappresentare e contestare la "linea del colore" nell'era di Jim Crow.

Chiudiamo il numero ricordando colleghe e colleghi che ci hanno lasciato negli ultimi due anni.

Questo numero di *RSAJournal* è il primo disponibile unicamente in versione digitale e si aggiunge all'archivio integrale della rivista disponibile, da oltre un anno, in Open Access. *RSAJournal* è indicizzata, tra gli altri, da *MLA International Bibliography with Full Text* e, entro l'anno, da DOAJ.

Vi auguriamo una buona lettura.

SPECIAL SECTION

Reproductive Justice
and Its Discontents:
Recent Representations
in American Popular Culture

Reproductive Justice and Its Discontents: Recent Representations in American Popular Culture

An Introduction

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KEYWORDS

Reproductive Justice, Bodily Autonomy, US Pop Culture, Intersectionality, Abortion

Introduction: Reproductive Justice and the Politics of Pop Culture

The rollback of federal abortion protections in the United States – culminating in the Supreme Court’s decision *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* (June 24, 2022) overturning *Roe v. Wade* (January 22, 1973) – marked a pivotal moment in American politics. However, the reproductive landscape that emerged in the wake of *Dobbs* is shaped by more than judicial decisions and legislative battles; it is underpinned by an ideological apparatus that merges state-sanctioned pronatalism with

conservative culture war rhetoric. In this terrain, pop culture operates not only as a reflection of the political climate but as an engine of political imagination, moral narratives, and affective regulation.

To understand and critically engage the present moment, we must look beyond institutional policies to interrogate the cultural forms – symbols, narratives, aesthetics, and myths – that organize meaning around reproduction. These include depictions of motherhood, abortion, family, and gender; social media and public discourse that reduces medical and scientific realities to polarizing slogans; and celebrity-driven provocations about fertility, population, and the nation. These elements emphasize the need to delve into a deeper examination of how reproductive politics are mediated through culture: in this context, the articles collected in this Special Section reflect on representations of reproductive issues in current American pop culture. As the US government intensifies its effort to police reproductive autonomy, culture becomes both a weapon and a site of resistance.

Pronatalism and the Post-*Dobbs* Landscape

In March 2025, during his first public address as Vice President in Washington, DC, JD Vance enthusiastically declared, “I want more babies in the United States of America!” (The Columbus Dispatch). Framed as a pronatalist call to action, Vance’s statement implicitly linked opposition to abortion with anxieties over the country’s declining birth rate. By no means an isolated viewpoint, Vance’s rhetoric reflects a growing chorus of right-wing figures sounding the alarm over a “birth dearth” – a demographic shift that, in reality, results from a complex interplay of economic precarity, evolving gender norms, expanded access to contraception and more equitable family planning options.

One of the most vocal figures in this discourse is Elon Musk – former head of the Department of Government Efficiency under Trump and father of fourteen – who has used his massive online platform to push pseudo-scientific claims about birth control, female health, and fertility. Musk’s alarmist claims, such as his posting that hormonal birth control makes women “fat and sick, doubles the risk of depression and

triples risk of suicide,”¹ illustrate how cultural provocations are used to reframe reproductive health as a site of national crisis. His rhetoric mirrors a broader strategy to separate reproductive health from science and healthcare, and instead tie it to nationalist, racialized, and moralistic agendas. Unsurprisingly, abortion has become the primary recipient of such ongoing political efforts, as anti-abortion militants and policymakers now collectively assert that abortion is never medically necessary, echoing a century-long history of grassroots activism and, subsequently, professional campaigns aimed at stigmatizing abortion (Luker). This dangerous (im)position has fatal consequences, particularly in the aftermath of *Dobbs*: reproductive autonomy devolved into a state-based patchwork, with a dozen states enforcing near-total abortion bans, others affirming access, and many depending on a variety of legal conditions based on gestational duration, health of the pregnant person, fetal anomaly, rape, and incest.² The uneven geography amplifies pre-existing inequities, placing disproportionate burdens on the most marginalized communities.

The conservative policy blueprint *Project 2025's Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, a 900-page document published by the Heritage Foundation in April 2023, codified these cultural arguments into a sweeping plan to restructure the federal government in case of a Republican presidency. Although Donald Trump initially distanced himself from the document, claiming with a post on Truth to “know nothing about Project 2025,” many of his key advisors contributed to its formation.³

¹ See <<https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1758569518442701250?lang=en>>.

² For useful information on current state abortion laws and restrictions on access, see Guttmacher’s fact sheet at <<https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/state-policies-abortion-bans>>.

³ See <<https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/112734594514167050>>. *Project 2025*, edited by Paul Dans and Steven Groves, foreword by Kevin D. Roberts, was written by some of the most powerful conservative thinkers and militants in the country, two-thirds of whom served under the first Trump administration. Its goal is to provide a detailed plan for building a right-wing America. See Jessica Valenti’s Substack *Abortion, Every Day* at <https://jessica.substack.com/p/project-2025-abortion-explainer?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email>. Valenti offers a detailed (and terrifying) reading of the passages about reproduction included in *Project 2025*. She argues that it is “a step-by-step plan on how the government can force American women out of public life and back into

Upon re-election, Trump's administration enacted several of its core proposals through executive orders, included dismantling federal agencies, restricting abortion access, banning the use of gender identity terms, rolling back LGBTQ+ and DEI protections, and aggressively regulating public education.

While the administration promotes a pro-family stance and Donald Trump famously advocated for a new "baby boom" and increased access to IVF on his campaign trail,⁴ its material policies – including cuts to the infrastructure required for fertility care, child support systems, and early education – reveal a disciplining logic at the core of US pronatalism. In fact, its tenets seem to be less about reproductive empowerment and more about controlling the reproductive capacities of specific populations – particularly cisgender white women – while surveilling, restricting, or criminalizing the reproduction of others: people of color, the poor, the disabled, the incarcerated, and gender-nonconforming individuals. This contradiction sits at the heart of Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger's seminal critique of state power in *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (2017). As they argue, so-called "pro-life" politics in the US have always been racially coded: reproductive rights are not expanded or curtailed according to universal ethical standards, but in alignment with demographic goals rooted in white supremacist, eugenic, and settler colonial ideologies (Ross and Solinger 18).

the home" through strategies such as supporting traditional gender roles within marriage and dismantling early education (pre-k) while "diverting funding to 'offset the cost of staying home with a child' and 'home-based childcare.' Who will be at home providing this care? I think we all know." See also Steve Contorno for CNN at <<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/07/11/politics/trump-allies-project-2025>>.

⁴ President Trump's speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference, CPAC 2023, on Saturday, March 4, 2023, at National Harbor in Oxon Hill, Md, is available online. During a Women's History Month event at the White House on March 26, 2025, Trump nicknamed himself the "Fertilization President." See the White House official YouTube Channel <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37yfOP8cVPQ>>.

Reproductive Justice: Origins and Framework

In 1994, twelve Black feminist activists⁵ coined the term Reproductive Justice (RJ) during a women's health conference in Chicago. Working in the tradition of the Combahee River Collective (Silliman et al.), these activists challenged the narrow focus on legal access to abortion and individual free choice rhetoric of the (predominantly white) mainstream reproductive rights discourse. Instead, RJ articulated a broader and bolder vision based on three primary principles: 1. the right *not* to have a child; 2. the right to *have* a child, and 3. the right to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments (Ross and Solinger 9). As such, RJ goes beyond merely being a response to the pro-choice/pro-life debate. Reproductive Justice – the combination of reproductive rights and social justice – is a bold, human rights-based approach that demands the right for all people to control their bodies, sexuality, labor, and reproduction, free from systemic oppression, coercion, and exploitation (Ross; Price). It insists that reproductive freedom cannot be separated from systemic oppression.

By framing reproductive freedom as an issue of justice rather than individual choice, the Reproductive Justice movement challenges the dominant legal and cultural narratives that isolate abortion from other social concerns. It links reproductive autonomy to struggles against white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, economic injustice, environmental violence, incarceration, and colonialism. In fact, Reproductive Justice fundamentally integrates intersectionality in its theory and praxis, foregrounding the voices and leadership of Indigenous women, Black women, immigrants, queer and trans people, disabled people, and other subjectivities whose reproductive lives have historically been marginalized or policed. In doing so, RJ provides not just a critique of state power but a plan for liberation that reimagines reproductive autonomy as a collective and communal right.

Out of this vision grew the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, founded in 1997 by Luz Rodriguez, then director of the

⁵ Their names were Toni M. Bond Leonard, Reverend Alma Crawford, Evelyn S. Field, Terri James, Bisola Marignay, Cassandra McConnell, Cynthia Newbille, Loretta Ross, Elizabeth Terry, 'Able' Mable Thomas, Winnette P. Willis and Kim Youngblood.

Latina Roundtable on Health and Reproductive Rights. Based in Atlanta, Georgia, and including many independent organizations across the country, it continues to be a leading force in the movement that amplifies the voices challenging the multiple intersecting oppressions that shape reproductive lives globally.⁶ As SisterSong has long emphasized, reproductive choices cannot be separated from the material conditions in which they are made. Therefore, RJ fights the structural inequalities that have long undergirded reproductive policy in the US and beyond – including forced sterilization, medical racism, access to housing and education, criminalization, and family separation.

RJ's adaptability has allowed it to evolve across different contexts while maintaining a coherent, intersectional critique of state and cultural power. In her 2017 article "Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism," Loretta Ross notes that "Reproductive justice theory, strategy, and practices emerge out of the distinct historical realities of diverse communities" (300). As long as it remains rooted in its foundational principles and centered on the voices of those most affected, the RJ framework "offer[s] tremendous scope for invention and intervention" (300). In respect of the eleven defining criteria established in 2006 by its founding mothers,⁷ "any organization may reformulate its mission and work to embrace the reproductive justice framework" (301).

⁶ Interviewed by the Ford Foundation, Monica Raye Simpson, the current Executive Director of SisterSong, explained that "Our name was given to us by one of our founding mothers, Juanita Williams. She talked about how important it was for us to have different voices all singing in harmony with each other. That's why we're called SisterSong. Maybe we'll be a band one day. Who knows?" (<<https://www.fordfoundation.org/news-and-stories/big-ideas/the-future-is-hers/monica-simpson/>>). A queer Black Southern feminist, Simpson has powerfully bridged political organizing with cultural production. By using performance, poetry, and music to advance RJ principles, she works to make space for cultural narratives that reflect the lived experiences and spiritual resilience of Black and Brown communities.

⁷ The eleven points that define reproductive justice framework are intersectionality, connects the local to the global, has a human rights basis, links individual to community, addresses the government and corporate responsibility, fights eugenics and population control, supports individual/community leadership that change power dynamics, puts marginalized communities at center, supports participation of those impacted, holds theory-strategy-practice together, applies to everyone. See Ross, "Reproductive Justice as Intersectional

This Special Section draws on the rich scholarship of Reproductive Justice and on Ross's assertion that Reproductive Justice is both context-sensitive and expansive. As women scholars of American Studies based in Europe and the US, who live or have lived for some time in the US and teach US culture to global student audiences, we are compelled by the gravity of the present moment to start an interdisciplinary conversation about issues that affect all of our lives. We embrace the Reproductive Justice framework through our own positionalities and specific perspectives, namely by keeping our eyes fixed on the global political landscape outlined earlier in this introduction, while underscoring that reproductive justice is not just a policy framework but also a cultural and imaginative project that both allows and demands new creative interventions. However, we want to acknowledge our indebtedness to the inspirational Black women who created it and those who further extended its scope. We affirm the core tenets of RJ and recognize that its challenges and insights are not confined to national borders. In the interview with Walter Toscano included in this Special Section, Loretta Ross underlines that "Reproductive Justice became a way to bring human rights home to the United States," whereas other countries may "already [put] a lot of emphasis and inclusion of human rights standards into [their] social welfare contract." (34) We believe that attacks on bodily autonomy, reproductive freedom, and gender equity are interconnected, global, and deeply cultural. Particularly, as literature and media feminist scholars – working from different locations but bound by shared commitments – we need to pay attention to the stories that are told and those we tell, to the pictures that are formed and deformed about our bodies, communities, social positions and institutions. With Ross, we believe that "Reproductive justice provokes and interrupts the status quo and imagines better futures through radical forms of resistance and critique" (292). Pop culture, in this sense, becomes a key battleground for shaping reproductive futures.

Pop Culture as Ideological Terrain

This Special Section explores the realm of cultural production not to catalog isolated instances of reproductive representation in US media, but to examine how popular culture molds public opinion, reinforces or resists dominant ideologies, and configures the cultural conditions in which reproductive politics unfold. Popular culture – in its myriad forms – is not a neutral or peripheral domain; by investing in certain stories and silencing others, it is a primary site where reproductive meaning is negotiated, contested, and lived. This Special Section foregrounds the cultural politics of reproductive justice and asks: how does pop culture respond to, reproduce, or resist the disciplining logics of US pronatalism? What new stories about reproduction, kinship, and futurity are emerging – and what possibilities do they open up?

Drawing on the work of Stuart Hall, we approach popular culture as an active site of ideological struggle – a space where dominant meanings are made, circulated, and sometimes subverted. As Hall reminds us, cultural texts and performances do not merely entertain; they produce meaning. This insight is further expanded by John Storey, who frames mass culture as a Gramscian “compromise equilibrium” (10) – a space where hegemony is secured through repetition, but also where alternative meanings can emerge. Storey also insists that pop culture is an especially powerful tool in that it acts on our fantasies by mobilizing public imagination and yearning. It shapes desire, encodes ideology, and provides symbolic resources for both oppression and liberation.

This tension defines pop culture’s double edge. On the one hand, it constructs and circulates hegemonic narratives: maternal purity, fetal personhood, law-and-order motherhood, and neoliberal “choice” feminism. These narratives frequently obscure the structural dimensions of reproductive oppression, framing it instead through melodramatic stories of regret, danger, or personal failure. On the other hand, popular culture provides a symbolic and affective infrastructure through which resistive imaginaries can be articulated. It can foreground stories that disrupt normative scripts – of, for instance, maternity, breastfeeding, abortion, or

men's involvement in abortion – and it can amplify voices that complicate or challenge the narrow frames of reproductive rights.

The articles collected in this Special Section identify popular culture – across genres like stand-up comedy, television, film, and speculative fiction – as a crucial arena for negotiating reproductive politics. A recurring critique is that mainstream narratives often sensationalize abortion, focusing on trauma or punishment, while suppressing more ordinary, autonomous, or joyful reproductive stories. These patterns, as Loretta Ross discusses in the interview published in this issue, serve business under a capitalist system that sells drama, while real-life stories are generally “infinitely boring.” “My abortion story,” she says, “was safe; it was legal; it was at a hospital; my boyfriend paid for it.” Yet, it is our contention that this is exactly what we need to shift our cultural context: “boring” stories that normalize access and approach to medical procedures in our reproductive care. As *Dobbs* reduces abortion to state-level legislations, we urgently need a cultural praxis that does not simply dramatize injustice but engages directly with the cultural technologies and affective economies that sustain or challenge it. This Special Section insists on pop culture as a powerful analytic. It is not a backdrop to reproductive messaging, but the material and symbolic landscape in which bodily autonomy is rendered plausible, not stigmatized, or invisible. What happens, for instance, when reproductive justice advocates collaborate with showrunners or screenwriters to craft new narratives of reproductive agency?⁸

The articles here included exemplify the wide array of venues through which people collectively conceptualize reproductive agency. Despite common assumptions emphasizing popular culture's Manichean depictions and the standard “happy ending motif,” the contributions in this issue highlight the capacity of these narratives to represent the complexities entailed in reproductive issues and challenge simplistic binaries. For

⁸ In the past decades, a number of films were written and independently produced by RJ organizations, such as *We Always Resist: Trust Black Women* (SistersSong, 2011), *No Más Bebés* (Virginia Espino and Renée Tajima-Peña, 2016), *Belly of the Beast* (Erika Cohn, 2020) and *All the World is Sleeping* (Bold Futures, 2021), the first full-length feature film made by a RJ organization.

instance, in her article Beth Widmaier Capo investigates how historical fiction, far from merely providing crucial information on the infamous practice of involuntary sterilization, can offer nuance in depicting the latter's implementation: in her review of recent historical novels foregrounding salpingectomy (the surgical procedure through which Fallopian tubes are removed), she underscores how the medical personnel and the social workers involved in the enforcement of such eugenic policy increasingly question the scientific soundness of the practice. Capo's discussion thus not only sheds light on the growing relevance of RJ thematization in contemporary historical fiction but moves beyond simple victim narratives to explore systemic inequalities and illuminate the moral conflict and ethical dilemma faced by the characters implementing the procedures. Similarly, in her analysis of the popular fiction novel *A Spark of Light*, Isabel Kalous argues that Jodi Picoult uses shifting focalizations to present a hostage crisis at a fictional Center for Women and Reproductive Health to reflect the intricate and polarized nature of contemporary abortion debates. Such a narrative strategy is complemented by the use of a reverse chronological order, which first presents the results of characters' decisions and only later explores the circumstances and motivations that led to their choices: in Kalous's view, this approach didactically invites the readership to withhold judgment while delving into the story. As the readers question their own moral responses, they ultimately come to recognize abortion as a legitimate option to achieve reproductive autonomy, as well as reconsider the definition of "life" itself. The urge to rethink that reproductive health matters beyond simple biology is also at the center of Serena Fusco's discussion of breastfeeding, which is presented as an in/visible multilayered issue. In her article, she defines breastfeeding as an "absent presence" in contemporary mainstream screen representations, as it rarely takes a central position despite its recognized public importance. Fusco illustrates how the lactating body is alternatively characterized as either repulsive, unruly, dangerous, sexualized, praised and yet hindered by structural socioeconomic inequalities, according to complex factors of race, gender, social class, and medicalization. In this sense, its complexity and subversive potential are powerfully conveyed by pop culture, which shows breastfeeding as being at once topical and obscured.

The challenge of critically engaging with stories about (non-) reproductive choices and bodily autonomy beyond simple binaries often comes through in the contributions collected here as a perspective that looks at pop culture narratives in terms of futurity, while staying within mainstream genres. For instance, Michele Meek's article on abortion road trip movies showcases a significant evolution in the portrayal of pregnancy termination in teens that moves beyond punitive narratives to more subtle, empathetic, and medically accurate depictions. In fact, Meek remarks that while early cinematic portrayals of teen abortion presented it as a transgressive and illicit act, often resulting in death or serving as a cautionary tale for sexually active girls, recent teen abortion movies depict characters who are "relatable and likeable," and decide to terminate a pregnancy with reasons presented as sound and embraceable. Meek also points to the rise of the teen abortion road trip movie as a subgenre highlighting the logistical and financial difficulties that emerged since the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, a subgenre that in parallel destigmatizes the abortion procedure by accurately describing it as painless and effective. Nonetheless, the article acknowledges the limits of the genre, for instance the "bad boyfriend" trope that, while activating sympathy in the viewer, might inadvertently reinforce narrow ideas about "acceptable" reasons for abortion.

In fact, the involvement of the male counterparts in the contested terrain of abortion politics and, more broadly, in reproductive justice issues, emerges as a particularly sensitive point of this Special Section. Significantly, with the sole exception of Walter Bruno Toscano in his role as interviewer, all contributors to this issue are women: a conspicuous absence that invites a critical reflection on men's awareness and positionality as citizens who are, willingly or not, embedded in and affected by the structural dynamics of reproductive politics and sexual health. Popular culture, by addressing male absence or lack of engagement through recurring and increasingly more original depictions, appears to gesture towards these tensions. Several contributions in this Special Section explore men's involvement in reproductive justice not merely as enforcers of patriarchal oppressive structures or in stereotypical terms, but as potential co-participants in a collective narrative and struggle for bodily

autonomy, equity, and human rights. For instance, Tuula Kolehmainen's analysis of abortion in male stand-up comedy contrasts simplistic, binary-reinforcing jokes with routines that reveal inconsistencies and challenge the "men as outsiders" narrative. Kolehmainen observes that most male stand-up comedy either avoids the subject of abortion altogether or still operates along the lines of common gendered stereotypes, such as the "male as a payer" trope, which reconfigures men's tangible or imagined economic dominance over women. However, she also draws attention to a few comedic routines, like Anthony Jeselnik and Steve Hofstetter's, that underscore male accountability in unwanted pregnancies by employing self-irony in order to dismantle male-centered perspectives in reproductive decision-making. In parallel, Sandra Tausel highlights how the Kamala Harris presidential campaign strategically appealed to male audiences by framing reproductive rights as affecting "the men who love us," an expression used by Michelle Obama to receive the endorsement of a wide audience of men beyond partisan lines. Tausel describes the brand of "protective paternalism" mobilized by Obama, underlining that the campaign aimed to universalize RJ issues and raise awareness in male voters through the use of familiar roles ("your daughter," "your wife," "your girlfriend") and by incorporating male testimonials, in order to frame reproductive oppression as yet another aspect of a broader crisis of the American healthcare system.

This Special Section, then, proceeds on two fronts: it traces how pop cultural forms have narrated reproductive justice and injustice – how stories of forced sterilization, abortion discourse and journeys, breastfeeding, policing and protest – found their way into screens, texts, popular fiction, comedy gigs, social feeds. It also charts the creative interventions, followed by activists and artists alike, which have leveraged those forms to expand public understanding, cultivate empathy, and seed movements. Theoretically, we attempt a cultural study that integrates Storey's equilibrium, Hall's meaningmaking, and Ross's structural intersectionality. We propose that popular culture is not marginal to reproductive justice; it is central as both an obstacle and an opportunity. Reproductive Justice, as we understand it, must operate not only in courts and clinics but also in cultural arenas. Taken together,

these articles highlight how fights to pass legislation must be sustained by fights to transform the symbolic narratives that shape how pregnancy, parenting, and autonomy are imagined. As Ross and Solinger remind us, RJ is not simply about individual “choice” – it is about addressing the intersecting structures of racism, patriarchy, colonialism, and economic violence. Popular culture is essential to this project. It encodes the norms through which these structures become common sense, but it also offers sites of rupture and imaginative possibility. This issue takes up that possibility, treating pop culture not only as a mirror of reproductive politics but as a site of intervention, critique, and transformation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the peer reviewers for their constructive feedback, the editorial board for hosting this Special Section, and the journal manager for her constant support. We are also grateful to the proofreader and the copyeditor for their careful work. Above all, we thank the contributors – whose work we are proud to present – for their engagement and insight.

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intersectional subjectivities, governmentality, and US pop culture within transnational frameworks.

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A Political Space that Wasn't There Before

An Interview with Loretta Ross

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ABSTRACT

This interview with Loretta Ross, a foundational figure in the Black feminist movement and a co-creator of the Reproductive Justice framework, provides a comprehensive overview of her life's work and political perspectives. The discussion, which took place on March 5, 2025, begins with Ross's personal experiences with reproductive oppression and sexual violence, which she identifies as the catalysts for her lifelong activism. She offers a nuanced explanation of how the concept of Reproductive Justice, which a group of twelve Black women developed, expands upon the traditional "pro-choice" movement. Ross highlights that true Reproductive Justice encompasses not only the right *not* to have children but also the right to have children and to raise them in a safe and supportive environment. The conversation further explores Ross's insightful critique of how mainstream media often sensationalizes and overdramatizes reproductive issues. She also discusses the adaptability and universality of the Reproductive Justice framework, explaining how it can be applied to and expanded by diverse groups to address their specific vulnerabilities and concerns. The interview concludes with Ross's thoughts on strategies for engaging men in the movement, emphasizing the importance of highlighting how these issues affect them and their communities. She also shares her forward-looking perspective on the future of reproductive

justice in the face of a global rise in far-right, pro-natalist politics, offering a hopeful vision of resistance.

KEYWORDS

Reproductive Justice, Black Feminism, African American History, Oral History, US History

Background

This interview was conducted via Skype on March 5, 2025 and is part of a research project started in 2022 by Bruno Walter Renato Toscano during the writing of his doctoral dissertation. The project aims to collect oral histories from activists involved in Black feminism, reproductive rights, and other women's political movements in the United States since the 1960s. Its central goal is to create an archive of oral sources that, using a transnational lens, contributes to the history of feminism in the United States.

Loretta Ross was born on August 6, 1953, in Temple, Texas. She majored in Chemistry at Howard, in Washington DC There, she was involved in Black Nationalist and Marxist-Leninist political groups. Her activism in reproductive rights began in the 1970s and was informed by her own experiences of racial and gender-based violence. In 1979, Ross became the Executive Director of the first rape crisis center in Washington, DC In 1985, she was the co-organizer of the delegation of over 1100 African American women that participated at the UN World Conference on Women held in Nairobi, Kenya. In the 1990s, she co-founded SisterSong and Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective. She was one of the twelve Black women who, in 1994, developed the term "Reproductive Justice." Ross has published several books, won the McArthur Prize, and since 2022 has continued to work at Smith College (Northampton, MA), where she teaches a course on "White Supremacy, Human Rights and Calling in the Calling Out Culture." She is also the author of the book *Calling In: How to Start Making Change with Those You'd Rather Cancel* (2025).

Bruno Walter Renato Toscano is a Post-doctoral Researcher at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy. His research explores the history of grassroots activism in the United States from the 1960s to the 1980s – focusing on radical African American organizations – as well as the transnational history of the population control movement and family planning during the Cold War. He is now working on his second monograph, based on his Ph.D. dissertation on the history of the Third World Women's Alliance, one of the most important women of color organizations of the last Century. He is the author of *Pantere nere, America bianca. Storia e politica del Black Panther Party* (Ombre Corte, 2023).

Toscano: I'm Walter Toscano. Here's Loretta Ross with me. Thank you for being part of this interview, which will be divided into two parts, the first of which is an introduction to your work. The second part is related to how, in your opinion, the media represent Reproductive Justice. I will start with the first question. Could you give us some insight into how you started working, first, on Reproductive Rights?

Ross: I became aware of what we call reproductive oppression through what had happened to me. I'm a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. I became pregnant from incest at age 14. I couldn't control if and when I had sex. And because it was 1968, abortion was not an option when I became pregnant. My only choice at that time was when I delivered the baby, whether or not to keep him. I chose to keep my son, so I went from being an incest survivor to a scared parenting teenager. I think not having self-determination over whether to have sex and not having self-determination over whether to continue an unwanted pregnancy are the things that made me conscious of reproductive oppression issues. When I went to college at 16, I started hearing about the Black liberation struggle, Black feminism, and everything other people were going through. I came from a very conservative family, so I didn't hear about any of those things at home. Then, it sparked my interest in challenging what had happened to me and trying to work so that it didn't happen to others. That's where my consciousness around Reproductive Justice came from. Obviously, we

didn't coin the term until 1994, several decades later, when my son was born in 1969. But the concept crystallized for us, the twelve Black women who created it: while the pro-choice movement fights for the right not to have children, using birth control, abortion, or abstinence, that was an incomplete articulation of what we as Black women needed. In fact, another part of my reproductive history is that I was sterilized when I was 23 years old by a doctor who said, "Well, you've already got one baby, so this shouldn't be a problem for you." That doctor should not have had that kind of attitude towards my reproductive future. Reproductive Justice as a framework also articulates that we have the right to have the children we want to have and the conditions under which we want to have those children. And then, once the children are here, we critique both the pro-choice and the pro-life positions, where they only seem to care about the pregnancy and its outcome. Still, they don't seem to care for the children or, at least, speak up as strongly for what happens once the children are born, what conditions under which they are raised, what both the biological and non-biological conditions that affect their futures, like unfair tax policies or gun violence or things like that. And so it was that lived experiences that drew me into reproductive politics. However, thlived experience also helped me define what Reproductive Justice would become.

Toscano: Who were your political references? Who were the women with whom you worked from the beginning?

Ross: Well, the woman who introduced me most to feminism is Nkenge Touré.¹ She is the woman who brought me to the Washington DC Rape Crisis Center. And that is where, beyond my experiences at Howard University, I discovered a Black feminist activist community. Nkenge Touré is probably the one most responsible for me becoming a Black feminist outside of what had happened to me at Howard University. But then, at Howard, I majored in chemistry and physics, so I didn't have much time for activism. I remember protesting gentrification and protesting

¹ On Nkenge Touré see Shay Dawson. "Nkenge Touré." *National Women's History Museum*. <<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/nkenge-toure>>.

against Apartheid in South Africa but not a lot of work on feminist issues. So that happened after I left University. Even though I was at Howard, another thing happened: I got pregnant my first year at college, and I had an abortion when I was a first-year student. But even that did not spark feminist activism in me because I was fortunate enough to be in Washington, DC, which decriminalized abortion the summer before I needed one. So, I was able to go to a hospital and have a perfectly legal and safe abortion for a perfectly affordable price. Because it was not an issue, it did not become an issue for me. I don't know if that makes any sense.

Toscano: Absolutely. And so Nkenge Touré introduced you to reproductive rights, let's say.

Ross: Into feminism.

Toscano: Okay. And what about reproductive rights?

Ross: Well, my entree into feminism was through violence against women: I was more conscious of having experienced incest and rape. So that is why I foregrounded that over the pregnancy. I don't know if that makes any sense, but my cousin, who was 27 years old and married, should not have been getting me drunk so that he could have sex with me when I was 14. That, to me, was a much bigger issue than the fact that I became pregnant as a result. So, my entree into feminist thinking was through fighting violence against women, not fighting reproductive oppression. But, of course, the two things are closely related. At the Rape Crisis Center, I learned to start telling the story of what had happened to me, and then it all got entwined, the sexual oppression as well as the reproductive oppression. They became part of the same story. But I have to be honest and say I wasn't motivated by the teen pregnancy so much as I've been motivated by sexual violence.

Toscano: Speaking about reproductive rights, how has the visual media, like television, cinema, or other platforms, portrayed reproductive rights?

Did something change regarding how reproductive rights are portrayed, generally speaking, from those kinds of media?

Ross: Well, media, by definition, can only stay in business if they portray extreme drama. Because that's what sells, if it bleeds, it leads, right? And so I've never felt that mainstream media offers a fair view of abortion, for example. They only talk about the stories where people "Oh, I had regrets that I had an abortion, and now I want to kill myself." Or the people who had the lousy abortion stories, or the people who were denied the right to an abortion... So they always portray the most dramatic stories because that's their media. That's their job. They can't stay in business under a capitalist system by telling the truth about women's lives. They just can't because our lives are infinitely boring.

I mean, it'd be hard to make a movie out of my abortion story: it was safe; it was legal; it was at a hospital; my boyfriend paid for it. Where's the drama in that?

Toscano: Well, that was all.

Ross: If I offer a critique of the media, it would be with recognizing their constraints regarding what stories they tell. They can't stay in business telling boring stories. So their job is to exaggerate the more dramatic stories, even if that's the minority of the stories. I don't like that media model because journalism should be committed to telling the truth. But it's very hard under this climate, to say the truth and stay in business at the same time.

Toscano: But what about books or other media?

Ross: I love that there's been an absolute proliferation of writings by women over the last twenty years, telling more of the truth and stories. My latest book is coming out in September, which I've co-written with Marlene Gerber Fried. She was the lead writer on it, and it's called "Abortion and Reproductive Justice." In doing the research for that book,

I was astonished at how many thousands of titles there are now writing about this topic, which was not true thirty years ago.

Toscano: True.

Ross: And so, yes, if you review the literature, there is a much more nuanced and wide-ranging coverage of the topic in terms of if you look at the alternative films that are out there, there's a whole cottage industry of feminist produced films about reproductive politics. But you don't see those books or films represented in the mainstream media.

Toscano: Do you think the term Reproductive Justice has found any space in the mainstream media?

Ross: Oh, yeah. As a matter of fact, I was just reading a report from the Black women's group *In Our Own Voices*, and the Congress has set up a Reproductive Justice task force. I think that reads pretty mainstream.

Toscano: Do you think there is a bad side to this attempt to talk about Reproductive Justice in a more mainstream way?

Ross: No. I'm not one of those persons that do language policing. If you use the term, I'm gonna be okay with how you use the term for the most part. I will not say, "You can only use the term if you use the exact definition of the term I use!" I believe that even misusing the term creates political space that wasn't there before. I used to get into this fight with my mentor, Shula Koenig because she was the mother of human rights education. Truly, she spent her life building human rights education organizations around the world. And she was so frustrated because she insisted that most people using the term human rights didn't mean it the way she meant it. And I always argued with her: "Sheila, it's a win for us when they say the term human rights. Even if they don't mean it the same way we want them to, they've entered into the public discourse, creating political space for us to have the conversation!" But she was insistent that they shouldn't use it at all if they didn't use it right. I'm not one of those language policers.

I should add that there is not widespread agreement in the Reproductive Justice movement because there are people who believe that if you do not use it precisely the way Black women intended it, you shouldn't use it at all. I don't agree with that either.

Toscano: What is the specific kind of definition that you are referring to?

Ross: Well, for them – and I'm only representing a viewpoint I don't agree with – Reproductive Justice emanates from Black feminist theory. Any use of it has to center Black women in the narrative. I think Reproductive Justice has a universalist quality. And who is in the center of the narrative depends on the material conditions of who's talking about it.

Toscano: Sure.

Ross: So Indigenous women in the United States are gonna talk about sovereignty as a Reproductive Justice issue, which Black women won't do because we're not tribes. We don't have treaties with the US government. Undocumented women are gonna talk about citizenship and birthright citizenship in particular as a Reproductive Justice issue – again, which is not a necessary issue for most African American women. What I love about Reproductive Justice is its adaptability. So, I resist people who insist upon a fixed definition of it.

Toscano: In terms of trying to explain or share the issue of Reproductive Justice with other people, my question is: how can we create new ways – symbolically, for example – to discuss Reproductive Justice? Is there any narrative that could improve women's lives and reproductive experiences regardless of race and class?

Ross: What surprises me is that Reproductive Justice became a way to bring human rights home to the United States. We were illiterate as a country when it came to understanding human rights. I think of Reproductive Justice as a very US-specific term because most countries have already embraced the human rights framework or at least the human

rights language. It was not happening in the United States. I'm saying use whatever works in your particular location. Like in Ireland, they like using Reproductive Justice because it provided political space that talking about abortion rights didn't offer because they were going up against the Catholic church there. So, in those situations, use whatever language works for you. But suppose you're in a Nordic country that already puts a lot of emphasis and inclusion of human rights standards into your social welfare contract. In that case, I'm not sure how Reproductive Justice adds to that value when you are already human rights-focused and are already giving protection to pregnant and parenting people. So it's specific to whatever conditions that you're dealing with.

Toscano: Reproductive Justice seems to be discussed mainly by women because they write about it and express concerns about their increasing vulnerability. They also share stories on the topic. But sometimes I'm perplexed about the fact that there are not a lot of men who talk about reproductive justice...

Ross: ... or reproductive politics – except for controlling them!

Toscano: Yeah, especially in this climate, I would say... I am interested in your opinion on the kind of distance that men sometimes take on the issue. Is there any way to include men more effectively in this struggle and discuss it?

Ross: The best way to get anybody to care about an issue is to show them how it affects them. So, for example, when I was in Mississippi organizing against the Personhood Amendment – that's when they tried to write personhood into the state constitution so that they can prohibit abortion – when I talk to men, I ask them, "How would you like to start paying child support from the moment your girlfriend gets pregnant? She hasn't even had the baby yet, and you're already paying child support. Because if this law passes, that child that hasn't even been born is gonna be called

a person that you have to pay for.” I think that persuaded many men... it showed them they were interested in that topic. So it wasn't just “I can't get pregnant.” You're at risk if you have unprotected sex for the rest of your life. Because if you have sex with a woman and she becomes pregnant, you have to start paying even before it's proven that the child is yours. And if you don't want that to be your future, maybe you should support women.

Toscano: Do you think that only the money argument is enough to convince men to join in the discussion?

Ross: Responsibility, too. Men should care about whether or not children receive an adequate education or have to suffer from gun violence or those kinds of things because that speaks to the health and well-being of the community in which they live. Do you want a whole bunch of children with mental health issues obtaining guns and shooting up their schools or their movie theaters? All those things have already happened. And so even if you're not directly affected by your body, you're socially traumatized by what happens. One of the things we tend to talk about more is socialized trauma, not just individual trauma. Anytime a mass murder event occurs, that's social trauma, even if you're not personally affected. So that's another way to talk about it.

Toscano: Do you think education plays a role in this? For example, does teaching a young man about the importance of Reproductive Justice strengthen his commitment to the cause?

Ross: Oh, yeah. My first – and only – experience teaching middle school students was as a sex educator. And honestly, young people are eager to learn the things that adults tend to hide from them. Once they had access to more information, they started making smarter choices – because that's what people do. When we know more, we make better decisions. I strongly believe in evidence-based sex education for all ages. In fact, I think it should begin as early as infancy. For example, when my son was a baby, he loved playing with his penis – that's masturbation. I wasn't going to ignore

that. Babies instinctively do what feels good to them. Every time he had the chance, he would touch himself. So I had to talk to him about that so he doesn't feel shame or think he's doing something wrong or all that stuff.

Toscano: True.

Ross: I wanted to raise a sexually healthy child. And the time at which I was parenting mattered because my son was coming of sexual age when the AIDS crisis was coming about. And so failing to educate my son about sexual safety felt like a death sentence. In the early 1980s, the world was just becoming aware of AIDS. I felt very irresponsible to be parenting a son in that period and not assume about sex and sexual safety.

Toscano: You told me about the universality of Reproductive Justice. And I was wondering if, in your opinion, this kind of framework could include the whole spectrum of the LGBTQ+ community. I was thinking especially of the transgender community.

Ross: Not at first: when we created it in 1994, we defined it in a very heterospecific way. And so a decade later, the Queer People of Color Caucus within SisterSong added the fourth pillar, which is "the human right to sexuality, to gender identity, to sexual pleasure." And so it's been amended to add a less womb-specific expansion. But the 12 women who created it originally... we were all heterosexual women. So we made it from the standpoint where we were. But we're not against it being expanded to include LGBTQ+ people. As I said, it can be adapted for anybody. As I said, Native American women adapted it, and Asian American women adapted it because it's based on human rights, and everybody has the same human rights. You can use the intersectionality framework to examine people's advantages, disadvantages, or vulnerabilities. And so, even though everybody has the same human rights, you have to pay attention to people's vulnerabilities to see that those disadvantages can be addressed so they can enjoy the same human rights. For example, if every child has a human right to an education, then a blind child might need books in Braille, but you must pay attention to her vulnerabilities. It isn't that she has more human

rights. Still, you use intersectionality to examine which vulnerabilities must be addressed, the same way you would look at the vulnerability of someone who's undocumented, or the vulnerability of someone who's queer, or the vulnerability of someone who didn't go to college or lacks a computer. All of those are vulnerabilities that you have to address. That's why I love the human rights framework; it includes everybody. But with the specificity, sure, that each individual deserves.

Toscano: Was there a specific book you used when you started to talk about reproductive rights within the framework of human rights, or did this connection emerge just by being part of a general movement in the 1990s?

Ross: No, there wasn't a particular book, but we, the SisterSong, decided to create *Reproductive Justice* in July of 1994. Three months later, there was an international conference on population development in Cairo, Egypt. That's where I learned about people using the human rights framework to make the same demands we were trying to fit under the US Constitution, and it wasn't working. So it wasn't a book. That was my wake-up call. But the movement of the Global South, women from the Global South who were demanding that you not impose population control without addressing systematic underdevelopment... That was the point that women from the Global South were making. If you're passing out birth control pills or are inserting intrauterine devices in our communities, and you're not addressing the lack of a public health infrastructure, you're practicing population control... You're not going at the systematic underlying issues that are human rights violations. You're violating our human rights by imposing population control without looking at the uneasy and uneven relationship between the Global North and the Global South.

Toscano: It was not far from what Black women said at the beginning of the 1970s.

Ross: Right, exactly. But, at the beginning of the 1970s, I only encountered Toni Cade Bambara and another woman who mentioned human rights in

her writings. So, it took 20 years for the phrase human rights to reappear and become popularized in Black women's writings. And that's largely because of our work, our solidarity work globally, because we had more to learn from people in the Global South than we had to teach.

Toscano: Sure. I have just another question about pop media. Did you use them to raise awareness about Reproductive Justice or not?

Ross: Well, not me, but people in our movement did. I remember I was invited to give a speech to a group called the *Hollywood Women's Political Caucus*. These were women who worked in the film and TV industry, and they wanted to hear about Reproductive Justice from me. And they did. But that didn't mean I would park myself in Hollywood and try to influence Hollywood. I let the women who already live in Hollywood and work in their history carry that message. I have to add that there's a generational difference that I'm observing because, like Monica Simpson, who succeeded me as SisterSong, she was at the Grammy Awards. So, she is bridging the divide between celebrity culture and reproductive politics. That wouldn't interest me, but I was very proud to see her dressed up for the Grammy Awards, you know? She got there because of her work on reproductive justice, networking, and working with people in Hollywood.

Toscano: But do you think that in that way it's easy to avoid that kind of dramatization of Reproductive Justice, you were talking about before? It is possible to merge the issue of Reproductive Justice with this part of the media culture that is more interested in dramatizing everything about abortion rights and so on?

Ross: No, I'm not saying avoiding it. Different ways of communicating are going to reach different audiences. And so the way people do it is through dramatization, through Hollywood, reaching a specific audience that I'm not interested in reaching. But it does work. Let me think about something analogous. You remember when Beyoncé did her tour and she put the word "feminist" behind herself on the stage? A lot of people criticized Beyoncé

because they're like, "How can a woman sitting up there with all this sexual imagery represent a feminist?" And I'm like: "But hell! Beyoncé is reaching millions of women we couldn't even reach in our fondest dreams!" How can we criticize her for her ability to reach people not enrolling in our women's studies courses? We should be supporting her.

Toscano: My last question. Considering the situation that we are facing in terms of the – I would say – worldwide rise of the far right, what do we have to expect about the struggles we face in Reproductive Justice? What is the future of the Reproductive Justice struggle in this global scenario?

Ross: Well, one of the things that I find most interesting is that many of these far-right governments are trying to impose very pro-natalist policies on their people. And I don't think they're going to work. Because pro-natalism, by definition, depends on women stopping their educations and stopping their participation in the workforce so they can stay home and raise babies. And I don't see that succeeding as a pitch to women who have educational and economic opportunities, that they will voluntarily divest themselves of opportunities to get education, participate in the workforce, and earn their own money. I think these guys are demographically doomed because their whole plan is based on convincing women to act stupid right now [laugh]. That's not going to happen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Loretta Ross not only for granting me this interview but also for the support she has given me – and continues to give me – since I first met her in 2022 during my research at Smith College. Most of all, I want to thank her for the greatest lesson she has taught me: being politically active means helping others, listening to them, and resisting the pull of the individualism we are so often pushed toward by society.

“I Hear No Men Talking About It”

Male Stand-Up Comedians on Abortion

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ABSTRACT

In his 2023 stand-up special, *From Bleak to Dark*, comedian Marc Maron wonders why men do not address the Supreme Court’s decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, which ended the constitutional right to abortion in the United States. The question of who is, or should be, entitled to take a stand on the right to abortion, is up for debate, but so is Maron’s claim that there are “no men talking about it.” Quite a few male comedians have presented their – fictitious or real – views on reproductive justice on the stand-up stage, not only in their post-*Roe* shows but also over the course of the past few decades. Stand-up comedy is a unique forum for dealing with themes like gendered vulnerability and power relations, even exposing views that would be considered offensive or even unlawful outside of the comedic context. Narratives produced and reproduced in society are popularized in stand-up comedy, and when they reach streaming services like *Netflix*, they reach huge audiences. Seeing stand-up comedians as potential public intellectuals (Kunze and Champion), this article explores how groups and communities are constructed and deployed in stand-up (Brodie; Chesters), focusing on how US male comedians navigate the social debates on the issue of abortion in their stand-up shows. While this article acknowledges that the “definition of reproductive justice goes beyond the pro-choice/pro-life debate” (Ross and Solinger 9), it will focus specifically on abortion for two reasons. First, extending the discussion to parental rights and reproductive justice more generally would require a longer discussion than is possible in the scope of this article, and second, focusing on abortion

reflects more precisely what is found in the comedic material of male stand-up comedians in the United States. Through analyzing a few examples from US comedians, I argue that while stand-up comedy on the theme of abortion by men often reinforces patriarchal norms, attitudes, and stereotypes, it also provides a platform for contesting them. I also argue that this dual function operates through a rhetorical practice that positions men as outsiders. While this rhetoric often deems women responsible for both pregnancies and abortions, as “public intellectuals,” stand-up comedians have the potential to deconstruct narratives of unequal gender relations and related social discussions.

KEYWORDS

Stand-up Comedy, Abortion, Gender, Stereotypes, Outsiderhood

Stand-up Comedy and the Issue of Abortion

In his 2023 stand-up special, *From Bleak to Dark*, comedian Marc Maron wonders why men do not address the Supreme Court’s decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, which ended the constitutional right to abortion in the United States (Maron 11:25-11:45). The question of who is, or should be, entitled to take a stand on the right to abortion, is up for debate, but so is Maron’s claim that there are “no men talking about it” (11:43-11:44). Quite a few male comedians have presented their – fictitious or real – views on reproductive justice on the stand-up stage, not only in their *post-Roe* shows but also over the course of the past few decades.¹ Seeing stand-up comedians as potential public intellectuals (Kunze and Champion), this article explores how groups and communities are constructed and deployed in stand-up (Brodie; Chesters), focusing on how US male comedians navigate the social debates on the issue of abortion in their stand-up shows. While this article acknowledges that the “definition of reproductive justice goes beyond the pro-choice/pro-life debate” (Ross and Solinger 9), it will focus specifically on abortion for two reasons. First, extending the discussion to parental rights and

¹ Many stand-up routines on the theme of abortion have been performed by, for example, George Carlin (1996), Bill Hicks (1997), and Doug Stanhope (2004).

reproductive justice more generally would require a longer discussion than is possible in the scope of this article, and second, focusing on abortion reflects more precisely what is found in the comedic material of male stand-up comedians in the United States. While some scholarly attention has been paid to representations of abortion in television comedies (Sisson; Weinstein), research around the theme of abortion in stand-up comedy, particularly performed by male comedians, is lacking. By examining stand-up shows from 2019 to 2024, this article aims to address this lacuna and shed light on how comedic discursive practices respond to and shape social debates about abortion.

Abortion is an issue that – directly or indirectly – touches upon the lives of most people in the United States,² and it is, thus, no surprise that many comedians have chosen to address the topic in their shows. It is important to explore stand-up performances because (of the way) they reflect and reproduce social and political debates, but also have the potential to reshape them. Stand-up is a unique forum for dealing with themes like gendered vulnerability, power relations, and identity (Weaver and Lockyer), exposing views that would be considered offensive or even unlawful outside of the comedic context (Giappone, Francis and MacKenzie 10).³ In their performances, comedians often assume an outsider position. Kunze and Champion argue that “Like public intellectuals, stand-up comedians benefit from a certain status, wherein they develop an outsider personality that allows them to present themselves as uncompromised individuals who can comment on their society without being tainted by its influence.” As public intellectuals, famous American comedians play a central role in popularizing heated social narratives as the recordings of their shows spread globally, but the degree of responsibility for what they say seems to be quite low. This was made evident in comedian Tony Hinchcliffe’s performance at one of Donald Trump’s October 2024 election campaign rallies, where his racist remarks about Puerto Ricans

² According to Boudreau and Maloy, “one in four people will have an abortion in the United States before the age of 45” (xii).

³ As discussed by Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt, famous American stand-up comedians have even been arrested for “uttering obscenities” on stage (xxi).

and Black Americans generated a backlash (Gomez and Superville). While Hinchcliffe's material was mostly condemned, this incident demonstrates that comedians can impact the narratives surrounding globally significant events such as the US presidential elections. Thus, harmful narratives may become disseminated through stand-up comedy. When the shows reach streaming services like *Netflix*, platforms like *TikTok* and *YouTube*, and television news, they reach huge audiences very quickly. These narratives are then reproduced in society by audience members around the world as they "feed [...] ideas back into the culture" (Witherington 115). Thus, stand-up comedy is a crucial pathway through which cultural narratives are shaped, even those surrounding sensitive issues like abortion.

In this article, by analyzing a few examples from US comedians, I argue that while stand-up comedy on the theme of abortion by men often reinforces patriarchal norms, attitudes, and stereotypes, it also provides a platform for contesting them. I argue that this dual function operates through a rhetorical practice that positions men as outsiders. While this rhetoric often deems women responsible for both pregnancies and abortions, stand-up comedians have the potential to deconstruct narratives of unequal gender relations and related social discussions. I start by showing how comedians construct themselves as outsiders through binaries in three recurring joke categories. Then, I examine how they blur the boundaries of those divisions to deconstruct the outsider narrative.

Creating Divisions

My analysis draws on Brenda Boudreau's and Kelli Maloy's notion that "popular culture can impact the cultural narrative about the issue of abortion" (xii). Representations in popular culture are a meaningful source of information about the issue because people who have abortions in real life often avoid talking about them due to shame (xii). Moreover, since there is limited data on men's experiences around the theme (Li, Heyrana and Nguyen 115), both additional scientific data and more popular culture stories would help deconstruct taboos and misconceptions related to abortion. The autobiographical nature of stand-up comedy (Brodie 41;

Double; Gilbert) offers a platform where this is possible. From Richard Pryor's accounts of setting himself on fire in the 1980s to Jamie Foxx's 2024 *Netflix* special, *What Had Happened Was...*, male comedians in the United States have told stories about their physical and emotional vulnerabilities. However, while abortion is a sensitive issue to many men as well (Li, Heyrana and Nguyen 113-14), male comedians have not adopted the theme of abortion to discuss parental rights, reproductive justice, and their feelings about their involvement in abortion stories in a sophisticated, empathetic manner.

Instead, in most of the material analyzed for this article, humor on the issue of abortion is created through binaries. The setups often introduce two divisions: "Women," who are assumed to be pro-choice, and "men," who are assumed to be pro-life. The binary conservative/liberal is often aligned with this division, so that women are constructed as liberal (and, thus, assumed to be pro-choice) and men as conservative (and, thus, assumed to be pro-life). These binaries transcend racial barriers in the sense that no race or ethnicity is inherently associated with any of the divisions. When it comes to the comedians' backgrounds, except for Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock, who are African American, all the comedians analyzed in this article are white. As I will try to show, there is no clear distinction between the comedic materials that would directly depend on the comedian's background. However, the issue itself does affect people in diverse ways and in different contexts. For example, Black women face heightened vulnerability (Boudreau and Maloy xiv; Ross and Solinger 5), which is related to the fact that, as Choi argues, "abortion regulations have been a political tool for the maintenance of white superiority and supremacy" (145). Through creating these gendered and political divisions, the comedians foster the illusion that the question is basically a women-versus-men controversy. As Diana Fuss argues, "'conventional binaries,' such as men/women, are based on another related opposition: the couple 'inside' and 'outside'" (1), and here, too, the comedians construct themselves (and other men) as outsiders in the issue through these binaries.

Of course, the in-groups and out-groups created by comedians are fluid, and both the audience and the comedian may shift between them – even within a single joke. In fact, as Ian Brodie argues, "vacillating between

an insider and outsider identity” (103) is a common strategy of stand-up comedians, who must maintain a certain duality in their persona to succeed in their performance (114). In the material I analyzed, the comedians play with the groups to create incongruity. The comedian, for example, assumes the role of a man who is “on the women’s side” on the abortion issue and, thus, apparently “licensed” to take a stand on it. After getting praise from female audience members, the comedian then resumes the role of an outsider. In this way, the comedian may first align himself with women (assumed to be pro-choice) and men who support them. In the punchline, the comedian often repositions himself as an outsider, often including a misogynistic remark to reinforce patriarchal gender divisions.

There is a real lack of data and stories from men about abortion, which may perpetuate gendered stereotypes and reinforce the narrative that men bear no responsibility in the issue. While terminating unwanted pregnancies benefits men, the data available on men’s experiences is insufficient to get a clear picture of them (Li, Heyrana and Nguyen 115). Removed from these stories, men’s experiences become invisible, distorted, or stereotypical (Choi) and their responsibility remains obscure. This exclusion has the potential to reinforce inequality between men and women (Li, Heyrana and Nguyen 115). More stories from men are needed if we want to avoid reproducing only the stereotypical ones. As argued at the beginning of this article, stand-up material on this issue may either reinforce or challenge hegemonic narratives of gender roles. In what follows, I will discuss some of the narratives that reinforce both gendered stereotypes and position men as invisible in abortion stories by constructing a community of outsiders.

Fabricating Communities

As discussed by Kunze and Champion, it is typical of stand-up comedians to create worlds where they are outsiders – whether of a broader society, a specific community, or smaller discourse communities they construct during their performances (Chesters; Swales). While outsiderhood usually denotes a negative state (implying unbelonging, disparity, and powerless-

ness), in many of the selected stand-up routines about abortion, it both offers men power and liberates them from responsibility. In their jokes, the comedians create a sense of community among men, both in general and with male audience members. Through humor, they persuade their audiences to laugh "as an expression of shared values" (Mintz 78), and in doing so, they often invite the audiences to join them in making moral judgments of women. As a result, these shows rely on stereotypical and hollow, even fatuous, humor – more bleak than dark – which reveals the comedians' detachment from real abortion stories. These jokes often fall into at least one of these three categories: the "Payer," "I'm Pro-choice, but . . .," and "Slogan reuse."

The first category, the "Payer," is a recurring punchline that connects men to abortions only as the ones paying for them. In the joke mentioned at the beginning of this article, upon wondering why men are not talking about abortion rights, Maron ends the joke with, "if you're a guy with any game at all, you've paid for at least two of those" (11:46-11:50), meaning abortions. The joke creates a division not only between men and women but also between men who have sexual success and men who do not. According to Maron's comedic logic, men who have "any game" also have economic power, which is an idea that ignores the fact that around half of the people who have abortions live in poverty (Boudreau and Maloy xiv). Thus, Maron constructs a homosocial community of those men who impregnate women and can afford to provide the means for abortion. Notwithstanding the fact that Maron's routine is most likely ironic, he performs here what Michael Kimmel defines as "*homosocial competition*," which is "a relationship among men in which the sexual victimization of women is a currency among men" (107; emphasis original). While plagiarism is not allowed in stand-up either, similar punchlines can be found in the material of countless male comedians. For example, Mark Normand has an almost identical punchline: "I love abortions. I paid for two last week" (0:23-0:25). Re-articulating men's real or imagined economic power over women is not only "used as a way to facilitate upward mobility in a masculine hierarchy" (Kimmel 107) but also consistently induces a positive reaction from the audience: laughter. This reaction, whether its source is relief, a feeling of

superiority, or incongruity,⁴ from the comedian's point of view, is always a positive response. As Brodie states, "The purpose of stand-up comedy is entertainment and its aim is laughter" (6).

In addition to generating laughter, one reason for these recurring punchlines could be the volatile nature of the issue. While a comedian who can make audiences laugh with controversial material and escape criticism is more likely to be popular (Brodie 21), creating such material is a challenging task. In an *Entertainment Weekly* interview with Josh Wolk, Chris Rock commented on writing jokes on sensitive topics thus, "You do some weird abortion joke, that thing's gotta be worded just . . . right. . . You're literally dealing with nitroglycerine. One drop and the whole place goes up" (Haggins 88). A heated social topic of debate such as reproductive justice would certainly require meticulous writing on the comic's part, as Rock argues. However, rather than writing jokes that acknowledge the complexity of the issue, the comedians merely repeat the narrative of men as outsiders and reinforce sexist and classist stereotypes in their abortion jokes. More specifically, the narrative seems to be that "real" men make both pregnancies and abortions happen but are situated outside the problem. In another example, Andrew Schulz (2022) envisages meeting God with his wife who has had an abortion, emphasizing the fact that it was *her* choice: "Looks like you need to pay for your sins, babe. Even though *I* paid for your sins" (0:48-0:55). Implying that terminating an unwanted pregnancy is the woman's choice and, thus, the woman's responsibility, these jokes, however, entail the need for a man's intervention. Here, again, all women are assumed to be pro-choice and men, by default, pro-life, even though they can switch groups.

In the "I'm Pro-choice, but..." category, the comedians emphasize abortion as a choice that women make, apparently acknowledging their agency and right to choose. As mentioned earlier, incongruity is established when a change of direction comes in the punchline, and the comedians end up vilifying women for their potential choice to have abortions. Coming back to Schultz's skit about meeting God, he starts it with "Ladies, I am with you, I think it's your body, your choice [...] when we all go up to

⁴ The most well-known humor theories are relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory (see, e.g., Carpio 5-7).

heaven and God's like why are we all killing babies, we're gonna be like 'Y'all? I think they were very clear whose decision this was, God'" (0:15-0:47). In this way, the disclaimer is used against women while at the same time aligning with the "men as outsiders" rhetoric. With "we" referring to men and "they" referring to women, the two juxtaposed groups are re-created and the division between them reinforced.

The comedians often reinforce the moral judgment of women by equating abortion with killing. For example, Anthony Jeselnik introduces a little less misogynistic but even more disturbing joke in his 2019 special, *Fire in the Maternity Ward*: "Yes, I did just say that I am pro-choice. That does not mean I am pro-abortion. You have other options" (48:47-48:53). Hearing about Jeselnik's "other option" – terminating the pregnancy after the baby is born – is likely to disturb some audience members, but, as it does provoke laughter, this imagery is made even more explicit by Chris Rock in 2023: "I am absolutely pro-choice, okay? I believe women should have the right to kill babies [. . .] I think women should have the right to kill a baby until it's four years old" (31:21-32:22). While all jokes are primarily designed to elicit laughter, they might directly or indirectly reflect the comics' political ideologies as well. Whether the comics have intended to reflect their own pro-life stances in the analyzed material is difficult to determine, but in these cases, pro-life narratives are used as comedic tools to generate laughter. At the same time, a pro-choice position – and along with it, women's rights, agency, and bodily autonomy – becomes the target of ridicule. As a result of this recurring pattern, audience members may come to expect a misogynistic remark or vilification of women whenever a comedian (or anyone) claims to be pro-choice, which also applies to the next category.

Jokes in the third category are sample slogans and phrases concerning reproductive justice, most commonly the feminist slogan "my body, my choice." A common strategy is to refer to the comedic material as the "body of work." For example, Mark Normand orders, "Don't tell me what to do with my body of work" (0:41-0:42) and Steve Hofstetter tells the audience "It's your right to choose whether or not you laugh. It's, yeah, it's my body of work, your choice" (5:34-5:42). While seemingly harmless wordplay, this kind of slogan repetition does have real-life implications. For example, at the re-election of President Donald Trump in November 2024, the far-

right activist Nick Fuentes posted online the text, “Your body, my choice. Forever,” resulting in an explosion of mentions of the terms to support him on the social media platform X (Tolentino). Using the slogan to resist the very rights that it was originally created to defend, like in Fuentes’ case, can be seen as “hostile mnemonic appropriation” (Blom). Slogan reuse in stand-up is an example of how humor can be used to negotiate ideological boundaries, potentially obscuring the original message.

As I mentioned earlier, some routines combine these three categories. In *Sticks & Stones* (2019), Dave Chappelle starts with the “I’m pro-choice, but...” disclaimer by saying to the men in the audience, “This is theirs. The right to choose is their unequivocal right” (34:49-34:56). Constructing a group of himself and male audience members by talking directly to the “gentlemen” and calling women “them,” Chappelle, in a deceptively polite manner, removes all men from the discussion of abortion rights (except the one he is having with them). Then, changing direction and talking to the women instead, Chappelle combines the payer trope with a slogan: “If you can kill this motherfucker, I can at least abandon ‘em. It’s my money, my choice” (35:26-35:31). Suggesting that men should not have to pay for abortions or take part in raising the child, Chappelle reinforces “the physicalist mindset rooted in a long-standing dualistic tradition of the Western philosophy and culture” discussed by Choi:

once men are “done” with the physical sexual activity, he can “walk away” from the interconnected and multiple responsibilities of that act and treat it as if it is an isolated physical incident. Moreover, the dualistic categorization is related, if not directly, to heteronormative and (toxic white) masculine maintenance of power. (128-29)

According to Choi, this mentality underpins the cultural narrative that frames men as outsiders in issues related to reproductive justice. To uphold this duality, Chappelle ends up using the racist stereotype of the “Deadbeat [Black] dad” (Carpio 4) to justify his misogynistic remarks.

The joke categories – the Payer, the I’m Pro-choice, but..., and Slogan reuse – work to create a sense of community among men, while making moral judgments about women. By “punching down” – targeting less

powerful individuals and groups in their jokes – comedians may reinforce oppressive stereotypes and attitudes even beyond the comedic context. Reproducing stereotypical narratives about gender roles, women's rights, and masculinity in abortion jokes not only risks upholding patriarchal structures, but also oversimplifies men's role in abortion stories. While many abortion jokes popularize misogynistic attitudes, thus deepening inequality between genders, others subvert them. In the following section, I will explore how comedy can be used to challenge these dynamics.

Blurring Boundaries

As I have tried to show above, stand-up comedy can perpetuate gender inequalities and distort the ways in which men's role is seen in social discussions on reproductive justice. Jokes that construct men as outsiders often maintain men's invisibility in abortion stories, potentially reducing men's sense of accountability in real life. However, some male comedians work to challenge those same power structures, either intentionally or not, and their material could potentially have the opposite effect. Even though this material deconstructs patriarchal norms, attitudes, and stereotypes, it is also produced using the outsider rhetoric.

In his 2019 special, *Fire in the Maternity Ward*, Anthony Jeselnik deconstructs traditional narratives described in the earlier section by ridiculing the self-absorbed male outsider. In a fifteen-minute routine, he recounts escorting his friend to have an abortion. More than forty-five minutes into the special, Jeselnik prepares the audience for a "very long, very true story" (47:45-47:50), which will most likely be interpreted as irony, because Jeselnik's jokes are usually absurd one-liners – very short, very untrue stories. Moreover, both Jeselnik's trademark dark style of humor and the themes he has covered earlier in the special – touching on violence, mental illness, and murder-suicide – have probably prepared the audience to expect a fully ironic story. Jeselnik constructs himself as the ultimate outsider, emotionally and physically detached from the abortion story: waiting alone in the clinic and unsure of how to act. To emphasize the distance between the sensitive issue and his self-centered persona, he

says, “It was boring. I don’t know why I thought it was gonna be fun and exciting” (51:13-51:21). Jeselnik tells the story completely from his point of view, ridiculing himself – the outsider who somehow always turns the focus on himself: “I’m so bored that after a while, my mind just starts to wander, and I start to think about my friend and what she’s going through behind those doors. And then almost immediately, I bring it back to myself” (52:40-52:57). In this way, Jeselnik ridicules male self-centeredness around sensitive issues rather than making abortion the target of the joke.

However, Jeselnik upsets audience expectations by blurring the boundaries of groups throughout the routine. First, he creates a group of himself and (apparently) male audience members (which he aptly calls “guys”), saying, “Don’t worry, guys, wasn’t my baby, wasn’t important” (47:54-47:59). Apparently ignoring female members of the audience, he re-emphasizes the egotism of his stage persona. However, as Jeselnik consistently uses “guys” when addressing the entire audience, he diverges from the pattern followed by Chappelle and Schultz. Here “guys” operates on two levels: first, it is a reference to male members of the audience, and second, used to address audience members of all genders. With the latter case, Jeselnik does not create divisions between men and women but instead creates an in-group including him and his fans, who match his self-absorption. There is another level of complexity here, however. Since only caring for your own children is a stereotypically male attitude to have, it looks like Jeselnik is speaking to the male audience members. This assumption forces the female members of the audience to question whether they are included in the group to which Jeselnik is speaking throughout the show.

While Jeselnik’s routine contains glimpses of bias against women, it does not fit the three categories because he creates a sense of personal connection to the issue, despite his outsider position.

I blew it when she walked in there. I didn’t have anything nice prepared, I didn’t have a plan. The doctor called her name, she stood up, turned around to look at me one last time and I panicked. I just went, “Um...kill ’em in there.” I’m not proud of that, you know? I consider that to be a total failure. The worst part for sure was the

fist bump, I know that now. And, yeah, she looked at me like I'm an asshole, but...who is she to judge? (53:13-54:03)

Jeselnik uses the theme of killing, common in abortion jokes, but the moral judgment ("who is she to judge?") is more subtle and softened by a personal reflection. Rather than performing "masculinity [as] a homosocial enactment," Jeselnik shows his audience his confusion and fear, what Kimmel calls "its overriding emotion" (34). If the stand-up's job is "to have something interesting to say" (Brodie 152), Jeselnik's routine is successful precisely because he reflects on his own feelings. Even though telling the story from his perspective reinforces his arrogant and mean stage persona, it also connects him to the story. Unsure of how to act in such a sensitive case, he admits that he "panicked" and said a stupid thing, an experience many of us can relate to. Jeselnik also blurs boundaries between true/autobiographical and fictionalized material. After telling horrible jokes about extremely sensitive issues, an audience member would expect him to lie, but he insists, "I'm not going to lie to you guys" (53:11-53:12). Before the long routine, Jeselnik foreshadows this ambiguity by saying, "You guys seem like you don't believe me" (42:52-42:56). Thus, audience members must reconsider their assumptions on the sincerity of his material.

The phrase, "a very long, very true story" (47:45-47:50) becomes the most compelling aspect of Jeselnik's abortion clinic routine when analyzed with the help of Chesters's concept of "comic synchrony." As Chesters explains, audience expectations guide how a joke is interpreted: "A single sentiment can operate both ironically and sincerely simultaneously, and that it is the expectations of those in the discourse community that ultimately colour the interpretation of any utterance" (66). Jeselnik's fans, most likely used to short, ironic, and (hopefully) untrue jokes, may initially assume irony; that the story is neither "very long," nor "very true." However, as Jeselnik says at five minutes into the story that he is "only halfway done" (52:33-52:35), audience members will have to reconsider any presumptions. Of course, whether fifteen minutes is a "very long" time is subjective, but in the context of Jeselnik's material in general, it is quite long. In this way, audience expectations both shape and are shaped by this utterance: invoking Chesters's concept of "comic synchrony," this routine can be considered very long and not very long at the same time.

The same applies to the phrase “very true.” It is only towards the end of the routine that Jeselnik calls his friend “Jessica” (59:50) subtly implying that she is, in fact, a real person. In the next joke, however, Jeselnik subverts that impression, reminding the audience of the creative process the routine is based on. Saying that “the worst gift you could get someone after they’ve just had an abortion would be a to-go box” (58:37-58:45), and apparently getting some bad looks from the audience, Jeselnik responds with an annoyed “Think of something worse and I’ll change the fucking joke” (58:47-58:51). In this way, he reminds us that the whole story has been “just” stand-up, leaving the live audience to the safety of irony and thinking that all his material is ironic and un-autobiographical. However, there is a last twist on *Netflix*, as the words “For Jessica, with Love” (1:02:29) appear on the screen before the credits. In this way, the audience becomes an out-group, and the real-life Jeselnik and “Jessica” form an in-group others cannot reach. The story remains both “very true” and “not very true,” especially when audience members learn that the story is based on a true event, but completely fictionalized (Mays). Even though Jeselnik says in an interview with Theo Von that he does not “have a message, just, you know, nihilism” (15:49-15:52) this routine works to deconstruct the narrative constructed in the three joke categories discussed earlier.

Another exception to the recurring categories of abortion jokes is Steve Hofstetter, who has criticized the decisions states have made concerning reproductive justice. A self-proclaimed “pro-choice comedian,” Hofstetter took the outsider perspective when he performed in Texas immediately after the state had passed an anti-abortion bill, a few months before the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*. This is important because, in 2022, Texas became one of the states with the strictest legislation concerning the right to abortion.⁵ Austin, Texas, is also where comedian and podcast host Joe Rogan opened his “anti-woke” comedy club, Comedy Mothership, in 2023 (Seipp). Instead of boycotting the state, as other people had advised him to do, Hofstetter “decided to do things [his] way” (0:04-0:06). This

⁵ In the early 2025, “abortion is banned [in Texas] in almost all circumstances. Private citizens can sue abortion providers and those who assist patients who are seeking an abortion after about six weeks of pregnancy” (McCann and Walker).

means he traveled to perform his pro-choice comedy in Austin and Dallas, Texas, ridiculing Texan politicians, policies, and residents in quite a literal way, laughing at them: "I'm sorry to laugh, I'm allowed to leave, so I... To me, it's funny" (5:10-5:15). Hofstetter's outsider position differs from the others in that it is geographical and used to support abortion rights. In this way, he first establishes himself as a physical outsider, not as a *male* outsider.

Hofstetter challenges the idea of men as outsiders in the issue of abortion by revealing some inconsistencies. He says to a crowd in Austin, Texas: "I understand that, that law wouldn't affect me if I lived here, you know, because I'm a guy, and guys don't have anything to do with pregnancy, apparently" (1:15-1:22). Highlighting the fact that "men are involved in *all* unwanted pregnancies" (Choi 136; emphasis original), he adds, "We need to stop these babies. We need to stop these women from having babies by themselves" (2:46-2:50). First, by making men more visible in the issue of abortion, he creates a sense of connection with the audience. Implying that men are, in fact, insiders, he reminds the audience of a shared responsibility: "I actually have a genetic history of women in my family [...] Yeah, my mother was a woman and...my grandmother was a woman and...I'm not, it skipped a generation with me, which is weird. But I bet if I have a daughter, she'd be a carrier" (3:21-3:38). Making the issue as relatable as possible (most people have mothers, grandmothers, or daughters), he persuades men to understand that defending women's rights concerns them, too.

Choi argues that engaging men in discussions of reproductive justice could have a positive impact on gender equality around the issue:

To invite and convince men to join the difficult conversation of RJ and to learn from women about their experiences and bodies from women's vantage points, I propose that we take the approach of "contact hypothesis," according to which, intergroup contact or interaction under appropriate conditions can reduce prejudice between members especially if one recognizes the common humanity as an "in-group." Through this approach, men may be more open to conversation and quicker to respond when the issues are perceived as *their* issues. (130-31; emphasis original)

Keeping men completely outside reproductive justice discussions, as Choi suggests, “conveniently hides men’s decisions, actions, and accountability” (123-24). However, creating communities across all genders and hearing all experiences could foster greater equality. This idea also applies to stand-up comedy, even though male comedians often construct themselves as outsiders. However, as Fuss argues, “Every outside is also an alongside” (5-6). Positioned both outside and alongside, Jeselnik upsets the gender divisions constructed in abortion jokes and real life. Whereas Jeselnik swears by nihilism, Hofstetter is an “activist comic” (Krefting), using not only stand-up but also his social media platforms like Instagram to take a stand on political debates. Their work is a form of public intellectualism (Kunze and Champion), which is antithetical to the three categories that mostly work to police and ridicule women’s choices.

I Hear Men Talking About It: Conclusion

In his response to the backlash following his performance at the Trump rally, Tony Hinchcliffe stated that the people calling him out on the blatantly racist jokes “have no sense of humor” (Yang). As I have tried to show in this article, the rhetoric used in stand-up comedy is interconnected with serious public debates, even potentially contributing to the resurgence and dissemination of sexist and racist social commentary. My key takeaway is that male comedians frequently engage with reproductive justice in their stand-up material. By reusing the same themes, setups, and punchlines, they risk reinforcing patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes even in broader cultural narratives. However, as exceptions like Steve Hofstetter show, there is great potential in stand-up comedy – even when performed by men – to deconstruct divisions and create new communities.

As the discussions grow more heated, rather than dismissing harmful narratives, scholars should pay close attention to what comedians say, and at the same time, see how comedy can be used to deconstruct exclusionary rhetoric. While not all abortion jokes performed in the US between 2019 and 2024 are included in my analysis, there is still much to explore, particularly regarding how the ethnicity of the comedian affects

the delivery or reception of the comedic material. In addition, a wider examination of how male comedians engage with reproductive justice, which refers to a host of other things than abortion, ranging from personal and cultural values and norms to "sexual autonomy and gender freedom for every human being" (Ross and Solinger 9; Choi 123), is still needed. Future research would also benefit from exploring how female comedians, such as Sarah Silverman, Beth Stelling, and Brittany Ross use comedy to navigate the norms, attitudes, and stereotypes related to this issue.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

Dr. Tuula Kolehmainen won the 2023 Rob Kroes award for her Ph.D. dissertation, "*Like Men They Stood*": *Black Male Vulnerability as Resistance to Stereotypes in Fiction Written by African American Women* (2022). Her dissertation, which is to be published with Brill, focuses on fiction written by African American female authors from the late 1960s to the late 1990s. In addition, she has published essays and articles on representations of masculinities in fiction written by African American and Asian American women. Kolehmainen has been working on her postdoctoral project, "Playing with Power and Vulnerability in Autobiographical Works of African American Stand-Up Comedians," at the John Morton Center for North American Studies at the University of Turku, Finland, with the support of the Turku University Foundation. Currently she teaches English at Tampere University, Finland, and is a board member of the Finnish American Studies Association (FASA).

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“To the Men Who Love Us”

The Reframing of Reproductive Rights during Kamala Harris’s 2024 Presidential Campaign

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ABSTRACT

Women’s reproductive rights were one of the central issues in the run-up to the 2024 US presidential election. Kamala Harris ran on the issue as she and her supporters on the campaign trail emphasized the importance of access to all reproductive healthcare services, which, depending on individual state laws, had been severely curtailed since the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022. However, to Harris’s detriment, the gender gap in the 2024 election was projected to be profound (Pellish), and Donald Trump did retain a firm hold over men’s votes, with 53% of men aged 18 to 44 and 57% of men votes aged 45 and up voting for him (“Interactive”). The Trump campaign was evasive about reproductive issues and, instead, aggressively promoted hypermasculine images by campaigning with Hulk Hogan and enlisting the support of conservative pundits, including Joe Rogan and Charlie Kirk (founder of the conservative activist organization Turning Point USA) (Kellman). Amanda Friesen and Kate Hunt’s observation that movements like #MeToo have further alienated men from women’s issues complicated the Harris campaign’s efforts to make inroads with male voters and actively engage them in the ongoing debates. This essay will show that the Harris campaign set out to win votes by reframing their rhetoric to position reproductive rights in the context of other fundamental American freedoms and convey that men have a stake in preserving access to reproductive healthcare. Michelle Obama’s powerful campaign rally speech on October 26, 2024, in Michigan (accessible on Kamala Harris’s

YouTube channel) was the most conspicuous example of this strategy. Taking the stage in a camouflage-patterned blazer, Obama, not long into her speech, began a sentence with “[t]o the men who love us . . .” (Kamala Harris, “Michelle Obama”). The former first lady’s argument was in part an impassioned plea that forcefully explained to men how another Trump presidency and concomitant healthcare restrictions would hurt the women they loved and, ultimately, themselves. Thus, I will argue that Obama’s speech strikes a delicate balance between prompting men to “step up” for reproductive freedom on its merits and appealing to masculine gender scripts, reminiscent of “protective paternalism” (Leaper and Gutierrez), to suggest that voting Harris is a way to fulfill their “duty” to “protect” women, which is a political strategy that nevertheless somewhat weakens emancipatory discourses of bodily autonomy.

KEYWORDS

Reproductive Freedoms, Michelle Obama, 2024 Presidential Election, Benevolent Sexism, Protective Paternalism

Introduction

Throughout Kamala Harris’s abridged 2024 presidential campaign, Beyoncé’s “Freedom” – according to Emmett G. Price III “a bonafide anthem for an end to discrimination, prejudice, racism, and the various forms of human-on-human oppression and trauma” (Parys) – rang out when the then vice president took the stage. The song from the 2016 album *Lemonade*, featuring Kendrick Lamar, set the tone for Harris’s campaign program, which centered on fighting for and reclaiming democratic freedoms central to US-American life. At a campaign rally in Atlanta, GA, on July 30, 2024, Harris listed the persistent conservative efforts to restrict freedoms, saying:

Across our nation, we are witnessing a full-on assault on hard-fought, hard-won freedoms and rights: the freedom to vote . . . , the freedom to be safe from gun violence . . . , the freedom to live without fear of bigotry and hate . . . , the freedom to love who you love openly and with pride . . . , the freedom to learn and acknowledge our true and full history . . . , and the freedom of a woman to make decisions about

her own body. . . and not have her government tell her what to do . . .
(Ganesan)

In reaction to Harris's speech, the audience repeatedly chanted, "We are not going back", signaling a rejection of another Trump presidency, which threatened to undo progress made on civil rights issues during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in summer 2022 starkly reminds us that, in George Lakoff's words, "freedom isn't free" (255) and that even well-established freedoms (i.e., hard-won civil rights) can be revoked. In *Pregnancy and Power* (2019), Rickie Solinger notes that "reproductive politics [...] remains so difficult" because it involves "the most bitterly contested, unresolved issues [...] [including] questions about female sexuality, gender identity, women's rights, racism, racial equality and white supremacy, immigration, citizenship eligibility, religious freedom, scientific integrity, the causes of poverty, health care, environmental quality, numerous population issues, and the human rights of all persons" (3). *Roe* protected abortion as a constitutional right under the Fourteenth Amendment. Its reversal in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* transferred legislative power over abortion to the states. Many Republican-led states enacted strict abortion bans, exacerbating existing inequities and curtailing access to vital reproductive healthcare services, while also contemplating criminalizing providers and pregnant people and restricting access to assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) and medication abortion.

The effect of these sweeping legislative changes is most evident in reports of pregnant girls, women, and people experiencing serious and life-threatening complications as they are unable to obtain gynecological, contraceptive, preventative, reproductive, prenatal, postnatal, maternal, and abortion care. Such reports have also galvanized public opinion (Doherty et al.) and made abortion rights a winning issue in 2022 and 2023 (Nash and Ephross; Forouzan and Guarnieri). Accordingly, the Harris campaign made "restor[ing] and protect[ing] reproductive freedoms"

(“A New Way Forward”¹) one of their central themes. In contrast to Joe Biden, a devout Catholic, who only reluctantly addressed these issues or even said the word “abortion” (Sherman), Harris had already established a track record of advocating for bodily and reproductive autonomy as a Democratic Senator for California (2017-2021)² and Vice President (2020-2024) before entering the race for the White House. Thus, her campaign chose a specific communicative approach to situate reproductive rights in the larger context of fundamental American freedoms and reframe them as a non-partisan issue that voters, including moderate Republicans, Independents, undecided voters, as well as the sought-after but historically Republican-leaning demographic of male voters, could rally around.

Doing so, as I will try to show, entailed invoking a more traditionally Republican rhetoric of freedom and redirecting voters’ attention onto the broader yet preventable reproductive healthcare crisis triggered by “Trump abortion bans” (Fox7Austin). It further involved enlisting support from well-known public figures, like former First Lady Michelle Obama. Obama’s powerful campaign rally speech on October 26, 2024, in Michigan was the most conspicuous example of the Harris campaign’s strategy to illustrate that all men have a stake in preserving reproductive freedoms. Not long into her speech, still accessible on Kamala Harris’s *YouTube* channel, Obama began a sentence with “[t]o the men who love us . . .” (Kamala Harris, “Michelle Obama”³) and turned her argument into an impassioned plea that forcefully explained to men how continued reproductive healthcare restrictions would hurt their loved ones. Thus, I will argue that Obama struck a delicate balance between prompting men to “step up” for access to reproductive healthcare on its merits and appealing to traditional masculine gender scripts. The latter is a politically sophisticated approach yet somewhat weakens emancipatory discourses

¹ The author accessed the campaign website in December 2024. As of January 2025, it is no longer available.

² One notable example was an exchange between Harris and Brett Kavanaugh at his 2018 Supreme Court confirmation hearing. Harris’s line of questioning had Kavanaugh admit that he was unable to “think of any laws that give the government the power to make decisions about the male body” (“Senator Harris”) and went viral.

³ For readability this citation will henceforth appear shortened to “M.O.”

of bodily autonomy as it plays on “protective paternalism” (Leaper and Gutierrez) to suggest that voting for Harris is a way for men to “protect” women.

Reproductive Rights and the Rhetoric of Freedom

Evoking the elusive concept of freedom in “the land of the free” is still an effective and affective strategy to appeal to voters because, according to Orlando Patterson and Ethan Fosse, it is “one of America’s most cherished values” (26). However, they also show that people’s “perception of high levels of freedom is not a universal experience” but is highly contingent on income, material resources, race, and historical inequalities (30-31). Whereas many white people, particularly conservatives, troublingly perceive a decline in their freedom during periods of social and racial progress, increased surveillance, policing, and economic inequality disproportionately erode the sense of freedom among financially disadvantaged, Black, Indigenous Americans, and Americans of color (30-31). These disparities necessitate distinguishing between perceived freedom and freedom as a foundational ideal. Accordingly, Cheryl E. Matias and Peter M. Newlove assert that the latter has always been and is

tainted with historical amnesia, hypocrisy, and inhumanity [because] its idealizations of opportunities, freedom, and liberty [are set] against the haunting backdrop of African American slavery, Native American genocide, Asian American [incarceration], gender discrimination, and restrictions against gender identity. In this disturbing revelation, many Americans are left to wonder whether they truly have freedom or, instead, only the illusion of freedom. (316)

Freedom has nevertheless been upheld as a core value in US politics and used as a political football. W. B. Gallie identifies it as an “essentially contested concept” (169), and George Lakoff argues that manifold interpretations preclude a shared understanding (25). Lakoff also explains that “the most basic assumption of simple freedom is that *being free does not make you free*

to interfere with the freedom of others" (41; emphasis original). However, what amounts to interference and justifies overriding it remains debatable (41). Invoking certain freedoms, Democrats and Republicans introduce policies that affect how constituencies can or cannot exercise them. Their differing definitions explain contrasting views on governance: Democrats emphasize the government's role in addressing inequalities, establishing safety nets, protecting the environment, and ensuring education, healthcare, and diplomacy. According to Ronald Brownstein, Republicans "have marketed themselves as the party of freedom" for decades and, thus, favor limited government, economic deregulation, states' rights, Second Amendment rights, individual responsibility, traditional family values, military strength, tough-on-crime and strict immigration policies, and national sovereignty.

The Republican Party's messaging around freedom became more personalized and combative with Donald Trump's election and first term (2016-2020). Trump's speeches during the 2024 campaign used exclusionary rhetoric, emotional appeals, nationalist ideals, populist messaging, and misinformation to claim that migrants were threatening American freedom and security. For example, at a rally in Wilmington, NC, on September 21, 2024, he falsely claimed that "migrants [were] attacking villages and cities all throughout the Midwest" (qtd. in Anderson). Dannagal G. Young et al. argue that the COVID-19 pandemic also allowed conservatives to instrumentalize freedom discourse to allege that vaccines and masking guidelines were "a threat to personal freedom" (1). On his show in 2021, Tucker Carlson even jibed that "[t]he Biden administration has decided it owns your body." However, the credibility of conservatives' emphasis on (personal and bodily) freedom was pushed to the breaking point in the aftermath of *Roe*'s overturning, when many states enacted laws that immediately (partially or totally) banned abortion. Such trigger laws and restrictions are an unequivocal reminder that many Republicans, conservative legislators, and religious "pro-life" advocates do not consider or are dismissive of reproductive rights as an encroachment on personal freedom.

Seizing on this selective interpretation of freedom, the Harris campaign,

aware of the broad public support for abortion rights,⁴ highlighted reproductive issues to appeal to moderate Republicans, Independents, and undecided voters. During a speech marking the 51st anniversary of *Roe*, Harris argued that “[f]reedom . . . is fundamental to the promise of America . . . And that includes the freedom to make decisions about one’s own body . . . not the government telling you what to do” (“Vice President”). Speaking about reproductive *freedoms* rather than *rights* allowed Democrats to invoke the fundamental promise of freedom in the American imagination and (re)connect reproductive matters to privacy, personal autonomy, and minimal government intervention as *Roe* had done. In short, Democrats were pushing to return to the status quo under *Roe* and presented reproductive debates in terms designed to persuade a broader spectrum of voters, including more men, to oppose further restrictions on American freedoms and vote for Harris.

As US reproductive debates are closely intertwined with religious beliefs, particularly Christian fundamentalism, the campaign also sought to address moderates within these electoral groups. Therefore, Harris continued to state, “one does not have to abandon their faith or deeply held beliefs to agree the government should not be telling [a woman] what to do with her body” (Fox7Austin). Seeking to appeal to individuals who are on the fence about abortion but oppose governmental interference in private matters, Harris’s campaign for freedoms enlisted support from several (former) Republicans. At the 2024 Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Chicago, Adam Kinzinger, former Representative from Illinois, accused “Donald Trump [of having suffocated] the soul of the Republican Party” (Cortellessa), while Olivia Troye, former advisor to Vice President Mike Pence, said she was supporting Harris “not because [they] agree on every issue but because [they] agree on the most important issue: protecting freedom” (Graham). Notably, former Representative from

⁴ In their 2022 Pew Research Center report, Elizabeth Nash and Peter Ephross show that ballot initiatives supporting abortion rights passed in six states (California, Michigan, Vermont, Kansas, Kentucky, and Montana). Compiling a similar report in 2023, Kimya Forouzan and Isabel Guarnieri summarize that Minnesota, New Mexico, Ohio, and Oregon also enshrined abortion rights in their state constitutions, while “a record number [129] of state-level abortion protections” were passed.

Wyoming, Liz Cheney, who is expressly “anti-abortion, . . . pro-life [and] supported *Roe v. Wade* being overturned,” also endorsed Harris, calling the current reproductive care landscape “simply . . . unsustainable” (Tapper). Her support signaled a recognition of the threat a second Trump term posed to reproductive freedom and healthcare, especially given the former president’s ominous promise to protect women “whether [they] like it or not” (Padilla).

Unifying Americans around a Healthcare Crisis

In the run-up to the election, Democrats frequently reminded Americans of the first Trump administration’s role in overturning *Roe*. Harris emphasized that Trump appointed three conservative justices – Neil M. Gorsuch (2017), Brett Kavanaugh (2018), and Amy Coney Barrett (2020) – to the Supreme Court, making him “the architect” of “a healthcare crisis” (“A New Way Forward”). Meanwhile, Trump professes to be proud of facilitating the overturning (Blumenthal), and his choice of staffers and running mates reflects a broader pronatalist agenda. For instance, Mike Pence is fervently pro-life and fiercely advocated for defunding Planned Parenthood (Redden), while Vice President JD Vance claimed that the US needed “more babies” (LiveNOW) at the 2025 March for Life. Endorsing activists’ pro-life stance, he implicitly rubberstamped their efforts to restrict reproductive autonomy further. In stark contrast, Liz Cheney asserted that extreme pro-life stances did not protect but put “life... at stake” (The View) and, to that end, Elizabeth Beck et al. argue that “the laws and judicial decisions against bodily autonomy constitute a form of state-sanctioned violence, determining who lives and who dies” (555).

The Democratic campaign, therefore, sought to assure voters that Harris would “never allow a national abortion ban” (“A New Way Forward”), while trying to contextualize the divisive issue as *one* integral component of many vital gynecological, preventative, sexual, gender-affirming, obstetric, reproductive, and maternal healthcare services. Concurring, the Center for Reproductive Rights asserts that “Black, Indigenous and people of color, . . . those living in rural communities and with lower incomes, are

disproportionately harmed when health care is inaccessible”⁵ and point out that while “most US maternal deaths are preventable,” maternal mortality “is more than three times the rate of most other high-income countries” (“United States”). More attuned to the current reproductive healthcare landscape, Democrats campaigning for Harris discussed states’ restrictions as an issue that widened preexisting care gaps, exacerbated racial, gendered, and financial health inequities due to a lack of access and resources, and ultimately put lives at risk.

Instead of simply presenting statistics, the campaign invited Americans to share their stories (in TV ads and on stage), highlighting the harm caused by abortion bans. Among them were Amanda and Josh Zurawski, Kaitlyn Joshua, and Hadley Duvall, who spoke at the DNC. The Zurawskis, a white Texan couple, revealed their fetus had no chance of survival, but Amanda only received care after developing sepsis, which impacted her fertility. Joshua, a Black woman from Louisiana, miscarried and was similarly denied care until she became critically ill. Duvall, a white woman from Kentucky, remarked that Trump calls abortion bans a “beautiful thing” but talking about her stepfather’s abuse and the abortion she needed at the age of twelve, she asserts that there is no beauty in “a child having to carry her parent’s child” (NBCNews). All stories emphasize abortion care as essential. However, the choice of stories signals that the Democratic Party’s approach emphasizes the necessity of abortion care after complications or extreme circumstances rather than someone’s legitimate decision to “just” have an abortion. Nevertheless, as Jennifer Aaker states that personal “stories are remembered up to twenty-two times more than facts alone,” enlisting storytellers effectively demonstrated the need for comprehensive reproductive healthcare to voters.

Given that gendered voting patterns from 1992 to 2024,⁶ as analyzed

⁵ The Center specifies that “Black women in the US are almost three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than white women” (“United States”), while Shameka Poetry Thomas argues that “[s]tructural racism perpetuates the decentering of Black health experiences” (19) to their detriment.

⁶ The CAWP also illustrates that race, ethnicity, religion, age, and education factor into voting decisions. The analysis shows, for example, that nine out of ten Black women voted for Harris/Walz, whereas the majority of white women have predominately cast their votes

by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), show that women favor Democrats and men lean Republican,⁷ persuading more men to support Harris and Tim Walz was crucial. Reproductive healthcare issues were used to appeal to male voters by portraying Harris as a defender of reproductive freedom, which would benefit women *and* entire families. Josh Zurawski's appearance beside Amanda exemplified the strategy of involving men. Visibly distraught, Josh recounted how he could not protect his wife and had to watch helplessly until she received basic abortion care. With this in mind, he concluded that "the fight for reproductive rights isn't just a woman's fight. This is about fighting . . . for our families and, as Kamala Harris says, our future" (NBCNews). Meanwhile, Walz, a former football coach, openly discussed his and his wife's fertility struggles and the importance of ARTs (Han). The overall tenor of the men's stories refocused the messaging from a more direct intersectional reproductive rights and justice framing to a no less valid but moderated argument that catered to men, who might view reproductive matters as a "women's issue."

Making men fear that a second Trump administration could impose a national abortion ban affecting the women in their lives was a potentially powerful tool to mobilize their votes. As Arit John et al. observed, Democrats aimed not "to persuade large swaths of men but to broaden the range of people who see reproductive rights as an issue that touches their own lives," hoping that "small gains . . . could make a difference in states . . . likely [to] be decided by a razor-thin margin." Despite Trump's win, expanding support for reproductive freedoms among Republicans, Independents, and undecided male voters can be considered a hallmark of Kamala Harris's presidential campaign, best illustrated by Michelle Obama's campaign speech, during which she made a direct appeal...

for Republicans since 2004.

⁷ When Hillary Clinton campaigned against Donald Trump in 2016, there was an 11-point gender gap (54% of women and 41% of men voted for Clinton) (CAWP). In 2020, when Joe Biden challenged Trump, the gap amounted to 12 points (57% of women and 45% of men voted for Biden) (CAWP). In 2024, there was ultimately a gender gap of 10 points with 53% of women and 43% of men voting for Harris (CAWP).

... “To the Men Who Love Us”

“So, let me take a minute to help folks, especially the men in our lives, to get a better sense of what could happen, if we keep dismantling parts of our reproductive care system piece by piece as Trump intends to do. I want folks to understand the chilling effect not just on critical abortion care but on the entirety of women’s health” (“M.O.”), begins Obama on stage in Kalamazoo, MI, on October 26, 2024. Her speech aligns with the criteria Richard M. Perloff outlines to create a persuasive narrative, as it “contains a structure that can be easily comprehended and has clearly defined protagonists and antagonists, a coherent storyline, a moral lesson, and rich metaphors . . .” (262). From the outset, Obama’s purpose is clear; she aims to engage men by evoking emotional responses, while also presenting essential facts, and conjuring alarming pictures of women’s lives without reproductive healthcare:

To the men who love us: let me just try to paint a picture of what it will feel like if America, the wealthiest nation on earth, keeps revoking basic care from its women and how it will affect every single woman in your life. Your girlfriend could be the one in legal jeopardy if she needs a pill from out of state or overseas, or if she has to travel across state lines because the local clinic closed up. Your wife or mother could be the ones at higher risk of dying from undiagnosed cervical cancer because they have no access to regular gynecological care. Your daughter could be the one too terrified to call the doctor if she’s bleeding during an unexpected pregnancy. Your niece could be the one miscarrying in her bathtub after the hospital turned her away. And this will not just affect women, it will affect you and your sons. (“M.O.”)

Here, Obama emphasizes that men are inevitably affected by debates about reproductive freedoms and speaks earnestly about “the chilling effects” (“M.O.”) restrictions have. The passage includes visceral descriptions of distressing scenarios designed to evoke fear, urgency, and protective feelings in (male) listeners. The former First Lady uses familiar roles – girlfriend, wife, and daughter – to make men envision the women they may have in

their lives and forge a personal connection to the issues at hand. However, the speech also does not lose sight of the bigger picture, as Obama asserts that “every single woman” (“M.O.”) will suffer the dire consequences of restrictive reproductive policies. In short, the speech persuasively argues that women will face considerable harm if Trump wins reelection.

“To the men who love us” marks a pivotal rhetorical moment in the speech, acting as both an appeal and a challenge. The phrase inextricably connects the private with the political, transforming men from passive observers into active stakeholders in the fight for access to reproductive healthcare. It also indicates men’s moral responsibility, suggesting that love requires action. The implicit challenge to defend women strategically invokes “protective paternalism,” which Leaper Campbell and Brenda C. Gutierrez argue is an aspect of benevolent sexism and constitutes a “set of patronizing attitudes,” precisely “chivalrous expectations that men provide safety for women” (5). To encourage more conservative men to see reproductive healthcare as relevant to them, the implicit suggestion that voting for Harris will protect women was likely intentionally crafted to resonate with those holding more traditional views of masculinity and gender roles.

Obama’s speech carefully insinuates that not voting for Harris and Walz, who have vowed to defend reproductive freedom, amounts to men’s failure to protect women. Switching from the conditional to the indicative mood, Obama explains how reproductive emergencies will affect men, while women face life-threatening situations:

If you and your partner are expecting a child, you will be right by her side at the checkups, terrified if her blood pressure is too high or if there’s an issue with the placenta or if the ultrasound shows that the embryo was implanted in the wrong place and the doctors aren’t sure that they can intervene to keep the woman you love safe. If your wife is shivering and bleeding on the operating room table during a routine delivery gone bad. Her pressure dropping as she loses more and more blood or some unforeseen infection spreads, and her doctors aren’t sure if they can act. You will be the one praying that it’s not too late . . . And then there is the tragic but very real possibility that in

the worst-case scenario, you just might be the one holding flowers at the funeral. (“M.O.”)

This passage makes generous use of so-called fear appeals to describe relatively common complications during pregnancy, which, if restrictive laws do not prohibit it, are treatable and preventable. Melanie B. Tannenbaum et al. note that the effectiveness of fear appeals depends on the degree of “depicted susceptibility and severity” (5) and showing personal risk and the harmful effects of inaction (5). They also argue that fear appeals are most persuasive when paired with “self-efficacy” or “response-efficacy” messages that assure the audience they can take action for positive outcomes (4). Similarly, Robin L. Nabi and Jessica Gall Myrick find that “feelings of hope in response to fear appeals contribute to their persuasive success” (463). Consequently, Obama presented her audience with frightening, high-stakes scenarios but also offered a solution in voting for Harris. Obama uses logical appeals – specifically, cause-and-effect reasoning – to illustrate the impact of restrictive policies. She explains how abortion bans cause clinic closures, the relocation of medical staff, and the emergence of healthcare deserts, which can lead to increased “undiagnosed medical issues such as cervical and uterine cancers” (“M.O.”). Her argument effectively redirects attention from abortion, which Lakoff and Elisabeth Wehling argue “[c]onservatives have made a negative public issue” (77), to the reality of a more extensive public healthcare crisis.

Obama’s speech employs accessible language and typical rhetorical devices to engage, activate, and persuade her audience. With the use of personal pronouns, primarily “we” and “you,” and the occasional “y’all,” she strikes a balance between creating a community among listeners and still speaking to each audience member. Accordingly, Norman Fairclough argues that personal pronouns give speeches “relational value” (185-86), and that “synthetic personalization” is a technique that helps “give the impression of treating each of the people ‘handled’ en masse as an individual” (89). Fairclough also stresses the significance of “visual language” (60) – gestures, facial expressions, movement, and postures – accompanying verbal texts. Obama’s straight posture, minimal body movement, and serious facial expression help convey the gravity of the

issue. Meanwhile, Obama relied on hand gestures, like placing her hand over her heart, to appeal to the audience, show emotion, or express genuine concern. Finally, taking the stage in a camouflage-patterned blazer should also be considered strategic. The associations with combat reify the *fight* for reproductive healthcare, and, for some audience members, it might even recall the US Army's motto –, “This We’ll Defend” – which emphasizes a commitment to defend the country and its foundational principles – freedom among them.

Overall, the speech aligns with Democratic talking points and contributes to Harris's campaign to emphasize the fight against reproductive healthcare restrictions. While Obama sought to bring men into the fold, she did not shy away from challenging the legitimacy of male-dominated political decision-making on reproductive rights and legislative abuses enabled under Trump. She reinforced Harris's message that Democrats “trust women” (6abcPhiladelphia) but, notably, did not speak about reproductive freedoms. Instead, Obama underscored that “the only people who have standing to make these decisions are women with the advice of their doctors” (“M.O.”). However, in closing, she returned to men and reminded them “to take [women's] lives seriously” (“M.O.”). She ended with a final plea to “not put our lives in the hands of politicians, mostly men, who have no clue or do not care what we as women are going through . . . Please, please do not hand our fates over to the likes of Trump, who knows nothing about us, who has shown deep contempt for us because a vote for him is a vote against us. Against our health. Against our work” (“M.O.”). Thus, Obama leaves (male) listeners with the clear message that preserving reproductive rights and protecting women's health is a moral responsibility and in everyone's best interest.

Conclusion: Reproductive Rights “Win,” Democrats Lose?

Although Donald Trump won the 2024 presidential election, the Harris campaign's reframing of reproductive rights into freedoms to cater to a broader electorate warrants close attention. The rhetorical shift allowed Democrats to try to contextualize the politically divisive and gendered

issue within the larger context of foundational freedoms that US-Americans hold dear. Purposefully emphasizing that abortion care is one among many other vital forms of reproductive healthcare further assisted in directing voters' attention toward a larger healthcare crisis. Michelle Obama's speech in Michigan is a crucial example of the campaign's efforts to communicate the importance of reproductive rights and healthcare to male voters. She notably blended her reasoned argument with fear appeals that purposefully leveraged traditional gender roles and, especially, protective paternalism, to appeal to and challenge men to take a stand for women's health in the election.

The success of ballot measures protecting abortion rights during the 2024 presidential election shows that Harris's focus on reproductive *freedoms* may indeed have influenced voters. Isabel Guarnieri and Krystal Leaphart from the Guttmacher Institute report that abortion rights measures were passed in seven of ten states. Arizona, Colorado, Maryland, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, and New York. While New York added protections against discrimination based on ethnicity, age, disability, pregnancy, reproductive health, sexual orientation, and gender identity. However, Florida's measure missed the 60% threshold by 3% and South Dakota and Nebraska's measures also failed. Ballot measures are vital for protecting access to reproductive healthcare, and their overall success underscores the potential for mobilization. However, the 2024 election showed a disconnect between supporting reproductive rights and voting for Harris, potentially also exposing a gender bias in voting for the first Black and South Asian woman running for president.

So far, Trump's second presidency has tested democratic institutions as the White House has flooded the zone (Broadwater) with executive orders affecting gender diversity, identity, trans rights, and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Programs (NPR Staff). Additionally, there are concerns about another substantial crackdown on reproductive rights and the advancement of an aggressively pronatalist agenda, not least because Robert F. Kennedy Jr, Trump's Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), has recently announced a review of mifepristone, a drug used in medication abortions (Rinkunas). The White House has also ominously suspended several government websites, including www.

reproductiverights.gov, and removed contraceptive information from the CDC website (Cooper), depriving Americans of an official sources of information, which echoes the concerns about the further dismantling of reproductive freedoms raised by Democrats, the Harris campaign, and Michelle Obama in the run-up to the election.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

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Character and Choice

Abortion in American Teen Films

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ABSTRACT

This essay summarizes the history of abortion in teen movies in the United States, emphasizing how, for over a century, teen abortion has often been censored, omitted, or depicted inaccurately. Even after the legalization of abortion via *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, a film like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), which shows abortion as a simple and painless procedure, remained rare. However, soon before the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* via the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision in 2022, several American teen movies such as *Grandma* (2015); *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020); *Unpregnant* (2020); and *Plan B* (2021) shifted the teen abortion narrative by depicting abortion itself as a valid and reasonable choice by the girl protagonist even as their access to abortion and emergency contraception becomes an ordeal necessitating a road trip. These sympathetic portrayals of girls who have a right to their abortion rewrite many of the stereotypes that had come to define abortion narratives for teens, instead showing abortion to be the safe and effective procedure that it is. In addition, these films highlight the difficulties for girls who need funds and parental consent for their abortions, predicting the actual circumstances that many adults as well as teens now find themselves in upon *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision.

At the same time, it hardly seems coincident that each film portraying an abortion depicts the girl in an abusive or harmful relationship. In doing so, the stories emphasize the girls' need for an abortion. However, such a pattern begs the question – is such a relationship deemed necessary within the story to give them the “right” to an abortion? In this essay,

I look to the history of abortion in teen films and examine the recent phenomenon of the abortion road trip teen film. Ultimately, I argue that aspects of these plots seem aimed toward appealing to a pro-choice fanbase while seeking to avoid ostracizing a more conservative audience who requires more justification for abortion.

KEYWORDS

Abortion, Film, Teenagers, Youth, Pro-choice, Girls, Pregnancy, Contraception, Censorship

In Amy Heckerling's 1982 teen film *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), the fifteen-year-old protagonist Stacy becomes pregnant after having sexual intercourse with her classmate Mike Damone. Without hesitation, she decides to have an abortion, asks him to pay half, and when he fails to do so, she goes to the clinic alone, has the abortion, and walks out. Stacy does not deliberate her decision. She does not experience obstacles in access to the procedure. She does not struggle to pay for it. The procedure does not cause medical complications. The abortion does not haunt her afterward. Watching this scene over forty years later, it seems almost shocking in its simplicity – her access to an abortion is unobstructed and her experience ordinary. *Fast Times*, it seems, was released during an all-too-brief moment in history, after abortion had become legalized nationally but before the onset of significant mainstream pushback. By 2019, writer Cameron Crowe believed that such an abortion plot would never stand up in the contemporary era because, as he put it, “It would be outrageously controversial, and it would be protested, and there would be a mess over it” (qtd. in Parker). After *Fast Times*, abortion practically disappeared from teen films for over thirty years.

In the last few years, however, abortion has made a surprising comeback in the genre – although, now, it is depicted as anything but easy. Films such as *Grandma* (2015), *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020), and *Unpregnant* (2020) all portray girls who must embark on a road trip to obtain an abortion. These sympathetic portrayals of girls who have a right to their abortion rewrite many of the stereotypes that had come to define abortion narratives. Furthermore, these films highlight the difficulties for girls who want abortions, predicting the actual circumstances that many adults

now even find themselves in upon the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022. At the same time, it hardly seems coincidental that each of them portrays the girl in an abusive or unfavorable relationship. In doing so, the stories reinforce the girls' need for an abortion. Such a pattern begs the question – is such a relationship deemed necessary within the story to give them the “right” to an abortion? In this essay, I look to the history of abortion in teen films and examine the recent phenomenon of the abortion road trip teen film. Ultimately, I argue that aspects of these plots seem aimed toward appealing to a pro-choice fanbase while seeking to avoid ostracizing a more conservative audience who requires more justification for abortion.

A Brief History of Abortion in US Teen Films

Abortion has always been a taboo topic for films in the US, and perhaps consequently it has been rare in films about youth. Abortion was banned nationwide in the US in 1910, so it is unsurprising that the first cinematic portrayals depict it as a transgressive and illegal act (“Abortion is Central”). Often cited as the first example, Lois Weber's 1916 film *Where Are My Children?* presents it as a “selfish” decision by married women who would rather party than have children. In the film, when the women encourage one of the maid's daughters to have an abortion, it leads to the girl's death. While *Where Are My Children?* led the way in establishing a long-standing narrative pattern of abortion resulting in death, it nonetheless is often cited as a groundbreaking representation of the “desire of women to remain voluntarily childfree,” which in itself was unconventional at the time (Zigneli 39).

During the 1930s-1960s, Hollywood opted to self-censor topics like teen sexuality, pregnancy, and abortion via a Production Code managed by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). In the early part of this era, abortion, if depicted at all, only served as a warning of the dire consequences for sexually active girls. An apt example is Dorothy Davenport's *The Road to Ruin* (1934), a remake of a 1929 film, in which protagonist Ann becomes sexually active leading to a “road to ruin” which includes an illegal abortion that brings about her death. Although

it did not specifically mention abortion until its 1951 iteration, the Code's moral position clearly outlined that the "sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld." Consequently, abortion was generally avoided, and any depictions tended to be dramatically punished through the plot – usually resulting in death. Films that did not adhere to such rules were censored. For example, the 1948 film *Bob and Sally*, also known as *Tell Our Parents*, depicts Sally who becomes pregnant by her boyfriend, Bob, leading them to having an illegal abortion that nearly kills Sally and leaves her infertile. At the conclusion of the film, the couple gets married – a more upbeat ending for a teen abortion plot at the time. However, *Bob and Sally* was both condemned by the Legion of Decency and could not obtain approval from the MPPDA and hence, was not released in theaters.

As the power of the Code began to weaken in the 1950s, some of the more dramatic death-by-abortion plots also waned. However, they became replaced by plots with abortion presented as the wrong choice for a teen "in trouble" (Crowther). One example was *Blue Denim* (1959), based on a play in which high school student Janet becomes pregnant after having intercourse with her boyfriend Arthur. While in the play, Janet has an abortion and survives, the film instead depicts Janet as "rescued" from her abortion. She keeps the pregnancy and gets married instead. In films at the time, parenthood was clearly positioned as a preferable resolution to abortion – even for youth. By the 1960s, numerous legal, medical, and social changes marked a significant shift. In 1960, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved oral contraceptive pills which put women who could afford it in charge of their own fertility. Teen pregnancy rates, which peaked in 1957, began to decline ("Abortion Rates among Teens"). Also in the late 1960s, 11 states legalized abortion, and ultimately, in 1973, the US Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion throughout the country for the first time ("Abortion is Central"). Not surprisingly, these events corresponded with expanded depictions of abortion. As Gretchen Sisson and Katrina Kimport discovered in their comprehensive study of abortion representations from 1916 to 2013, storylines of abortion have increased every decade since *Roe v. Wade* by at least 31 percent. Of course, this fact does not mean that abortion was depicted compassionately or

accurately. Sisson and Kimport discovered an “inaccurately exaggerated” risk of death from abortion with nine percent of storylines leading to death despite an actual current risk of death from abortion as “statistically zero” (“Telling Stories” 417).

In teen films, abortion remained a relatively rare topic even in the late twentieth century. Some films placed it in a past era when abortion was illegal and thus more dangerous – such as *To Find a Man* (1972), *Our Time* (1974), *Dirty Dancing* (1987), and *If These Walls Could Talk* (1996). Such films often emphasized hazards of reverting to a time when women and girls did not have access to safe, legal abortion. While many of these films might be understood as pro-choice, in setting the stories back in time, they dramatized both the difficulty in obtaining an abortion and its associated health risks. As such, a film like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, which depicted abortion as a simple, safe, and effective procedure was rare indeed, despite it being more accurate for the time. Anti-abortion fervor mounted in this period. In 1983, a year after *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* was released, the first abortion doctor was targeted and murdered by an anti-abortion protester in the US (Stack). Deadly attacks on clinics and doctors across the country continued throughout the late twentieth century – from 1977 to 2022, there were 11 murders, 42 bombings, 200 arsons, 531 assaults, and thousands of other criminal acts directed at patients, providers, and volunteers, according to the National Abortion Federation (“Violence Against Abortion Providers”). The anti-abortion movement has aimed to depict the procedure as immoral and transgressive despite the reality that one in four women has an abortion (“One in Four Women”) and in many ways, this movement succeeded in keeping abortion undercover.

Despite its legality, abortion was largely omitted from teen films in this era. In 2007, *Juno* reintroduced the choice of abortion in a teen film, but only to disavow it. Here, sixteen-year-old Juno discovers that she’s pregnant after having intercourse with her friend Paulie. Initially, she seeks out an abortion. When she arrives at the clinic, she runs into her classmate Su-Chin who holds a sign that says, “NO BABIES LIKE MURDERING” and repeatedly chants the grammatically incorrect statement, “All babies want to get borned” (00:16:34-01:16:37). As Juno walks past her, Su-Chin yells after her, “Your baby probably has a beating

heart, you know! It can feel pain. And it has fingernails!" (00:17:32-01:17:41). This last comment causes Juno to stop in her tracks and say "Huh," but she nonetheless forges ahead into the clinic. However, as she's filling out the paperwork, Juno can't help noticing the fingernails of all the women in the clinic conveyed through a series of shots of finger tapping, scratching, and nail painting. Abruptly, Juno runs out of the clinic as Su-Chin yells after her, "God appreciates your miracle!" (00:19:20-00:19:23). Ultimately, Juno opts not to have the abortion, deciding to give the baby up for adoption. Her parents do not discourage her from this decision. When Juno comes to them, her mother says quietly, "Have you considered the alternative?" to which Juno replies, "No." Her mother smiles and says, "Well! You're a little Viking" (00:25:22-00:25:31), and then immediately outlines plans for her prenatal care. In this way, *Juno* simply updates the moralistic anti-abortion narrative – teen pregnancy is no longer punishable by death nor resolved by teen parenthood. Instead, Juno chooses a new compromise – pregnancy without parenthood. With such a dearth of abortion representations in teen films,¹ *Juno* becomes a problematic portrayal and, as a result, the film has suffered accusations of being anti-abortion. While more than one-third of all teenage pregnancies end in abortion, ("Abortion Rate Among Teens"), only a small fraction of teen pregnancies result in adoption ("The Myths of Pregnant Teens and Adoptions"). *Juno* not only minimizes the numerous reasons a teen like Juno might opt for abortion, but it also directly contributes to misinformation by providing her a false reason for avoiding abortion. Su-Chin's comment about fingernails remains uncontested – even though it is scientifically inaccurate (Munteanu et al.). Perhaps the "joke" implied here is that Su-Chin is misinformed, along with her poor grammar and spelling. However, due to a widespread lack of sex education in the US, many audience members might take Su-Chin's statement as fact. In this way, *Juno* perpetuates misinformation about abortion – unintentionally employing a tactic that has "fuel[ed] the anti-abortion agenda," for decades and created barriers for abortion (Pagoto et al.). Ironically, *Juno* demonstrates how anti-abortion rhetoric had largely won during this era

¹ For a list of representations of abortion in teen films, see "Abortion Onscreen."

despite the fact that screenwriter Diablo Cody intended nothing of the sort. When interviewed about the film in 2022, she admits, “I can see how it could be perceived as anti-choice. And that horrifies me.” She recalls soon after the film’s release receiving a letter from an administrator at her Catholic high school praising her for “writing a movie that was in line with the school’s values” to which her response was, “What have I done?” (qtd. in Brown). While there were a small handful of teen films in the era that depicted abortion, none approached the enormous popularity of *Juno* which presented it as the “wrong” choice. In the early twenty-first century, the US headed toward removing nationwide legal protections for abortion. Anti-abortion groups made substantial progress in states where the procedure was restricted in dozens of ways – through waiting periods, forced ultrasounds, bans on specific procedures, parental consent laws, and medically unwarranted requirements for abortion providers (Arons). Some states even mandated burials or cremation for fetal tissue, creating undue burdens and costs (“Fetal Burial Requirements”). Despite the majority of Americans being in favor of abortion in some or all cases, the anti-abortion movement won a national victory when *Roe v. Wade* was overturned in 2022 with the Supreme Court case *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*. The turnaround came as a direct result of the first presidency of Donald Trump during which he nominated three conservative justices to the Supreme Court – all of whom voted to support Mississippi’s right to ban abortion. As of 2025, 19 states currently ban or severely restrict abortion. At the same time, abortion remains legal in 30 states, many of which have enshrined the right to abortion in state constitutions or laws (McCann and Schoenfeld Walker). Currently, teen abortions comprise less than 10 percent of abortions in the US, and those by minors – under 18 – are even more rare (Diamant et al.). Nevertheless, the number of abortions in the US is not on the decline since the *Dobbs* decision. In fact, total abortions increased from 2022 to 2023 (Maddow-Zimet et al.). Since 2015, there have been several US films that depict teens opting for a legal abortion. Interestingly, even as momentum gained to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, abortion became more central to the plot and positively portrayed, particularly in several recent teen films.

The Teen Abortion Road Trip

In 2015, *Grandma* brought teen abortion back to the forefront and reasserted it as a reasonable and safe choice. It also launched what might be considered a new subgenre – the teen abortion road trip movie. In the film, eighteen-year-old Sage enlists her grandmother Elle (Lily Tomlin) to fund her procedure, but when she doesn't have the money, the two embark on a road trip across Los Angeles to find it. In 2020, two other films in genre emerged – *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and *Unpregnant*, both of which highlight the magnitude of an all-too-real social, political, and health problem for young women – one that has only become more pervasive since the *Dobbs* decision. In *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, seventeen-year-old Autumn discovers that she's pregnant and seeks out care in her state of Pennsylvania. She mistakenly finds her way to an anti-abortion clinic where the worker shows her an anti-abortion video. Autumn goes home and researches "abortion under 18 Pennsylvania" only to discover that she would need parental consent. She tries to take matters into her own hands by attempting to self-induce abortion through hitting her stomach and taking pills, but it doesn't work. When her cousin Skylar finds Autumn sick at work and learns of the pregnancy, Skylar springs into action – and the two of them get on a bus to New York City so Autumn can have an abortion. However, the trip which they expected to be a one-day journey turns into three because Autumn is sixteen weeks pregnant (not ten, as the anti-abortion clinic had told her), requiring her to go to another clinic for a procedure that takes two days. Due to their lack of sufficient funds, the length of their trip leaves them vulnerable and homeless in New York City for the duration of the weekend. After the abortion is complete, the girls borrow money from a man they meet to pay for the bus fare home. *Unpregnant* takes a more comedic approach to the topic. Veronica discovers that she's pregnant and immediately starts to do research on abortion in her state of Mississippi. However, she quickly learns that the closest clinic to obtain one without parental consent is nearly 1,000 miles away in Albuquerque, New Mexico. When she meets with her boyfriend Kevin to enlist his help, he instead proposes with a ring, causing her to suspect he knew. He admits that he was aware a condom had broken weeks earlier, which infuriates her, and she says, "I literally could have taken the morning

after pill. I could have avoided this whole situation” (00:13:08-00:13:11). Kevin, however, is gleeful about the pregnancy because he wants to keep Veronica with him in their town, rather than accept her leaving for Brown University to attend college the following year. In desperation, Veronica enlists the help of an estranged friend Bailey, who had discovered her pregnancy test at the beginning of the film, and the two embark on the trip together. In each of these films, young women are no longer weighing whether to terminate a pregnancy or worrying about the risks. Instead, the storylines dramatize “the immense barriers women face when seeking safe and legal abortion healthcare” (Zigneli 39). Each depicts a girl’s journey as an ordeal – not because of the weighty deliberations or tragic outcomes, but rather due to the difficulty in accessing care due to parental consent requirements and costs. Another contemporaneous film, Rashaad Ernesto Green’s *Premature* (2019) depicts the obtaining of an abortion as simple, but the consequences as more dire. Here, seventeen-year-old Ayanna has an abortion via medication which is dramatized by Ayanna’s bleeding in the tub. When her boyfriend Isaiah finds her, he realizes what she’s done without telling him, and consequently shuts her out. The abortion stance of this film is more ambiguous – Ayanna’s reactions to her abortion are shown as severe, and she is punished through Isaiah’s rejection of her choice. Nevertheless, the film represents an important portrayal of a young woman’s making a choice for herself, even if the plot is not centered specifically around abortion – and no road trip to obtain one is necessary. In 2021, another film, *Plan B*, brought a new spin to the abortion road trip genre by depicting a teen’s struggle to obtain emergency contraception, or the Plan B pill. The films depict girls of varying race, ethnicity, and class backgrounds. In *Plan B*, Sunny is Indian-American; in *Premature*, Ayanna is Black-American; and in *Unpregnant* and *Grandma*, Veronica and Sage are both white. Of the road trip films, the only one where race/ethnicity is emphasized is *Plan B*. When Sunny and her friend Lupe go to the pharmacy for the Plan B pill, Sunny sees the pharmacist is also Indian and declares “Indian Mafia!” to which Lupe says, “Sunny, there’s no secret network of Indians reporting back to your mom” (00:28:33-00:28:40). In the film, Sunny and Lupe (who is Latinx) experience racist and sexist comments against which the girls fight back. For example, at a rest stop, two men sexually harass them calling them “hot tamales” and asking, “Do you think

these two Mexicans got spicy tacos?” (00:40:53-00:40:56) to which Sunny responds, “I’m South Asian so that metaphor doesn’t track actually” (00:41:00-00:41:05). While all the girls appear to be middle-class, the road trip films depict them as lacking funds for their terminations. They also rely on the construct that the girl’s mother is suspected of not being supportive of the procedure, perhaps because without that feature, there would be little plot. In *Plan B*, Sunny says, “My mom’s going to kill me and then she’s going to kill herself. It’s going to be a murder suicide” (00:27:44-00:27:48) and in *Grandma*, Sage says, “She would have a stroke and then she would start strangling me, and then she would have a stroke” (00:06:09-00:06:15). In both *Unpregnant* and *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, the girls hit a low point in their journey and call their mothers but ultimately decline to ask for their help. In the comedies, the mother is confided in by the end. In both *Plan B* and *Grandma*, the girls must ultimately resort to telling their mothers who become part of helping them obtain the care they need. Sunny’s mother goes with her back to the pharmacy where they were initially refused the Plan B pill, and Sage’s mother pays for the abortion. In *Unpregnant*, Veronica only informs her mother after she returns home from the trip – and although her mother does not agree with her decision, the scene unfolds in a touching way to show how her mother loves and supports her daughter despite their differing views. In the only drama of these films, *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* does not depict any resolution for the protagonist Autumn and her mother, emphasizing the fact that Autumn did not have parental support for her abortion. Nevertheless, in each of these films, the heroine succeeds in her goal of obtaining an abortion or contraception as a key part of the happy ending of the film. Even before the *Dobbs* decision when abortion was legal nationally, it was not always affordable or easily accessible. Due to a discrepancy between states restricting abortion and others legalizing it, many needed to travel great distances to access care. This reality was worse for teens who often faced parental consent laws in their own states. Unsurprisingly, this fact has worsened since the *Dobbs* decision. For instance, the Guttmacher Institute found that patients traveling to other states to obtain an abortion doubled between 2020 and 2023 (Forouzan). In many ways, these films seem prescient because it is now not only teens,

but also adults who often must travel hundreds of miles to obtain a clinical abortion in the US (Simmons-Duffin and Fung). While most abortions currently happen via medication, only *Premature* depicts that option. That said, medication abortion has also increased significantly in the last several years since these films released. The Guttmacher Institute found that medication abortions accounted for 63% of all US abortions in 2023, a 53% increase from 2020. The “abortion pill” has rarely been depicted in teen films, but when it has, it tends to be a smaller part of the plot. *Plan B*, for instance, rather than highlighting medication abortion, chronicles Sunny’s adventure in obtaining emergency contraception.

Significantly, this spate of abortion road trip films generally depicts the procedure itself as painless and effective – and this fact in itself is groundbreaking. While *Grandma* does not explicitly depict the procedure, it shows Sage walking out fine, and when Sage’s grandmother, recalling her own past abortion, expresses her concerns, the doctor assures her, “This isn’t the Dark Ages – not here at least” (01:01:23-01:01:28). *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* shows a brief scene of the procedure itself – Autumn lying on the operating table as she’s asked to recite her name, date of birth, and the procedure she’s having. She’s also asked if she has any questions, and when she answers no, they ask if she’s ready to go to sleep to which she nods. When she wakes up, it’s over – and she’s sitting in a softly lit recovery room in a comfy chair alongside other women. After, she walks out to find her cousin Skylar who asks, “You ok?” to which she responds, “Yeah” (01:30:51-01:30:52). At lunch afterward, Skylar asks several questions including, “Did it hurt?” to which Autumn responds, “Just uncomfortable.” Skylar then asks, “How do you feel now?” and Autumn answers, “Tired” (01:32:07-01:32:23). While characters like Autumn and Sage struggle to pay for their abortions, the relative ease with which these girls walk out of their abortions without adverse medical complications harkens back to the ease with which Stacey walks out of her abortion in *Fast Times*. Ultimately, these scenes help correct longstanding inaccuracies in the depiction of abortion – showing abortion to be the safe procedure that it is.

Perhaps ironically, the most accurate and thorough depiction occurs in the comedic *Unpregnant*. In a scene where a clinician narrates to Veronica

the steps of the procedure, we see Veronica changing into her gown; receiving a vaginal ultrasound which is “not fun but doesn’t hurt”; getting hooked up to an IV; waiting in a room with other women; getting put to sleep (her choice) in the surgical suite so they can remove the fetus which takes “under ten minutes”; and finally waking up in recovery “safe and sound” (01:31:00-01:31:56). The entire set of shots is filmed with warm lighting and soft focus that highlight the comfort of the procedure. At the end of the scene, Veronica walks out into the warm sunlight to find Bailey waiting who jokes, “They wouldn’t let me see you, so I just assumed you were dead.” Veronica smiles and replies, “Nope I’m fine.” Bailey asks, “How are you feeling?” to which Veronica pauses and then replies, “Relieved... and hungry” (01:32:32-01:32:48). Here, the film pokes fun at the absurdity of dire results and instead shows the ease of abortion.

After decades of misinformation, it is refreshing that each of these films depict the procedure more accurately – particularly in that it does not cause medical complications or significant regret for the girl. Numerous scholars have noted a link between accurate media representations of abortion and support for those seeking abortion. For example, in their study “Exposure to Lived Representations of Abortion in Popular Television Program Plottines on Abortion-Related Knowledge, Attitudes, and Support: An Exploratory Study,” the authors found that while “medically accurate and realistic abortion depictions” of abortion did not impact “attitudes” about abortion (e.g. whether someone is pro-choice or not), they did find a correlation between accurate depictions and “higher abortion knowledge and higher willingness to support someone seeking an abortion” (Herold et al. 289). Other studies have shown how fictional representations of abortion can also help “normalize and destigmatize” abortion (Andreescu 135) – and these films do so by creating sympathetic characters who face an ordeal in obtaining the care they need.

The Right to an Abortion

Grandma, *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, and *Unpregnant* underscore that the girl protagonists have a right to their abortions – and as such, they

can be interpreted as pro-choice. While films from the 1940s and 1950s depicted abortion as a mistake, in these early twenty-first century films it is validated through well-articulated reasons. One is simply that the girls consider themselves too young to be mothers – and they believe, rightly so, according to the data (Fergusson et al.), that having a child as a teen would negatively impact their lives and careers. In *Unpregnant*, for example, Veronica has been accepted by Brown University, and she fears that having a child would derail her plans. While each film portrays an explicit moment where the girl is asked if she has carefully considered her decision, at no time is her right to make this choice independently called into question. Each of the protagonists are relatable and likeable – and one of the key ways their characters are rendered “good” is in direct contrast to the boy responsible for the pregnancy. In their essay “A Content Analysis of Abortion Storylines on US Streaming Services: Lessons from Narrative Persuasion,” John J. Brooks et al. suggest that “a viewer’s evaluation of a character is likely to depend on whether they judge the character’s qualities and actions to be generally ‘good’ or ‘bad’” (3). In a film about abortion, the character’s reasons – such as “personal considerations (e.g., a character’s goals or preferences), external constraints (e.g., financial circumstances, other responsibilities), or some combination of both” – for the procedure become important in this evaluation since, as they point out, “these reasons may shape how the audience processes the story. Similarly, the absence of reasons might play an inhibitory role by limiting the audience’s ability to understand the character’s perspective” (6). Perhaps in an effort to solidify the protagonist as “good” and her decision as “justified,” each film highlights how “bad” their boyfriends are – all are depicted as absent or abusive. In *Grandma*, Sage’s “loser” boyfriend fails to come through with funds or moral support. In *Unpregnant*, Veronica’s “stalker” boyfriend tricks her into getting pregnant by failing to tell her about a broken condom weeks earlier. And in *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, it is made clear that Autumn was in an abusive relationship where she was threatened, harmed, and sexually assaulted. In the two comedies – *Grandma* and *Unpregnant*, the boyfriend gets a humorous comeuppance. In *Grandma*, Cam becomes the punchline of a joke in an interaction with Sage’s grandmother. Early in the story, Elle

asks her granddaughter if she became pregnant after “a one-night stand,” to which Sage replies, “No ew. He’s kind of my boyfriend” (00:12:26-00:12:30). Later when the two have trouble finding the funds for the procedure, Elle convinces her granddaughter to seek out Cam since he had promised to pay half. The scene results in a showdown between Elle and Cam where she repeatedly insists on him giving them money until he threatens Elle saying, “Get out of my home you crazy old fucking bitch. Get out of my home or I’ll fuck you up. I’ll fuck you up.” Elle calmly asks, “You’ll fuck me up?” and he responds, “I will fuck you up” (00:15:30-00:15:41). Elle then grabs his hockey stick and hits him in the crotch with it, after which he falls to the floor, pleads for mercy, and admits he has 50 dollars in his sock drawer which she takes. Here, the film emphasizes the boyfriend as the villain to be overcome. Similarly, in *Unpregnant*, Veronica’s boyfriend Kevin is presented as the antagonist, once again eliciting sympathy for Veronica and her choice. When she’s trying to pawn her engagement ring to pay for the procedure, Kevin appears suddenly, causing her friend Bailey to cry out, “Stalker!” He tells Veronica he brought a rose for “every single reason we should spend our lives together.” After he’s eventually cut off by Bailey, Kevin notices the ring on the counter and asks, “What is she doing with my ring?” to which Veronica says, “I’m sorry, Kevin, but I’m taking care of the situation.” He insists, “You can’t make this decision alone” (00:21:16-00:22:32). When she refuses to come around to his view, he begins getting angry saying, “You should be thankful and count your lucky stars that you have a guy that’s so devoted to you that he would literally track you down to this skeezy dump.” Veronica replies, “You tracked me here?” and when he says, “Kind of,” she takes his phone and steps on it. He goes toward the counter and demands the shopkeeper, “Give me my ring back.” The shopkeeper takes out a gun, points it at him, and says, “Consider your next move very carefully” (00:22:41-00:23:07). At first he balks, but she cocks the gun and he runs out. The woman, who had initially refused to purchase the ring, then offers Veronica \$1,300 for it which is enough to fund their trip. In *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, the abusive boyfriend gets a more muted comeuppance. The film opens with Autumn performing a song at a school talent show with the lyrics, “He makes me do

things I don't want to do. He makes me say things I don't want to say" (00:01:26-00:01:35) and "He's got the.... power of love over me" (00:01:37-00:01:53). Immediately after, Autumn is at a restaurant with her family, but she's not eating. When she looks across the restaurant, she sees a boy and when they make eye contact, he raises his eyebrows and makes a face at her, sticking his tongue in his cheek. At the same time, a family drama ensues where Autumn's mother asks her dad to tell her that she performed well to which her dad sarcastically replies, "Your mother wants me to tell you how great you are." Autumn replies, "Eat shit" (00:04:08-00:04:15), gets up from the table, walks over to the boy, throws a glass of water in his face, and walks out. Later, we learn the extent of her boyfriend's abuse – and how that abuse might have led to Autumn's pregnancy. The title of the film comes from the questionnaire that Autumn receives in the clinic. When Autumn is asked to respond to the statement, "In the past year, your partner has refused to wear a condom," Autumn responds, "Sometimes" (01:00:15-01:00:29), and when asked "Your partner made you have sex when you didn't want to" (01:01:58-01:02:02), Autumn begins to cry. She is then asked, "Has anyone forced you into a sexual act in your lifetime – yes or no" to which Autumn responds, "Um, yeah" (01:02:38-01:02:48). Each of these stories appear to conjure an abusive or lying boyfriend to make the girl protagonists more sympathetic and their actions more justifiable. Certainly, abuse can be a strong motivation for an abortion – and in fact, between 6 to 22 percent of women terminate a pregnancy due to intimate partner violence (IPV), including psychological aggression, rape, and physical violence. However, one of the issues with this narrative pattern of abusive, controlling, and unlikeable men is that it runs the risk of implying that only a girl with such a relationship has valid reasons for choosing abortion and keeping that decision to herself. As Melissa Hair notes, "public attitudes towards abortion in America have been shaped by {a} problematic discourse" specifically: "'Acceptable' reasons that a woman might have an abortion include if the woman's life is at risk, if the fetus has severe abnormalities, or if the pregnancy is a result of rape or incest, therefore rendering 'all other reasons for aborting questionable at best and frivolous at worst'" (381). Not surprisingly, the presence or

lack thereof of the “man responsible” in the narrative “is likely to influence viewers’ ability to mentally represent the relationships between characters and situations” (Brooks et al. 8). Omitting him completely can raise questions for viewers. However, on the flip side, I would argue that relying narratively on depicting the boys responsible as “bad” represents an unnecessary constraint. Perhaps these characterizations do help validate the girls’ decision in the plot, but together they represent a troubling pattern of a negative relationship being narratively essential in order to rationalize a teen’s decision to have an abortion. Due to a dearth of sex education and even greater lack of abortion education, the media become a primary source of information for youth. Writers and filmmakers are often aware of this fact. For instance, in an interview, author and screenwriter Jenni Hendriks explains that the producers of *Unpregnant* purposefully maintained a PG-13 rating so “kids can see it with their parents and talk about it” (Meek). However, films are not ideal venues for education. In a comprehensive study of depictions of abortion in television between 2005-2014, the authors noted that, “fictional women who have abortions are most often teenagers, nulliparous and white” despite the fact that “women who obtain abortions in real life are most often between 20 and 29 years old, have given birth at least once and are non-white” (Sisson and Kimport, “Characters Seeking” 448). This “underrepresentation of populations” they suggest “could contribute to feelings of internalized stigma or isolation among real women who obtain abortions but do not see themselves or their experiences represented in popular culture” (449). Similarly, by featuring a character as a survivor of abuse or stalking, the films might offer an easier path in justifying the girl’s right to an abortion as it reiterates how the decision is hers alone, not her boyfriend’s. However, if perpetuated, such narrative devices could tacitly suggest that other, more common reasons for having an abortion are somehow less acceptable. Of course, since the *Dobbs* decision, we have even greater concerns. Since 2020, there has been no US teen film to depict a legal abortion (“Abortion Onscreen”), and as such, we remain quite a ways off from representing abortion authentically in mainstream media.

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When the Past is Prologue

Involuntary Sterilization in Recent American Women's Historical Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes representations of involuntary sterilization in recent historical fiction by American women writers. Focusing on novels published in the past two decades, it examines how authors engage with the legacies of eugenics and the forced sterilization practices carried out in twentieth-century America. Part of a growing number of popular novels representing involuntary sterilization in the larger context of reproductive health, choice, and justice, *A Mother's Promise* by K.D. Alden (2021), *Only the Beautiful* by Susan Meissner (2023), *Necessary Lies* by Diane Chamberlain (2013), and *Take My Hand* (2022) by Dolen Perkins-Valdez use point of view, characterization, and dramatic structure to engage contemporary readers. They foreground themes of class, disability, race, gender, and sexuality, illustrating how intersecting systems of oppression shaped reproductive policies and their enforcement. These novels effectively employ the tropes of historical fiction, reimagining historical figures such as Carrie Buck and institutions such as the Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded, connecting dramatic action to actual events including American legal cases and Nazi sterilization protocols, and including personal reflections in author's notes as well as educational material such as Reading Group Guides. Through an analysis of narrative technique, the article highlights the complex ways in which these works address bodily autonomy, reproductive justice, and resistance. The analysis situates these novels within the broader context of American social and legal history as well

as feminist and literary theory, considering the ongoing relevance of sterilization as a tool of state control and its cultural resonance in American society. By examining how historical fiction functions to remember and reimagine past injustices, the article also reflects on the power of fiction to counter dominant historical narratives and foster a deeper understanding of reproductive rights and justice. Ultimately, it argues that these novels serve not only as artistic expressions and popular entertainments but also as interventions in public memory.

KEYWORDS

Involuntary Sterilization, Eugenics, Reproductive Justice, Historical Fiction, American Women Writers

To scholars of American literature, Donald Trump's campaign slogan to "Make America Great Again" ominously recalled its use in Octavia Butler's 1998 dystopian novel *Parable of the Talents* by a Christian fundamentalist administration which institutes enslavement, reeducation camps, and systemic rape. The recent loss of reproductive rights in America combined with the Trump decrees to eliminate diversity initiatives and deport immigrants suggest the eugenic ideology of earlier twentieth-century America. Eugenic policy combined unproven theories of heredity with economic anxiety, sexism, and xenophobia to determine reproductive "fitness." Sterilization was one tool employed in the name of national progress to stop "mental defectives" and those with other undesirable traits from reproducing. From the 1880s until the 1970s, the United States forcibly sterilized hundreds of thousands of people (Hansen and King 3). According to reproductive justice scholar Loretta Ross, the US was the first nation "to permit mass sterilization as part of an effort to 'purify the race,'" and "Black people, Catholics, poor white women, and others such as the mentally or physically disabled were singled out for planned population reductions through both government and privately financed means" ("Trust Black Women" 66). Legal challenges and growing public awareness of the effects of Nazi Germany's eugenic policy quieted public support by the 1940s, but coerced sterilization of marginalized women continues.¹ For example, a whistleblower reported involuntary sterilizations at an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention

¹ See Roberts; Ross and Solinger.

facility in 2020 (Ghandakly and Fabi). The movement for reproductive justice, which addresses how structural inequalities deny “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities” (SisterSong), identifies coerced or forced sterilization as well as denial of informed voluntary sterilization as human rights violations.²

While speculative novels such as *Parable of the Talents* warn readers of possible futures, historical fiction, characterized “largely by literary realism, verisimilitude, and historical accuracy,” serves to educate readers of a “usable past” that is prologue to our contemporary moment (Sheffer 1). This article analyzes four recent historical novels about eugenic sterilization by American women writers.³ While literary scholars such as Karen Keely, Barbara Ewa Luczak, Daylanne English, and Lois A. Cuddy and Claire M. Roche have analyzed the intersection of canonical authors and the American eugenic movement, little has been written on popular genres that rely on familiar narrative tropes. But, as Karen Weingarten has argued, “popular fiction is also a place to tell women stories about themselves and a means to circulate dominant ideologies, in particular, those regarding the ties among reproduction, race, and class” (85). *A Mother's Promise* by K.D. Alden (2021), *Only the Beautiful* by Susan Meissner (2023), *Necessary Lies* by Diane Chamberlain (2013), and *Take My Hand* (2022) by Dolen Perkins-Valdez use point of view, characterization, and dramatic structure to offer “readers the pleasure of emotionally experiencing the past in streamlined, simplified form” (Sheffer 1) while creating empathy and educating readers to recognize injustice.

In the 2021 novel *A Mother's Promise*, K.D. Alden reimagines the life of Carrie Buck, the young white woman named in the 1924 Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell*. This case, which historian Nancy Ordovery argues was

² Sterilization can be an individual choice for permanent contraception: for instance, a recent study found that “surgical sterilization has significantly increased since the change in abortion banning laws in Texas” (Mohr-Sasson et al.).

³ Other recent historical works by American women writers related to sterilization and eugenics include *All Waiting is Long* by Barbara J. Taylor (2016), *The Foundling* by Ann Leary (2022), *The Last Carolina Girl* by Meagan Church (2023), *Butcher* by Joyce Carol Oates (2024), and *The Lies They Told* by Ellen Marie Wiseman (2025).

“part of a deliberate and determined effort to situate women as the primary candidates for sterilization” (135), upheld a Virginia law authorizing the involuntary sterilization of the “unfit” to protect the “public welfare” (“*Buck v. Bell*”). Alden tells the story from the point of view of the victim and creates a memorable, sympathetic character to humanize the victim. Narrator Ruth Ann Riley, the Carrie Buck proxy, has a lively, intelligent, and humorous voice. The direct first-person perspective helps readers understand her innocence and bravery as a poor girl in Virginia educated through the sixth grade, pregnant from rape by her foster parent’s nephew, and involuntarily institutionalized in the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-Minded.⁴ Lack of education, poverty, and unwed pregnancy transform a young girl into a “feeble-minded” threat to public safety. Despite her initial naivete, Ruth Ann’s native intelligence allows her to analyze the self-serving institutional rhetoric as at odds with the reality of inmate care. She comes to realize, “I ain’t feeble-minded, no matter how many times they tell me I am. I can read, I can write, I can do my figures. They just brought me here because I got knocked up and couldn’t be around decent folk” (Alden 310-11). Observant, she notes the number of women and girls as young as nine in the hospital with abdominal scars because “Dr. Price took out my appendix” (153) and concludes that they are being sterilized without their knowledge or consent. Indeed, her friend (and eventual love interest) Clarence, the one-handed handyman, informs her that these “YouGenic” operations have been occurring for years (33). When Dr. Price tells Ruth Ann “We’re going to do an operation on you” “for the greater good” (5; 6), she firmly replies, “I don’t want this” (9). Readers, invested in Ruth Ann’s perspective, must consider her reactions and reasoning while sharing her powerlessness.

In its following of historical events and use of secondary characters, *A Mother’s Promise* reveals the collusion of law with medicine in denying

⁴ Many of the historical novels depicting eugenics in America are set at least partially in an institution that adds to the negative portrayal of eugenics as the institutions range from patronizing and oppressive (*All Waiting is Long* by Taylor; *The Last Carolina Girl* by Church) to abusive (*The Foundling* by Leary, *A Mother’s Promise* by Alden) to lethal (*Butcher* by Oates).

reproductive justice.⁵ Dr. Price teams up with an attorney on the Colony board, another ambitious and elitist male authority. Dramatic irony warns readers that Ruth Ann will not be fairly represented. As her case progresses to the Supreme Court, the reader learns about eugenic legislation alongside Ruth Ann. "Very recently," Mr. Stringer, the defense attorney, announced, "the Commonwealth of Virginia passed a law authorizing the compulsory sterilization of the intellectually disabled. This progressive and ultimately compassionate statute is based on sound legal precedent: similar laws were adopted by Indiana in 1907, California in 1909, Nevada in 1911, Kansas in 1913. Several other states are in the process of enacting them" (Alden 269). While Stringer presents this litany as evidence of the reasonable and progressive nature of eugenics, Ruth Ann's response centers the individuals effected by these laws: "What a load of mumbo jumbo. She sure would love to get her some of that commonwealth. She didn't have a penny to her name" (269). While the statement is humorous, the first-person insight into the role of poverty in determining reproductive fitness is astute, reinforcing the injustice at the root of eugenic policy. Her insight that "Maybe they call it medicine, but it sure seemed like violence" reflects the novel's message against involuntary sterilization (105). Ruth Ann's ability to articulate her experience as counter to what "they say" situates the reader in opposition to the dominant discourse.

In addition to her quick intelligence undermining the "feeble-minded" label, Ruth Ann's caring nature and desire to be a mother amplify her sympathetic characterization. She wants to keep her baby, whom she names and holds, but it is taken from her and given for adoption. Involuntary sterilization would deny her the future children she dreams of. Alden portrays Ruth Ann as caring for her family (her mother and younger sister are also institutionalized), loyal to her friends, and capable of romantic love. This traditional gendering, referenced in the novel's title, may make her more sympathetic to mainstream female readers of the target audience, and is typical of protagonists in these novels. By humanizing the victim as

⁵ Historians Hansen and King note that lawmakers and the medical board of the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-Minded crafted the case to enshrine the legality of involuntary sterilization (102-15).

an intelligent, funny, caring, and moral person, the novel builds narrative momentum and leads readers toward empathy when injustice unfolds: like Carrie Buck, Ruth Ann loses her case and is sterilized, bringing back the trauma of rape and the loss of bodily autonomy as patriarchal malice: “She tried not to think about being naked and helpless and once again under a man’s power, even if he was a doctor. Even if the violation to her was for the good of society, and not for the pleasure or sick malice of the man” (324-25). Several scenes in the novel deviate from history to add further dimensions to Ruth Ann as well as drama, such as an escape attempt highlighting her intelligence and courage. An epilogue provides a tidy, happy ending, including marriage and a grandchild, that may satisfy readers who’ve come to care for Ruth Ann.⁶

A Mother’s Promise meets another common trope of historical fiction, the inclusion of educational material such as a Reading Group Guide with the text of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.’s majority opinion in *Buck v. Bell* and a discussion of the author’s interest in the topic. This material frames the issue with personal and larger contemporary relevance, bridging Alden’s fertility struggle, her first hearing about Carrie Buck, and the discovery that “*Buck v. Bell* is still, shockingly, the law of the land. It was cited in 2001 in a Missouri case by the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals, which ruled that ‘involuntary sterilization is not always unconstitutional.’ And from 2006 to 2010, 150 (!) inmates of California prisons were sterilized” (366). Discussion questions and book suggestions follow, demonstrating the intended book club potential of the text. As scholar Irina Rabinovitch notes, the novel “may be viewed as offering important insights into the recent #MeToo movement and to the overturning of the *Roe v. Wade* ruling” (110). Given the cascading harm to reproductive justice in the first months of 2025, the novel’s plucky protagonist fighting insurmountable odds provides a warning of how the most vulnerable are harmed.

⁶ The author discusses her choice to add these imagined events in an interview (Fink, “*A Mother’s Promise: An Interview with K.D. Alden*”). All the novels I’ve discovered make use of dramatic scenes such as escape or physical violence for narrative interest, and all reach narrative closure by providing a happy ending, often marriage and family or a form of legal justice, for the victims.

Set more than a decade later in the eugenics movement, Susan Meissner's 2023 *Only the Beautiful* also relies on first-person narrative but offers a more complex dramatic structure. Many Americans associate eugenic policies with Nazi Germany, but Meissner accurately depicts how American policy preceded and inspired the Nazis. Part I, set in California in 1939, is narrated by Rosanne, a poor seventeen-year-old orphan denied an education and treated as menial household labor by her caretakers, the Calverts.⁷ Impregnated after a single act of intercourse with her kind but unhappy foster father, Rosanne is another innocent but brave young woman. When the pregnancy is discovered, she does not reveal the name of the father to the authorities, leading to charges of her promiscuity. As in *A Mother's Promise*, the trope of the admirable first-person narrator is fulfilled: Rosanne is honest, hardworking, intelligent, and caring. Like Ruth Ann, Rosanne figures out that women are being sterilized after observing them with abdominal stitches from "a procedure," possibly "appendix," that she discovers is a "salpingectomy" after surreptitiously reading medical charts (Meissner 47-48; 78). Rosanne is told she will have to give her baby up for adoption, a baby she immediately names and clearly loves. She is caught trying to escape with the infant a few days after childbirth and wakes up to "just three little incisions," sterilized without consent (161).

While Rosanne is a sympathetic character, the narrative structure creates ambiguity. Although Rosanne narrates Part I, the identity of the father, and Rosanne's attempt to resist his sexual advances, are not revealed until later, creating interest and friction as the reader judges the narrator based on incomplete information. Meissner also complicates the protagonist by imbuing her with an unusual "disability," synesthesia, the ability to "see" colors and shapes when she hears sounds. Misunderstood and feared, it is

⁷ First-person protagonists fall into two categories in these works: young female victims who are some combination of poor, orphaned or otherwise parentless, uneducated, disempowered by gender roles, abused, made pregnant despite sexual innocence, and mildly disabled (e.g. *The Last Carolina Girl* by Church) or a more educated and usually older woman who becomes aware of the injustice and acts to rectify it (e.g. *The Foundling* by Leary); a few use multiple narrators, such as *Butcher* by Oates or several of the novels discussed. Secondary characters are usually flat, creating clear villains such as corrupt doctors (E.g. *The Foundling* by Leary; *All Waiting is Long* by Taylor).

treated as a mental illness by her guardian and medical authorities. This condition, combined with her unexplained and unwed pregnancy, lead to her involuntary commitment to the “Sonoma State Home for the Infirm: Caring for the Mentally Encumbered, the Epileptic, the Physically Disabled, and the Psychopathic Delinquent” (10). Pregnant, unwed, poor, mentally “defective,” and the orphaned child of Eastern European immigrants, she is a burden on society, echoing the economic imperative of eugenic rhetoric that, as the historian Alexandra Minna Stern notes, guided policy in California at this time: “ideas about the dangers and costs of hereditary degeneracy pervaded California government and culture,” she writes, leading to a rise in sterilization from the mid-1930s until 1940 (83-84). Intrigued by her condition, Dr. Townsend experiments on Rosanne with electric shock to “cure” her. To justify the involuntary sterilization, he tells Rosanne, “I have seen what happens to people like you who are burdened and who burden others with an inherited abnormality” (Meissner 164). The novel underlines the bad science underpinning sterilization, revealing late in the novel that Rosanne’s daughter did not inherit synesthesia. The reproductive injustice is clear: government policy and patriarchal use of medicine take Rosanne’s child and her fertility from her.

The novel also offers a more complex depiction of eugenics by weaving together two separate narratives. The rise of Nazi Germany shadows Part I as Rosanne’s guardians receive letters from Mr. Calverts’ sister Helen, who is working as a nanny in Austria. Part II shifts to Helen’s perspective from 1939 through the late 1950s. Thus, readers leave Rosanne in the middle of the novel, after she is released from the institution, changing setting and narrative voice. The themes of reproduction, eugenics, and power provide coherence: Nazis take the child that Helen cares for, a young girl with a limb difference and developmental delays, institutionalizing her without the family’s consent even though her father is himself a Nazi officer; two weeks later she is dead (316). Horrified, Helen responds with action, joining a network to smuggle disabled children into Switzerland. The first smuggling episode provides narrative tension that mirrors the earlier drama of Rosanne’s attempted escape. The reader encounters the Nazi euthanasia and eugenic programs after experiencing Rosanne’s personal tragedy, inviting readers to understand the similarities between a “progressive”

era policy in America and Germany's full-scale genocide. Reinforcing this connection, Helen returns to America in 1947 and discovers that institutions, like the one Rosanne was sent to, sterilized patients. "You're saying this was happening to people here, in America, long before the Nazis started doing it in Germany?" Helen responds, shocked: "You know that's how Hitler began, right? He began by sterilizing people he didn't want having children" (239). *Only the Beautiful* not only parallels the American history of eugenic sterilization with Nazism but also emphasizes that the American practice was the model. A starred review in *Publishers Weekly* states that "Meissner seamlessly unites the two narratives, drawing striking parallels between Germany's forced euthanasia of disabled people and eugenics in the US. This is riveting" ("Only").

While Part I places the reader in the shoes of a victim of sterilization, Part II expands reader awareness such that ignorance is impossible and inaction is complicity. Unable to locate Rosanne (who has married and moved away), Helen adopts Rosanne's daughter and begins a campaign to change sterilization laws. The novel offers a happy ending to Rosanne, her child, and Helen, a necessity for popular fiction. But through Helen the novel argues that action must be taken against reproductive injustice. Helen writes a book "to bring audiences past the point of saying, 'Isn't it awful what happened over there?' to 'Something awful is happening right here'" (Meissner 374-5). By creating a dramatic presentation of past injustice, *Only the Beautiful* acts similarly, encouraging readers to see that what happened "over there" in the past is only the prologue to the "something awful" happening now. In her Acknowledgements and Author's Note, Meissner notes the history of involuntary sterilization in California on which she based her novel and reinforces the principle of necessary action such as the 2003 formal apology from the governor and money set aside by the state legislature in 2021 as reparations for the over twenty thousand victims (385). Popular fiction such as this provides a subversive vehicle to teach readers about the past and its legacy.

In her 2013 novel *Necessary Lies*, which depicts eugenic sterilization in 1960's North Carolina and its aftermath, Diane Chamberlain uses three first-person narrators and two time periods to create a sense of political urgency. Sections narrated by Brenna in 2011 frame the novel's core story;

Brenna's relationship to the characters narrating the other sections, set in 1960, is only revealed at the end, creating an engaging narrative mystery. Fifteen-year-old Ivy provides the voice of the marginalized victim; like Ruth Ann and Rosanne, she is a sympathetic character whose poverty and innocence create the conditions leading to an unexpected pregnancy. Her family is "dysgenic": social workers have institutionalized her schizophrenic mother and diagnosed her older sister Mary Ella, the mother of a biracial toddler, as "low intelligence" and "promiscuous." Combined with Ivy's childhood epilepsy, her situation marks her as "defective," a judgement belied by the character's unschooled intelligence. Ivy works in the tobacco barns, cares for her family, and worries about her future with the boy she loves, the landowner's son and her lifelong friend: "Me and Henry Allen used to say we'd run off after we finished school, which meant three more years for me and two for him, but I couldn't see how I'd ever be able to leave Mary Ella or Nonnie or Baby William. Everything would fall to pieces without me" (Chamberlain 32). Readers share the excitement of Ivy's coming-of-age balanced against the risk she takes each time Henry Allen "pulls out" as a way of practicing birth control (187). The historical setting builds dramatic irony and primes readers to understand Ivy's reproductive life as shaped both by the economic system of Southern sharecropping and by gender expectations. Like the sympathetic protagonists previously discussed, Ivy wants to be a mother: "I can't imagine having no children. That's crazy. That's what life's about" (173). But under eugenic ideology this is not a choice the young protagonists get to make. As legal guardian, their illiterate and diabetic grandmother provides sterilization consent for Mary Ella and Ivy without asking or informing them. "I can't manage another one of them" (73), she tells the visiting nurse, and asks when Ivy "can get the operation" (71) to get "fixed" (73). Thus, Ivy's story conforms to the tropes previously discussed to create a sympathetic protagonist.

Like *Only the Beautiful, Necessary Lies* offers a second first-person narrator who can react to the victim and offer a contrasting female role for readers to identify with, providing additional narrative complexity. A recent college graduate, Jane is a social worker who wants to make a difference and work to that end before starting a family; she keeps her birth control secret from her pediatrician husband. Her knowledge of pregnancy and contraception, and

her relative privilege over Ivy due to her age, education, class, and marital status, demonstrate how eugenic policy preyed on marginalized women. But Jane's precarious position in her marriage adds a feminist message, underlining the relative lack of power all women face within patriarchy, as Jane feels pressure to quit her job, start a family, and satisfy her spouse. Her husband Robert serves as the voice of mainstream medicine which holds itself superior to those who should be sterilized. When Jane tells him about her clients Ivy and Mary Ella, he replies, "It sounds like everybody in that household should be neutered" (Chamberlain 135). Jane questions the validity of the IQ tests that bolster diagnoses of low intelligence and is horrified that these girls are being sterilized without their knowledge or consent. Her reply to Robert's neutering comment – "But she's a human being. All these people I'm working with are human beings. Just like me" – supports their equal humanity, a claim Robert rejects (136). Like Helen Calvert in *Only the Beautiful*, Jane feels a sense of responsibility that leads her to take action. Her supervisor fires her for insubordination after Jane tries to halt the petition to sterilize Ivy. The novel contains a facsimile of a Petition for Sterilization and an Order for Operation of Sterilization (201-11; 235) for Ivy, adding documentary realism to the text. Giving Jane a voice recognizes how "the American eugenics movement offered college-educated white women unique career opportunities" (Hubbs 463) as field workers, social workers, and nurses. Jane's growing consciousness depicts the moral dilemma facing those in a position to implement eugenic policy, including nurses and social workers, adding nuance that other novels, with more simplistic depictions of one-dimensional antagonists, often lack. As a former social worker herself, Chamberlain writes in her Author's Note that "I believe the vast majority of social workers had their clients' best interests at heart" (338); seeing her clients as complex individuals forces Jane to confront her complicity in surveilling and controlling their reproductive lives.

Structurally, *Necessary Lies* alternates chapters between the perspectives of Ivy and Jane, showing readers the miscommunication between and struggles of both characters. It also builds the rising action through a series of fast-paced, dramatic chapters, such as a medical emergency for Baby William, Mary Ella's suicide, and a burning barn. Discovering a plan to

sterilize Ivy and take her newborn immediately after giving birth, Jane takes Ivy to her own house, where Ivy delivers her baby only to be arrested days later. This sequence, juxtaposing the natural drama of a homebirth scene against the violent violation of their created female community, manipulates contrasting emotional tones that, combined with the shifts in perspective to share each character's fear and anger, heightens the intensity of this narrative climax. Like previously discussed novels, dramatic events create the excitement of a popular "beach read" while confronting readers with a sense of injustice. Indeed, *Kirkus Review* refers to the novel as "Socially conscious melodrama at its best" ("*Necessary Lies*"). The third first-person narrator, speaking from 2011, resolves this melodrama by revealing what happened to Jane and Ivy in a satisfying conclusion. As characters prepare to attend a public hearing about the North Carolina eugenics program, the novel ends with a surprising reunion and the larger possibility of public recognition and reparation for victims.

In her Author's Note, Chamberlain recognizes that eugenic policy disproportionately affected African American women in North Carolina until 1974. However, like the previous novels discussed, *Necessary Lies* centers on white characters. While this choice may engage a white female audience that feels protected from reproductive injustice, it obscures the racist underpinnings of eugenics and the disproportionate effects on African American, Native American, and Chicana women who were and continue to be targets of sterilization as a form of reproductive injustice. For instance, according to historian Jennifer Nelson, "In 1970, black women were sterilized at over twice the rate of white women," and a "1973 survey reported that 43 percent of women sterilized in federally financed family planning programs were black" (67). *Necessary Lies* does introduce a neighboring African American family as important secondary characters. Chamberlain creates in Lita, an unmarried Black mother of five, an admirable foil to Ivy's homelife: her house is neat, her children clean and well-behaved. While Ivy and Mary Ella are involuntarily sterilized, Lita seeks sterilization as a form of permanent contraception. This choice exemplifies the right NOT to have children included in reproductive justice. But Lita's access to this choice is not guaranteed. In a conversation with her supervisor, Jane discovers the conditions that qualify

a woman for sterilization included an IQ below 70, promiscuity with an inability to manage the children already born, mental illness, and epilepsy (Chamberlain 50). Lita does not meet these qualifications but is eligible due to the “one hundred and twenty rule” – multiply the woman’s age “by the number of children she has and if the result is more than one hundred twenty, she can be sterilized” (51). As Rickie Solinger notes, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists used this guide, which also stipulated that “two doctors and a psychiatrist” must approve, “until 1970, when Second Wave feminists successfully pressed for women’s right to decide these matters for themselves” (9). Eugenic policy forced sterilization on women viewed as undesirable while denying it to those eugenically “fit” whose “duty” was to reproduce. Through Lita, Chamberlain extends insight into eugenic policy and the importance of personal choice and informed consent for sterilization.

One novel that centers the experience of women of color is *Take My Hand* (2022), by Black American author Dolen Perkins-Valdez. The novel highlights the effects of eugenic ideology on the African American community as well as the community’s complicity in eugenic policy. Told from the point of view of Civil Townsend, a nurse at the Montgomery Family Planning Clinic in Alabama in 1973, the novel is similar to *Necessary Lies*, with its first-person narrator a young professional woman and with sections set in the contemporary moment (2016) bookending the eugenic history. By telling the story in Civil’s voice, the novel illuminates the ethical dilemma and possible resistance of the professional women administering eugenic policy. But *Take My Hand* also offers a nuanced view of race, including the divisions within Black Montgomery society: Civil reflects, “when we talked about the community, it was something real, something defined by shared experience. Course that doesn’t mean we didn’t have our fissures. A big one was between the educated and uneducated, the poor and the not-so-poor” (Perkins-Valdez 20). Civil refers to herself as a “bona fide member of the Talented Tenth” and is aware that her education and economic status afford her some reproductive control; she had an illegal abortion in 1972, and although *Roe v. Wade* has now legalized abortion, Civil knows that “Alabama had not yet caught up with the law. And even if safe hospital abortions had been made available, the procedure was expensive and out of

reach for most poor folks. The best solution had always been a prophylactic one” (Perkins-Valdez 120; 14). She views “the miracle of birth control” as a better means for her patients to “plan their pregnancies” (13). In the novel, many family planning nurses look down upon their patients, seeing them as less intelligent and capable, and therefore they prefer to administer a Depo shot every three months until they can obtain consent for sterilization. College educated and the daughter of a physician in the post-Civil Rights South, Civil is aware of the history of medical experimentation on Black bodies; she was a student at Tuskegee University a year after the Tuskegee syphilis experiments were uncovered. The shadow of Dr. J. Marion Sims, “father of gynecology” who developed techniques by repeatedly operating on the unanesthetized bodies of enslaved women, also haunts the text (Perkins-Valdez 74; Owens). Civil’s work at the family planning clinic is thus contextualized overtly in the distrust minority populations have for established medicine (Washington).

Readers come to know the young victims of eugenic sterilization through Civil, their nurse. She grows deeply connected to her first patients, eleven- and thirteen-year-old sisters India and Erica Williams, the daughters of a Black tenant farmer, and questions why they are being given shots of Depo Provera for birth control when they are not sexually active (nor even yet menstruating) and the drug is not FDA approved and causes cancer in lab animals (Perkins-Valdez 64-65). Like social worker Jane in *Necessary Lies*, Civil exceeds the boundaries of her professional duty to help the Williams family and questions the governing eugenic policy that seeks to control the girls’ fertility. While Civil initially believes in the prevailing ideology that “we had a job to do. Ease the burdens of poverty” (6) and agrees with her supervisor that “Our mission is to help poor people who cannot help themselves” (11), she becomes aware of herself as “the government lady,” the mechanism of surveillance and coercion that invades the Williams’ family privacy in return for “a sliver of a slice of American pie” they receive on public assistance (51). The secondary characters are humanized, exceeding the generic categorization of “the poor” as Civil builds relationships with them. She grows uneasy with the protocols of her profession and its rhetoric of protection when she discovers that the previous nurse did not explain the shots to the girls, nor fully to the illiterate father and grandmother,

so they have no real understanding of the serious side effects, including near constant bleeding (27). This treatment becomes contextualized in a growing awareness that staff are pressuring clinic patients into tubal ligation, a form of permanent sterilization also known as a “*Mississippi Appendectomy*” (79). Perkins-Valdez accurately depicts the way medical professionals and policymakers discussed sterilization as a cost-effective contraceptive method for groups devalued by eugenic ideology. Historian Rickie Solinger notes that “After *Roe v. Wade*, the federal government paid for the sterilizations (100,000 to 150,000 a year) of poor women but not for their abortions. Welfare officials told many poor women that only if they were sterilized could they keep their welfare benefits, and doctor-led sterilization campaigns emerged in major cities” (12).

Take My Hand follows the expected dramatic pattern with a series of quickly-escalating events leading to tragedy in the novel's first half: Civil discovers that despite her role as a nurse she has little power: the assumption that Black girls are sexually active (Perkins Valdez 115-16) combined with India's muteness leads the white nursing supervisor to convince their illiterate and ill grandmother to consent to their sterilization. Perkins-Valdez intensifies the drama with the unexpected: a car accident following her discovery of the sterilization plan prevents Civil from intervening, and an injured and distraught Civil discovers the girls in the hospital frightened and in pain. “Blood-soaked bandages were wrapped around her abdomen” as Erica tearfully says, “they done something to us, Miss Civil. I thought we was coming for shots. But they done something to us. They say we can't have no babies” (136). The scene maximizes pathos: Civil is too late to prevent injustice, and two innocent girls have been denied a chance for future motherhood. At this point *Take My Hand* turns from the dramatic case of injustice against individuals to fighting against reproductive injustice as federal policy. Like *A Mother's Promise*, the novel is based on a real legal case and educates readers on American history; like *Only the Beautiful*, the narrator becomes an advocate for social change after witnessing the effects of eugenic sterilization on young girls. Fired for insubordination, Civil convinces the other nurses to help gather evidence for a legal case against the Montgomery clinic, which becomes

a federal class action suit against the secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare and the Office of Economic Opportunity. In her Author's Note, Perkins-Valdez notes that the "real-life case of *Relf v. Weinberger*," a 1973 case of two young sisters sterilized in Montgomery without their consent by a federally funded agency, inspired her novel (353). Through the courtroom scenes, Perkins-Valdez educates readers about the legacy of racism and eugenic thinking; as one expert testifies, "over the past few years, nearly one hundred fifty thousand low-income women from all over the nation have been sterilized under federally funded programs" (294). A spectator at the trial, Civil's outrage shapes the reader's reaction. Her sense of complicity, that "As long as these injustices continued, all of us were culpable" (307), is a broader claim implicating the reader. But the novel does not close with the completion of the trial, recognizing the much greater work needed to remedy the legacy of eugenics. The novel's structure interweaves sections of Civil in 2016 as she returns to Montgomery to find closure with Erika, India, and others from that period of her life now that she is an established obstetrician-gynecologist "working on [a study] about reducing the high rate of maternal morbidity among black women" (197). As an individual, she has shaped her life to fight for reproductive justice but suffers a lingering sense of guilt. With its awareness of the intersections of race, class, and gender, the novel offers a nuanced understanding of the long history of reproductive injustice in the United States.

In a range of settings across the United States, this sampling of historical fiction demonstrates how popular tropes can educate readers about the past and alert them to current challenges to reproductive justice. The use of dramatic pacing, narrative perspective, and characterization create engaging stories of the past in order to engage contemporary audiences. In the extra-textual apparatus and interviews, these American women writers indicate that they are inspired to write on eugenic sterilization because it is still relevant to our contemporary situation – both public opinion and government policy regarding who has the right to be a mother are shaped by lingering prejudice. Perkins-Valdez, for example, pointedly relates the history depicted in her novel to our contemporary moment: "The moral and ethical questions

I explore in *Take My Hand* remain salient today,” she states, citing several recent cases such as that of over 100 imprisoned women in California who were sterilized (353). Can this fiction do more than raise awareness and inspire lively book club discussions? Several of these authors fervently hope so, and their first-person protagonists are model forms of activism. “My hope,” continues Perkins-Valdez, “is that this novel will provoke discussions about culpability in a society that still deems poor, Black, and disabled as categories unfit for motherhood. In a world inundated by information about these tragedies and more, I still passionately believe in the power of the novel (and its readers!) to raise the alarm, influence hearts, and impact lives” (355). These novels contain a message that is especially important to the medical and legal professionals who design and carry out reproductive policy. In a Mayo Clinic podcast, Perkins-Valdez discusses the complexity of agency and continued silencing of women in a way that invites listeners in rather than casting blame: “I wanted us all to think about how we’ve walked that fine line between help and harm. I hope that we think about that in this discussion over reproductive justice too. We want women to have reproductive control over their bodies. But that also means that we have to listen and we have to respect the very women that we’re trying to help” (Mayo Foundation). The two podcast hosts, both physicians, model how fiction can help medical professionals explore ethical issues and shape provider practice. Amid rising nationalist sentiment and patriarchal authoritarianism that dehumanizes women, immigrants, minorities, and the differently abled, these novels use the tropes of historical fiction pitched to popular audiences to create counternarratives for reproductive justice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to the anonymous readers for their astute and encouraging feedback, and to the special issue editors for their patience.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

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A “silent count of limbs and landmarks”

Abortion in Jodi Picoult’s *A Spark of Light* (2018)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of abortion and its attendant moral conflicts in Jodi Picoult’s *A Spark of Light* (2018). Positioned within a growing corpus of abortion narratives, the novel responds to current debates and restrictive abortion legislation in the United States. Set during a hostage crisis in Mississippi’s last abortion-providing clinic, *A Spark of Light* employs shifting perspectives and a reverse-chronological structure to explore the diverse experiences, emotions, and ideological positions of patients, clinic staff, abortion opponents, and the hostage-taker. Published in 2018, before the US Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to abortion, the novel depicts the increasing polarization of public discourse about abortion, as well as the diverging views and assumptions regarding issues of reproduction. Picoult’s in-depth engagement with a controversial and hotly debated topic stands out not only in *A Spark of Light* but is a hallmark of most of her novels. However, although she is one of America’s best-selling authors, her work has received little scholarly scrutiny thus far. Critics have frequently dismissed her novels as non-serious literature and commercial fiction that prioritizes entertainment and profit over literary merit. Challenging such dismissals, the article shows that *A Spark of Light* deserves critical attention for its nuanced exploration of abortion experiences and contribution to contemporary abortion debates. Through a close reading that is informed by feminist scholarship on reproductive politics, the article illustrates how Picoult’s narrative portrays abortion as a complex decision influenced by intersecting social, economic, emotional, and medical factors, while critiquing the impact of restrictive

laws and limited access to reproductive health care services. The article further contends that, by incorporating authoritative medical insights and providing a detailed portrayal of a procedural abortion, the novel counters misinformation and thereby challenges the stigmatization surrounding abortion. Diversifying mainstream representations, *A Spark of Light* exemplifies the potential of popular fiction to engage in pressing cultural and political debates and foster nuanced discussions about reproductive rights.

KEYWORDS

Abortion, Fetal Representation, Popular Fiction, Jodi Picoult, Reproductive Rights

I will choose what enters me, what becomes / flesh of my flesh. Without choice, no politics, / no ethics lives. I am not your cornfield, / not your uranium mine, not your calf / for fattening, not your cow for milking. / You may not use me as your factory. / Priests and legislators do not hold / shares in my womb or my mind. / This is my body. If I give it to you / I want it back. My life / is a nonnegotiable demand.

Marge Piercy, "Right to Life"

Introduction

In early July 2022, shortly after the US Supreme Court issued its decision in the *Dobbs* case that upheld Mississippi's near-total abortion ban, the Jackson Women's Health Organization permanently closed its doors.¹ Locally known as the "Pink House" because of the color of the building, the clinic was the last remaining abortion care provider in Mississippi. It had previously challenged the state's 2018 Gestational Age Act, which banned most abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy. This legal battle resulted in the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* – the constitutional right to abortion that had been in place for nearly half a century. Even before this decision, the

¹ Currently, Mississippi enforces a trigger ban that prohibits abortion with the only exceptions being to save the life of the pregnant person and in cases of incest and rape.

state had served as a testing ground for restrictive abortion legislation, with some of the most stringent laws in the United States. For years, the Pink House had been a flashpoint for ideological conflict and fierce battles had been fought over its existence. Jodi Picoult’s 2018 novel *A Spark of Light* centers on a fictionalized version of the Pink House, called the Center for Women and Reproductive Health. Based on actual events, such as the violent attacks on clinics and abortion care providers, the novel stages a hostage crisis at the Center, locking together individuals with opposing views on the ethics and implications of terminating a pregnancy. Through shifts in focalization, it reveals the complexity of emotions, experiences, and ideological positions from the perspectives of clinic staff, patients, an antiabortion activist, and the attacker. By exploring the characters’ polarized and seemingly irreconcilable stances, it reflects the current debates about reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. As such, *A Spark of Light* is part of a growing corpus of recent abortion narratives that engage with the socio-political discussions surrounding the issue and critically respond to the steady tightening of restrictive laws and the erosion of reproductive freedoms in the United States.

Jodi Picoult is widely known for tackling socially relevant and highly topical issues in her novels, including teenage suicide, sexual abuse, and school shootings. This has resulted in several of her books being banned by school districts across the United States.² With nearly thirty novels to her name and approximately forty million copies in print (Picoult, “Published Books”), she ranks among America’s best-selling authors. However, despite this success, her work has received limited scholarly attention. This neglect is at least partly due to her work being categorized as popular fiction – a genre typically defined by its broad appeal, entertainment value, accessibility, plot-driven narratives, reliance on stock characters, and a perceived absence of originality, complex narrative style, and literary innovation (Murphy 4-9). Critics frequently dismiss Picoult’s novels as women’s fiction or commercial literature, focusing on entertainment rather than aesthetic value and literary

² According to the PEN America Index of School Book Bans, Picoult’s *Nineteen Minutes* (2007) tops the list of the books most banned in the 2023-2024 school year. In 2024, *A Spark of Light* was removed from classrooms in Orange County, Florida.

merit. From this perspective, the immense popularity of her work in the wider public sphere has been interpreted as a sign of non-serious writing. Moreover, her style has been described as “formulaic and carefully contrived” (Hayes-Brady 147) and “clumsy and sentimental” (France), lacking the perceived distinction and quality associated with “highbrow” literature. Yet, while Picoult’s work, including the novel on which I focus in this article, exhibits traits typical of popular fiction, it also challenges some of these conventions. As my reading of *A Spark of Light* will demonstrate both the novel’s intriguing engagement with a controversial topic and the narrative techniques it employs deserve critical attention.

Drawing on recent feminist scholarship on reproductive politics as well as cultural and literary studies, I scrutinize the representation of abortion in *A Spark of Light*. To contextualize my analysis of the novel, I begin by examining how abortion is treated in both public debate and popular culture, particularly focusing on the use of fetal imagery in antiabortion discourse. The main section of my article offers a close reading of Picoult’s novel that focuses on its portrayal of abortion as a complex decision shaped by intersecting social, economic, emotional, and medical factors. My analysis shows that the novel critiques restrictive access to abortion services and challenges the misconceptions about abortion that are prevalent in mainstream public discussion. I maintain that such a representation can serve an important role in advancing reproductive justice and fostering nuanced discussions. This underscores the capacity of popular fiction to respond to urgent cultural concerns and intervene in contentious debates – a perspective that aligns with that of Brenda Boudreau and Kelli Maloy, the editors of *Abortion in Popular Culture: A Call to Action* (2023), who assert the cultural, social, and political significance of popular culture and its potential to shape public perceptions and encourage critical reflection (xiii).

Abortion Discourse, Fetal Representation, and Popular Culture

Despite its prevalence, the experience of terminating a pregnancy is often marginalized and shrouded in taboo in public discourse. According to the

Guttmacher Institute, roughly one in four women in the United States will have an abortion by the age of forty-five (Guttmacher). Nevertheless, fear of social disapproval prevents many from openly discussing their experiences. The resulting silence fosters stigmatization and reinforces the false perception that abortions are rare – a misrepresentation that, as Paula Abrams observes, “transforms into a social norm that labels abortion, and the women who have them, as deviant, furthering a cycle of secrecy and stigma” (184). This stigmatization is entrenched in “negative social attitudes toward women who decline maternity” (183). Judgment and enduring stereotypes vilify women who exercise their reproductive autonomy, either by depicting them as victims misled or coerced into the decision, or by portraying them as selfish, irresponsible, morally deficient, and monstrous. Such stereotypes are key in antiabortion discourse and contribute to harmful narratives that both marginalize women who have chosen abortion and discredit the complexities of their individual circumstances and decision-making processes.

Within the abortion debate, fetal imagery – the prime signifier of abortion – is especially contested. Antiabortion movements have long sought control over fetal representations in an effort to influence public perceptions by demonizing abortions and those who obtain them. As Lena Hann and Jeannie Ludlow note, one of their most effective tactics is leveraging the cultural and emotional resonance of the fetus through violent and emotionally charged language as well as grotesque graphic visuals that seek to provoke moral outrage and disgust in order to dissuade people from ending a pregnancy (119). The pro-choice movement, on the other hand, “has no strong or effective narratives to counter this tactic” (119). Instead of engaging directly with narrative and visual fetal representations, pro-choice discourse often obscures or erases the presence of the fetus. Problematically, this avoidance creates “an absent presence” where the aborted fetal body is unacknowledged in public advocacy (Ludlow, “It’s a boy! borted” 50).

The hijacking of fetal imagery by the antiabortionists was intensified as reproductive technologies developed, particularly with the emergence and dissemination of ultrasound technology. Introduced in the 1950s and gaining widespread use in subsequent decades, the sonogram allowed for

a visualization of what had previously been invisible aspects of pregnancy. This new obstetrical technology produced images that revolutionized the way antiabortion advocates spoke about abortion. The by-now-standard black-and-white images of the fetus floating in the dark depict it as autonomous and obscure its dependence on the pregnant body. The erasure of the woman in these images made it possible to imagine the fetus as an independent entity and gave rise to a new view of women's bodies (Weingarten 7). Importantly, as Sara Dubow lays out in her study on the history of the fetus in the United States, the visualization "enabled the identification of a fetus as a 'person' separate from the mother, and constructed the fetus as a 'citizen' with rights subject to the protection of the state" (6). For antiabortion activism of the 1960s and 1970s, such images of the fetus were crucial. Leslie J. Reagan insists that "[t]he most significant ideological work of the antiabortion movement was the separation in American cultural and legal thought of both the pregnant women from her own pregnancy and the developing fetus from the pregnant body" (xix). The notion of the fetus as a distinct and autonomous entity has since been a cornerstone of fetal rights advocacy. It has contributed to the criminalization of pregnant women who opt for abortion and are thus deemed to act against the fetus's best interests.

In her seminal 1987 article on fetal images and the significance of visual culture for reproductive politics, Rosalind Pollack Petchesky shows how antiabortionists successfully used visual culture "to make fetal personhood a self-fulfilling prophecy by making the fetus a public presence [in] a visually oriented culture" (264). Meanwhile, creating abortion-positive representations remains a challenge. As Petchesky observes, "feminists and other prochoice advocates have all too readily ceded the visual terrain" (264). The strategic use and manipulation of the visual is exemplified by the influential 1984 short film *The Silent Scream* which epitomizes the alleged horror of abortion. Petchesky's analysis of the film reveals its pivotal role in shaping antiabortion rhetoric and imagery. The film features gynecologist Bernard Nathanson, an abortion provider turned antiabortion advocate, who comments on the ultrasound of a 12-week-old fetus during an abortion procedure. Narrating the moving images with medical authority, Nathanson is in control of

their interpretation and proclaims to be showing the “truth” about the procedure. He describes the fetus as a child in distress, sensing mortal danger and struggling to avoid the lethal instrument. The film’s most iconic moment shows what Nathanson interprets as the fetus opening its mouth in a scream, declaring that “this is the silent scream of a child threatened imminently with extinction” (Dabner 16:56-17:03). Here, abortion is framed as an act of violence against a vulnerable child. Rendering a legal abortion as a “gothic spectacle” (Valerius 32), *The Silent Scream* clearly belongs “in the realm of cultural representation rather than medical evidence” (Petchesky 267). Although the medical community quickly discredited the film’s central claims – such as the claim that fetuses can feel pain in the first trimester – it marked a turning point in the way abortion was discussed. By politicizing fetal imagery, it transformed visual representations of the fetus into effective tools for antiabortion advocacy that have a remarkable staying power.

Scholars in Abortion Studies and Reproductive Rights argue that contemporary cultural texts have the potential to challenge dominant antiabortion imagery, dismantle stereotypical representations, and break the silence surrounding abortion. For example, Boudreau and Maloy affirm that “popular culture can play an integral role in increasing public knowledge and humanizing the way we talk about abortion through accurate and nuanced narratives” (xii). They also reason that cultural narratives wield significant influence as they shape public perception, challenge restrictive policies, and even inspire political activism (xii-xiii). Considering the current political climate in the United States, this role has certainly gained new urgency. Indeed, in recent years, abortion has become a recurring topic in literature and film. The research project “Abortion Onscreen” shows that abortion plotlines in movies and TV series persistently increased each year since the project’s start in 2016. Additionally, as reproductive rights are rolled back in numerous states, forcing people to travel across state lines for abortion procedures, the so-called abortion road trip movie has emerged as a result of these circumstances (Upadhyaya; Andreescu). This new genre highlights the legal, logistical, and financial barriers that restrict access to abortion care. Similarly, a variety of literary narratives has been published that range from realist fiction (e.g. Jennifer Haigh’s *Mercy Street*, 2022) and

feminist dystopias (e.g. Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks*, 2019) to historical novels (e.g. Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Wench*, 2010, and *Take My Hand*, 2022) and memoirs (e.g. Honor Moore's *A Termination*, 2024).

Through complex, empathetic storytelling, such texts can encourage readers' critical engagement with the topic while countering dominant stereotypes about women who have an abortion, their motives, and the procedure itself. Jodi Picoult's *A Spark of Light*, which I will discuss next, exemplifies this potential. Written and published before the *Dobbs* decision, the novel powerfully captures the sociopolitical currents and increasing polarization of public discourse that marked the cultural context in which it emerged. The 2022 Supreme Court decision was the culmination of a decades-long campaign to dismantle the constitutional right to abortion, fueled by conservative legislative efforts that were accompanied by a history of attacks on medical personnel and clinics. Picoult's novel addresses these realities by referencing real-life incidents of antiabortion extremism. It thus represents a meaningful intervention in contemporary debates that aims to stimulate discussion while maintaining a firm stance on the importance of reproductive autonomy.

Representing Abortion in *A Spark of Light*

A Spark of Light opens with a description of the Center for Women and Reproductive Health, which symbolizes the contested nature of reproductive rights and healthcare: positioning the Center as a site for ideological conflict, simultaneously a sanctuary for those in need of care and a target of vehement opposition, it is described as squatting "behind a wrought-iron gate, like an old bulldog used to guarding its territory," "a small rectangle of a structure painted a fluorescent, flagrant orange, like a flag to those who had traveled hundreds of miles to find it" (Picoult, *Spark* 10). Its depiction as scarred "from the cuts of politicians and the barbs of protesters" (10), yet defiant and enduring, reflects the resilience of abortion care providers who persevere despite incremental restrictions. This opening is not only a vivid portrayal of the Center's precarious existence but also a critical commentary on the nationwide erosion of reproductive rights.

Post-*Dobbs*, it can be read as a lament for what has been lost and a tribute to the ongoing efforts of those fighting to preserve reproductive rights.

The depiction of the Center sets the stage for the unfolding drama in *A Spark of Light*. Inside this embattled clinic, a gunman holds staff and patients hostage. Through alternating focalizations, the hostage drama is related from the points of view of those trapped inside the Center: obstetrician Dr. Louie Ward; patients such as Joy Perry, who is at the Center for an abortion procedure; a teenager seeking a prescription for birth control; a retired professor with cervical cancer; and antiabortion activist Janine Deguerre, who has come to the Center disguised as a patient wanting to expose the alleged violence of this "abortion factory" (Picoult, *Spark* 213). In addition, the novel also integrates the perspectives of the attacker, George Goddard, who seeks revenge because he believes that his teenage daughter had procured an abortion at the Center; and the detective, hostage negotiator, and father of one of the hostages; as well as Beth, Goddard's daughter, who is being held in a hospital and is about to be prosecuted for fetal homicide for illegally ordering and taking abortion pills.

Through these different characters – their respective circumstances, experiences, and beliefs – *A Spark of Light* outlines and contrasts different positions. The multiperspectivity, a defining characteristic of Picoult's narrative style, effectively mirrors the complexities of contemporary abortion debates. Although the narrative does not offer simple conclusions or definitive resolutions to these conflicts, it seeks common ground by highlighting shared human experiences. This is particularly evident in the dynamic between Joy, who has an abortion at the Center, and the abortion opponent Janine, who after the hostage crisis is resolved, offers to accompany Joy home. The two characters are clearly positioned on opposite sides of the abortion debate, and neither woman changes her stance: Joy remains relieved that she was able to receive the care she sought, while Janine continues to see herself as a 'savior of the unborn.' However, in a brief yet poignant moment, Joy shares the ultrasound image she received before her abortion, and Janine responds with a silent gesture of support: "Janine covered Joy's hand with her own. She didn't respond. / She didn't have to. / She just had to be here, one woman holding up another" (40). Despite their irreconcilable views, Joy and Janine momentarily connect on

a deeper, more personal level – not as ideological opponents, but as women. The novel does not suggest that this connection resolves their differences; but, it does reveal a shared experience of womanhood that transcends the ideological divide over abortion, if only temporarily.

By exploring and contrasting various perspectives and standpoints, the novel allows readers to witness shifting opinions and evolving arguments. The juxtaposition of discrepant positions on reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, and the beginning and value of human life, allows for the presentation and evaluation of arguments, while also exposing the limitations of individual perspectives. The fact that individual perspectives are inherently limited is also made apparent through the novel's structure: Narrated in reverse chronological order, it first presents the outcomes and results of the decisions made by the characters, and only later explores the circumstances that led to these choices – thus gradually revealing a deeper and more nuanced insight into the characters' motivations and beliefs. In this context, it has been noted that “the characters experience a pivotal reevaluation of their preconceived notions about life and death, right and wrong, compassion and hatred, and must reconcile with themselves that what they may have felt was a non-negotiable stance is much more complicated than they previously considered” (Hansen 6). Read in a pedagogical vein, this insight can also be extended to the readers of the novel, who are invited to critically engage with the characters' beliefs and – potentially – to reassess their own assumptions. The narrative approach reinforces one of the central concerns of the story and its didactic purpose, which is to ask readers to withhold judgment, question their moral responses, and reconsider their positions on the issue as more context is provided. Ultimately, it guides readers toward recognizing abortion as a legitimate option for individuals seeking control over their reproductive lives and an essential part of reproductive justice.

The temporal register of the novel foregrounds the centrality of time, both as a structural framework and as a thematic concern. Spanning a single day, the story begins with the detective fatally shooting Goddard in the late afternoon and then unravels backward to detail the events of that morning. Each chapter is dedicated to an hour, providing a mosaic of perspectives on the unfolding crisis. This narrative reversal draws attention

to the temporal urgency of the crisis and underscores time as a force that governs the gunman’s volatile emotions, the negotiator’s tactics, and the health of the patients and staff held hostage. But the significance of time extends beyond the immediate hostage crisis, as the novel sheds light on its crucial role within the context of pregnancy and reproductive healthcare: while pregnancy is measured in weeks and months, involving a future-oriented trajectory, abortion access is critically time-bound and constrained by legal restrictions that are tied to gestational limits. Commenting on regulation that prohibits abortion after six weeks of gestation, Jaime Leigh Gray notes that

temporality has become a particularly fraught concern regarding abortion care. Time manifests in multiple ways, affecting the mobilities and bodies of abortion-seekers: the availability of doctor’s appointments, the effects of mandatory waiting periods, the sometimes-slow process of ordering abortion pills by mail, the need to travel to access the procedure. Negotiating these impediments takes time. (95)

In various respects, time dictates the options available to individuals and shapes their experiences, particularly in the post-*Dobbs* era, where many states have implemented stricter restrictions on abortion access. *A Spark of Light* foregrounds time as a critical factor and confirms Gray’s observation that “[r]ecent abortion narratives invest in the passage of time – of duration – to shed light on the obstacles to accessibility and subsequently the physical and emotional labor involved in obtaining an abortion” (95-96). For example, the novel gestures to the ways in which mandatory waiting periods prior to the procedure, while ostensibly providing time for reflection and informed decision-making, actually undermine the pregnant person’s autonomy. Such policies suggest a lack of trust in women’s ability to make decisions regarding their own bodies and lives, thereby effectively infantilizing them. In the novel, a character aptly comments on this matter, noting that “this was indeed some crazy world, where the waiting period to get an abortion was longer than the waiting period to get a gun” (Picoult, *Spark* 227).

To illustrate the challenges of accessing legal abortions, *A Spark of Light* depicts the experiences of two characters seeking to end their pregnancies and shows how time intersects with legal and financial barriers. Joy is forced to delay her abortion because she cannot afford the procedure, only to face even higher costs as her pregnancy progresses. Beth, the gunman's teenage daughter, is unable to receive a legal abortion because Mississippi law requires parental consent for minors. Desperate, ashamed to confide in her father, and unable to procure a parental consent statement in time, she purchases abortion pills online. Her self-induced abortion leads not only to her hospitalization and impending prosecution but also sets off the disastrous chain of events that culminates in her father's violent actions at the Center. Through the experiences of Joy and Beth, *A Spark of Light* shows how the lack of necessary resources and restrictive abortion legislation impacts women. In fact, it insistently suggests that denying individuals control over their reproductive lives can have fatal consequences.

The temporal dimension of *A Spark of Light* highlights the interconnectedness of time, choice (or its absence), and consequence. Significantly, by drawing attention to the barriers to legal abortion, the novel also complicates the idea of "choice" often invoked in debates about reproductive rights. Imbricated with neoliberal notions of individualism, autonomy, responsibility, and self-reliance, the concept of choice conceals the stark inequalities in access to abortion care and "masks the different economic, political, and environmental contexts in which women live their reproductive lives" (Ross and Solinger 47). For many abortion-seekers, a lack of financial resources, emotional support, or other necessities creates what Ross and Solinger call "choiceless choices" (102).

The novel critiques not only the restriction of access to reproductive health care but also debunks misleading conceptions about abortion prevalent in mainstream public discussion. This is accomplished through the character of Dr. Louie Ward. He is significant not only because he conveys medical expertise but also because he embodies a unique perspective: as a Black man and practicing Catholic who was raised in southern Louisiana, Dr. Ward reconciles his faith with his unwavering advocacy for women's reproductive rights. Throughout the novel, Dr. Ward plays a pivotal

role, serving as both an authoritative medical voice and a character who examines the broader sociopolitical dimensions of reproductive justice. For example, he provides accurate knowledge and dispels common myths, such as exaggerated abortion risks and the unfounded claim that fetuses at sixteen weeks can feel pain – an assertion that has shaped restrictive abortion laws like those in Mississippi. Furthermore, Dr. Ward strives to normalize abortion by pointing to its long history and the fact that it is an integral part of the human experience. In doing so, he challenges associations of abortion with danger and instead reframes it as a common and shared reality.

It is also from the point of view of Dr. Ward that a procedural abortion at 15 weeks of gestation is narrated step by step. This depiction is noteworthy for its detailed portrayal of the process. Eschewing abstraction and euphemisms, the procedure starts with the ultrasound, followed by the injection of local anesthetic, the rupture of the membranes to release amniotic fluid, and the disarticulation and extraction of the fetus using aspiration and forceps. The procedure concludes with Dr. Ward’s “silent count of limbs and landmarks” (Picoult, *Spark* 246) to ensure the complete removal of fetal tissue. The narration of the process focuses on the materiality of the fetus, while Dr. Ward’s silent musings raise complex questions about the beginning of human life, the value ascribed to it, and the reproductive autonomy of women:

In that boggy mess of blood and tissue were recognizable parts. They were familiar enough to be upsetting. The bottom line was this: a zygote, an embryo, a fetus, a baby – they were all human. But at what point did that human deserve legal protection? [...] Whether or not you believed a fetus was a human being, there was no question in anyone’s mind that a grown woman was one. Even if you placed moral value on that fetus, you couldn’t give it rights unless they were stripped away from the woman carrying it. Perhaps the question wasn’t *When does a fetus become a person?* but *When does a woman stop being one?* (245; emphasis original)

This passage spotlights the presence of the fetus and draws attention to its status as a contested symbol in the abortion debate. Alternately described

as a “boggy mess of blood and tissue,” “a baby,” and “a human being,” the fetus occupies a liminal position between a life-like form and a person. This liminality mirrors the broader cultural and societal ambiguities surrounding the legal and moral status of the fetus.³ It is this ambiguity that reinforces Ward’s belief that the lived reality of the patient must take precedence over the abstract idea of life. *A Spark of Light* thus underscores what scholarship on abortion has long emphasized: that the fetus, “located on a continuum that stretches from a single sex cell [...] to a newborn human infant” (Luker 4), is ambiguous, and that abortion – and the question of when life begins – is less a medical issue than a moral one. Shifting the focus from the fetus to his patient Joy, Dr. Ward attempts to navigate the complexities of personhood and rejects the notion that the fetus holds rights that outweigh those of the pregnant woman. For Dr. Ward, stripping women of their reproductive autonomy and eliding their right to bodily integrity amounts to their dehumanization because it erases their personhood and humanity.

Although the description of the abortion process is delivered in a dispassionate voice informed by clinical expertise, Dr. Ward nonetheless reflects personally on the procedure and the impact it has on him: “At the fifteen-week mark, [...] the calvarium had to be crushed to fit through a 15-millimeter cannula. As a provider, you could not unfeel that moment. And yet. Was it a person? No. It was a piece of life, but so was a sperm, an egg” (Picoult, *Spark* 244). Here, Dr. Ward asserts his position that the fetus is life-like, but he rejects the idea of personhood, which would elevate the fetus’s rights above those of the pregnant individual. At the same time, he acknowledges the reality of terminating “a piece of life” and its emotional weight. By foregrounding the presence and the materiality of the fetus and acknowledging the experience of abortion providers, the novel depicts abortion as a complex, felt process – “you could not unfeel that moment” (244) – without compromising its abortion-positive stance.

³ A similar liminality of the fetus is evoked after Beth’s self-induced abortion. The remains of her pregnancy are described as recognizably human, yet far from complete: “pink and unfinished,” with “translucent skin showing dark patches of future eyes and organs” (Picoult, *Spark* 281), the fetus is depicted as being at the threshold of life.

Dr. Ward’s patient has similarly complex emotions after the procedure. While Joy feels relief, she still experiences a sense of grief: “she had gotten what she wanted, but she also felt the pain of loss, and they were not mutually exclusive” (40). Joy’s acknowledgment of her emotions is significant because it challenges the binary framing of abortion experiences as either purely traumatic or entirely liberating. Instead, the novel recognizes the coexistence of conflicting emotions without undermining Joy’s agency or the legitimacy of her decision. By doing so, *A Spark of Light* resists oversimplified narratives and acknowledges the deeply personal, embodied, and sometimes ambivalent nature of reproductive choices. This treatment of abortion is particularly significant in light of the erasure of the fetus in pro-choice discourse, which, as critics have pointed out, has allowed antiabortion politics to claim ownership of fetal representations (Ludlow, “No Bigger” 240). Erasure of the fetus certainly limits the stories that can be told about abortion and further contributes to its stigmatization. It also risks alienating patients and providers whose emotional and lived experiences may feel unacknowledged. By including the fetus’s presence in the text and illuminating the ambivalent emotions that accompany abortion, *A Spark of Light* expands the scope of pro-choice discourse. Indeed, Ludlow insists that “prochoice discourse could be strengthened – not weakened – by attention to the material and emotional reality of the fetus” (234). The novel thus provides an example of an abortion-positive representation that foregrounds the fetus as well as the experiences of patients and caregivers.

Conclusion

Jodi Picoult’s *A Spark of Light* demonstrates that popular fiction plays a significant role in dissecting pressing social and political issues. As I hope to have shown, the novel offers an important contribution to the contemporary abortion debate, potentially opening up discussions about reproductive rights. By dramatizing moral dilemmas and juxtaposing the characters’ different views and convictions, it reflects the conflicts unfolding in political and public spheres while avoiding ideological

oversimplifications. Importantly, *A Spark of Light* maintains a clear emphasis on reproductive autonomy – including safe and legal access to abortion – as a fundamental right. At the same time, it does not shy away from addressing the complex corporeal and emotional realities faced by those who seek to end a pregnancy, and the challenges faced by abortion care providers. The novel not only reinforces the moral and political stakes of reproductive justice but also seeks common ground by engaging with the contradictions, struggles, and evolving viewpoints on abortion.

In her introduction to the edited collection *Representing Abortion* (2021), Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst underscores the capacity of cultural texts to challenge dominant portrayals of abortion by centering the pregnant person as the subject of the experience (1). Highlighting the crucial role of current abortion storytelling, she stresses that such “imaginative intellectual-political work reclaims images and narratives about abortion from anti-abortion rhetoric, but it also creates new images and narratives while destabilising anti-abortion attempts to fix the meaning of the fetal image” (1). *A Spark of Light* contributes to this cultural work by challenging the politicized framing of abortions, normalizing the procedure, and challenging the silence and stigmatization surrounding it. Moreover, by focusing on the materiality and the presence of the fetus instead of erasing it, the novel carves out a path to depict the contested figure of the fetus in an abortion-positive way. Following Karen Weingarten’s assertion that “novels and other forms of popular culture have the potential not only to represent but also to create material realities” (3), it could be suggested that *A Spark of Light* may reshape cultural narratives of abortion. Furthermore, bestselling works of popular fiction, such as Picoult’s novel, can reach a broad audience and foster critical engagement with the issue. In the post-*Dobbs* era, where antiabortion activism and right-wing populism threaten reproductive autonomy, the novel is certainly a timely read. It demonstrates how popular fiction can serve as a space for social and political reflection, offering readers a way to engage with the moral, legal, and personal dimensions of abortion in a nuanced and accessible way.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors of this special issue for their constructive feedback on earlier versions of this article.

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Unveiling an Absent Presence

Spaces of Breastfeeding in Contemporary Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Breastfeeding as a complex discourse, and how different subjects enter this discourse, handle it, and entwine it with the embodied practice of lactation, have become increasingly visible and important matters at a historical time when the medical encouragement to breastfeed openly clashes with the impracticality, for many, of pursuing the activity. Against the background of this contemporary contradiction, this essay proposes to explore the subject of breastfeeding in selected contemporary narratives. I shall offer examples of how a historical cultural repertoire of lactation signs and motifs entwines with contemporary debates around breastfeeding – already themselves articulated across several spheres, from medical discourse to feminist criticism to cultural studies to the health humanities – and ‘seeps’ into creative products from highbrow to middlebrow. Among relevant works are novels (for instance, by Toni Morrison and Shanthy Sekaran), tv series (among which *ER*, *House*, *M.D.*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *Game of Thrones*), and films. Overall, albeit in different ways and with profoundly different implications, such works can be discussed as creative responses to an existing contradiction: one between acts of breastfeeding and the existence of obstacles to the realization and instantiation of this practice. I am especially interested in representations and readings that question the ‘privatization’ of breastfeeding, revealing instead its existence as a public issue, beyond the idea of parenthood as (neoliberal) ‘identity work’. I also hope to illustrate how the ‘absent presence’ of breastfeeding channels and

contributes to revealing contemporary anxieties about gender, sexuality, race, motherhood, parenthood, and medicalization/healthcare. Some of the works analyzed here reveal an increasing necessity of tackling breastfeeding as well as the anxiety of culturally managing it, oscillating among its exposure and its removal from sight, its valorization and its debasement, alternatively emphasizing its naturalness and its putatively regressive, even dangerous quality. On the other hand, other works articulate breastfeeding as a relational practice which becomes a nodal point, a lens through which broad issues of historical and political importance can be (re)focused.

KEYWORDS

Breastfeeding, Feminism, Media, Literature, Public Health

Premise

As noted by Edith Frampton (2005), a theoretical interest in the subject of breastfeeding began to mount in the 1970s and (I would add) continues, albeit not constant nor unchanged, in the present. The 1970s are, of course, the years in which feminist criticism rose and became prominent; the year 1976 saw, among other things, the publication of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Breastfeeding is obviously related to pregnancy and childbirth – that is, to biological motherhood; however, it does *not* fully coincide nor overlap with it. The documented existence of other forms of infant feeding since antiquity, the widespread practice of wet nursing at different historical times and in different parts of the world, the rise of bottle feeding in the twentieth century, the biologically proved existence of the male breast's possibility to "lactate," human milk banks and informal milk sharing, induced lactation pursued by adoptive parents, and lactation among adults as an erotic practice, complicate any straightforward consequentiality or symbolic equivalence between pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding.

In the past few decades, feminist scholars have renewed their interest in the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (Frampton), who, from the 1930s through the 1950s, stressed the importance of breastfeeding in human development. The mother's breast provides, for Klein, both the first instance of infantile gratification and the first infantile experience of desire

frustration; hence, it forms the basis for dealing with – and reconciling – contradictory feelings and fantasies. In her introduction to Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories*, Gayatri Spivak refers to Klein:

The infant has one object [the breast] with which to begin to construct the system of truth (meaning) and goodness (responsibility) which will make it human. [...] At weaning and before, the breast – and secondarily, other part objects – become 'symbolized' and recognized as whole persons. Our sense of what it means to be human is played out in scenarios of guilt and reparation where the object is the primary part object [the breast] incessantly transmogrified into people and other collectivities.

To tie human subject formation to Oedipus was to tie it to the patriarchal nuclear family. To make it depend upon the primary part object (overwhelmingly still the breast) as the chief instrument for the production of truth and lie (signification) and good and evil (responsibility) is to free it from that historical bondage. (xiv)

The crucial role of the breastfeeding relation claimed by Klein, Spivak seems to suggest, has historically been overshadowed because other structures of signification have prevailed. Consideration of human lactation as a crucially meaningful experience is probably not very widespread at historical times when formula feeding, not breast feeding, becomes prevalent. According to medical historian Jacqueline Wolf, by 1970 the US had essentially become a "formula-feeding culture" ("They Lacked the Right Food" 229). Probably, one of the reasons why a theoretical, feminist-informed debate seriously took up the matter of breastfeeding during the 1970s is the onset of what would be known as the "breast-bottle controversy" (Van Esterik; Frampton). Public opinion debates on methods of infant feeding were accompanied by the rise of a scholarly interest, also on the part of openly feminist scholars. Since then, there has been, as Jacqueline Wolf notes, no consistent feminist position on breastfeeding.

Regarding numbers, after the nadir of breastfeeding rates in the first half of the 1970s (Frampton 13), figures began to slowly rise again during the mid-Seventies and, amidst oscillations, the practice of human lactation had a recognizable resurgence during the 1990s. Nevertheless, in 2006

Wolf cautioned against excessive optimism, because breastfeeding statistics mostly tend to capture the rather fleeting moment of breastfeeding *initiation* and *not* its establishment and continuation: “‘initiation’ means only that a baby is breastfed at least once before hospital discharge” (“What Feminists Can Do” 399).

The year 1990 was a turning point in global breastfeeding policies, because of the ratification of the Innocenti Declaration on the Protection, Promotion and Support of Breastfeeding, adopted by governmental delegates from over thirty countries, a document later also endorsed by the forty-fifth World Health Assembly and by UNICEF (UNICEF Innocenti Research Center 1). In the US, a *Blueprint for Action on Breastfeeding* was released for the first time in 2000; finally, Surgeon General David S.atcher observed in 2001, a “science-based action plan to increase breastfeeding rates in the United States [...] We know breastfeeding is one of the most important contributors to infant health, and that it offers economic benefits to the family, health care system, and workplace. Despite these benefits, however, breastfeeding rates [in the US] are surprisingly low, especially at six months postpartum” (72).

Nowadays, breastfeeding is increasingly regarded as a global health issue. As mentioned above, several governmental and nongovernmental bodies are actively promoting it. For the past few decades, the World Health Organization has promoted breastfeeding as the ideal form of nutrition for newborns and very young humans, and a type of mother-child affective bond which has healthy implications for psychological development. The WHO currently recommends breastfeeding on demand; six months of exclusive breastfeeding; the introduction of “complementary foods” at six months of age, with human milk remaining the principal source of nutritional intake; and afterwards, next to solid foods, the continuation of breastfeeding until the child is at least two years old (WHO, “Breastfeeding: Recommendations”). Breastfeeding has come to be recognized as a public health matter, in the sense that a substantial body of medical scholarship maintains its crucial benefits for human health, both short- and long-term. Among these are notable long-term benefits for the immune system, hence increased protection from many types of illness for the child, and even the possibility of reduced breast cancer risk in lactating women. In other words, according to an increasingly accepted and endorsed medical

perspective, to increase breastfeeding rates globally might, in the short term but especially in the long run, contribute to saving lives (WHO, “Infant and Young Child Feeding”).

This does not imply that there is universal consensus and no controversy on the matter – quite the opposite. Different opinions and habits exist in different contexts, as well as in the opinion of individual healthcare professionals. An especially controversial matter is breastfeeding termination – when should it be discontinued? – with individual pediatricians often offering strikingly different advice.

Contradiction

The issue of *choice* is at the heart of many contemporary discussions on breastfeeding, in the US and beyond. A typical pattern consists in presenting women as freely choosing between the ‘two methods’ of feeding, breast or bottle.¹ Feeding choices can even be regarded, Charlotte Faircloth suggests, as a ‘lifestyle’ or ‘identity’ choice, with parents “encouraged to spend a large amount of time, energy and money in raising their children. [...] [P]arenting is now an occupation in which adults (most typically, mothers) are expected to be emotionally absorbed and become personally fulfilled” (15). Pointing out the contradictions of this (neo)liberal perspective, Amanda Barnes Cook observes that “[a] society that tells women ‘you are free to choose to breastfeed’, but whose institutions make it impossible for her to exercise this right, is not a just society – nor is it a society that lives up to liberalism’s own ideals” (5). Crucially, the encouragement to breastfeed exists in tension with a widespread *lack of conditions for choice*, i.e., it often coexists with the practical impossibility of pursuing the goals set by WHO.

A clear-cut rhetoric of choice has been justly criticized by radical feminist scholars, who do *not* deny the importance of choosing; rather,

1 An example of this approach can be found in the bestselling baby care handbook by Tracy Hogg (with Melinda Blau) *Secrets of the Baby Whisperer: How to Calm, Connect, and Communicate with Your Baby*, originally published in 2001 and re-issued several times.

they attempt to dis-align the very idea of choice from a purely (neo)liberal perspective. Vanessa Maher observes that “women’s infant feeding choices are limited, enhanced, or oriented by the circumstances in which they live” (187); in a similar vein, Bernice L. Hausman observes that “infant feeding choice is [...] constrained by economic forces” (184). For Penny Van Esterik, attention must be shifted from choice to the *conditions* wherein choice occurs, if one wants to create an environment that is consistent with, and not often *incompatible with*, the increasing exhortation to breastfeed for the sake of public health: “The trajectory goal becomes not to have every woman breastfeed her infant, but to create conditions in individuals, households, communities, and nations so that every woman could” (qtd. in Hausman 211).

In other words, to make breastfeeding a real choice, one should address structural socioeconomic inequities, like disparities in terms of access to paid leave. This entails regarding lactation, first and foremost, as a right to claim, cultivate, and decide whether, when, and how to exercise. Reframing lactation from this perspective might even lead to rethinking work legislation and the configuration of workers’ rights in general. Acknowledging – and attempting to move past – impasses in feminist discourses on breastfeeding, Hausman recommends: “To press for women’s right to breastfeed as an ordinary aspect of embodied maternal practice, we have to argue for equality that accommodates difference, and in political terms that means benefits for mothers and significant changes to the current organization of market work” (228).

Breastfeeding Motifs, Narratives, and Unruly Bodies

While human lactation, despite its recognized public importance, seldom takes a central position in contemporary mainstream culture and art, it is nevertheless there; it is, I suggest, an ‘absent presence’. Contemporary debates about breastfeeding penetrate cultural products from highbrow to middlebrow. We might speculate that the open – albeit overall still rather shy and occasionally simplistic – thematization of lactation emerges nowadays precisely because of the aforementioned contradiction between the

encouragement to breastfeed and the impracticality, for many, of pursuing the activity. To thematize lactation is also, clearly, an attempt to culturally ‘manage’ the practice. Next to this ‘topicality’, we should acknowledge the cultural complexity and long-term existence of breastfeeding as signifying act and embodied practice: “breastfeeding throughout history and across different cultures is not only a nutritional exchange, but a complicated psychosocial cultural behavior” (Cassidy and El Tom 1). This would entail considering the resonances of breastfeeding as written and visual trope, connecting it to representations of parenthood, motherhood, the body, queerness, race, mythical and religious discourses, legal discourses, medical discourses, and more. It may be suggested that the cultural politics of breastfeeding change and evolve also as a way of coping with “anxieties over women’s roles” (Martucci 15) and how these roles change. From an even broader perspective, the fraught in/visibility of breastfeeding exists in a space of convergence among contemporary anxieties not only about gender and motherhood, but also about sexuality, race, work, class, and healthcare. Regarding breastfeeding as ‘absent presence’ can contribute to unveiling an ideological mechanism: one which, on the one hand, cannot but recognize, especially nowadays, the potential of an articulated reflection on lactation for a thorough rethinking, possibly a transformation – in a feminist direction – of the prevailing politics of work, gender, and healthcare; and which, on the other hand, actively removes this potential, simultaneously evoking the practice and painstakingly ‘taming’ it.

Representations of breastfeeding in contemporary media can be part of an attempt to enhance realism and verisimilitude: they are, for instance, (relatively) recurrent in medical tv shows, such as *ER* (1994–2009) (Foss 333). They can also be, in comedies, occasions for sexually salacious humor. ‘Long-term’ breastfeeding – conventionally speaking, lactation extending beyond one-two years of age of the child – is, for instance, satirized in the sitcom *Scrubs* (2001–2010). In “My T.C.W.” (Season 2, Episode 18), a mother declines painkillers because her son is still breastfeeding. The boy, who appears to be around five years old, winks, clicks his tongue knowingly and gives the (male) doctors a thumbs-up. Doctor “J.D.” Dorian (Zach Braff) makes a face and mentally comments “I think at a certain point breastfeeding becomes creepy” (dbfinch 00:00:17-00:00:19);

he immediately proceeds to fantasize about that very mother breastfeeding her son as a teenager. We do not see the act on screen, but we see the young man's milk moustache. (It is worth noting that the referenced *YouTube* clip of this scene is accompanied by comments that not only confirm, but also escalate the sense of creepiness and disgust – not to mention the patronizing attitude – openly manifested by the male medical fictional characters in the show). Dennis Dugan's comedy film *Grown Ups* (2010) also features a long-term breastfeeding relation. A four-year-old boy, son of one of the five childhood friends (all men) whose reunion over a weekend is the center of the film, is still breastfed. At the reunion party, the boy's request to nurse, and the mother's compliance, are met with shock by the attendees, who treat the practice as bizarre and obscene: embarrassed comments are made on the boy's age; another mother screens the eyes of her own daughter; and the nursing mother herself is partly apologetic ("We meant to stop last year, but he likes it so much!"). The film repeatedly plays with the sexual aura that Sally (Maria Bello)'s nursing breasts emanate for the grown men around: the 'obscene' quality of long-term breastfeeding occupies a span including its heavy heterosexual sexualization and its 'infantilizing', regressive quality – as implied in the very title, the film is about men unable or unwilling to 'grow up' (not coincidentally, almost every TV show and film I discuss here features *male* children – and not only children).

In "Could I Leave You?" (Season 2, Episode 17) from *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), the company for which Lynette Scavo (Felicity Huffman) works hires a new employee, a woman who, it is later revealed, breastfeeds her five-year-old son. When pressured to terminate breastfeeding by her employers – who find the practice inappropriate and 'distracting', despite the fact that she nurses behind closed curtains – she reveals that she has kept up the practice, more than for the sake of her child, because she believes that it burns calories and helps keep her body in shape. This episode entwines several motifs: the overbearing mother who will not let her *male* child mature; the incest taboo; male breast sexual fantasies; expectations concerning the female body and beauty; motherhood and the workplace; and, last but not least, the changed perception of breastfeeding in recent decades, including its medical endorsement – the mother enumerates the health benefits of long-term breastfeeding, initially giving the impression

that those were the main reasons for her choice. Overall, it may be observed that, even at a time of public, institutional breastfeeding endorsement, 'long-term' breastfeeding still raises deeply sexualized anxieties that are here exorcized through comedy.

There is, as even these initial examples from popular culture suggest, a dark side to recent fictional representations of lactation. Among recurring tropes are: the idea of the breastfeeding relation as dangerous; breastfeeding bodies as unruly; and the breastfeeding mother as potentially or actually unrestrained, threatening, and, in some cases, lethal – like in an episode of *ER* ("Under Control", Season 6, Episode 16) in which a baby dies because of the amphetamines that his mother has been taking, which pass into the milk (Foss). A narrative situation like this also plays, in darker tones than the ones previously evoked, with the idea of a breastfeeding relation that should not have taken place beyond a putatively 'reasonable' limit, or taken place at all. In "Paternity" (Season 1, Episode 2) from *House, M.D.* (2004-2012), Gregory House (Hugh Laurie) sees a young mother and her baby daughter. The scene opens with the mother declaring that her child takes "no formula, just mummy's healthy, natural breast milk" (House M.D. 00:00:05-00:00:08). This forms the background of what comes after. She also declares her opposition to vaccinations, which, in her view, are promoted only for the sake of increasing the profits of "some multinational pharmaceutical company" (00:00:31-00:00:33). In his scathing fashion, House comments on another thriving business: "teeny tiny baby coffins" (00:01:06-00:01:08). Implying that the mother believes her milk can provide protection from illnesses *in lieu of* vaccinations, he states that "the antibodies in yummy mummy only protect the kid for six months" (00:01:14-00:01:18) (this, per se, a rather questionable statement). Here as well, breastfeeding is associated with a death risk, to the extent that the "no formula" choice is depicted as part of an attitude – a 'lifestyle', Faircloth may add – valorizing 'natural' mothering and harboring a distrust for the economic and medical establishment (House observes that the baby's toy frog is "all natural, no dyes" 00:00:45-00:00:47), which, the cautionary

tale goes, results in mothers ‘parsing’ medical advice and consequently overlooking some serious health risks for their offspring.²

Hausman notes the recurring presence of “dead babies” in media representation of infant feeding: “I am amazed by how many of those representations that do exist link specific forms of infant feeding with death” (36). She observes that, historically, news about babies dying have been alternatively mustered by supporters of both breastfeeding and bottle feeding; broadly speaking, “[a]ccording to breastfeeding advocates, (dark) babies in Africa and Asia die because they aren’t breastfed; according to breastfeeding skeptics, (white) babies in America die because they are” (43). Hausman discusses the mediatic coverage of the case of “Tabitha Walrond, nineteen years old, African American, and a single mother living with her mother (both of whom [...] on public assistance), [who] was convicted of negligently causing the death of her seven-week-old son Tyler, who died of starvation in August 1997” (33). Hausman maintains that media outlets consorted in emphasizing Walrond’s blackness next to her alleged obstinacy in breastfeeding against all odds. The fact that she was represented and perceived as “poor and black and on public assistance” automatically “put her in a category of women at high risk for breastfeeding failure” (60) in the eyes of the public. Hausman presents several examples, from articles to fictional televisual representations,³ of stories featuring white babies who die, or risk death, because their mothers insist on exclusive breastfeeding and realize, too late, that they are facing serious issues in producing milk. Most stories, she adds, feature *white* mothers portrayed as well-meaning but naive dupes of someone else’s discursive power: namely, as victims of a fringe of medical zealots who, blindly following the new global and US guidelines on breastfeeding promotion, deliberately ignore the possibility of breastfeeding failure; or, perhaps – going back to my example from *House* – as preys to promoters of a pseudo-natural, regressively anti-capitalist

² As Martucci (2015)’s insightful study suggests, a search for more ‘natural’ mothering actually can, and in many cases *does*, rely on medical expertise, including medical advice on breastfeeding.

³ She discusses episodes from *Chicago Hope* (1994-2000) and *Law and Order* (1990-2010, 2022-).

niche lifestyle. By contrast, Walrond, a *black* mother, was convicted because found negligent and ultimately responsible for her child's death, despite any reported difficulty she encountered in *obtaining* regular medical supervision for her son: "Poor black women, stereotypically perceived to be negligent mothers, can be held responsible for their children's welfare, even in the face of gross medical and bureaucratic negligence" (68). To sum up, the idea of the lactating body as unruly and dangerous is nuanced according to complex factors of race, social class, and medicalization – a complexity which further contributes to making breastfeeding both topical and obscured, and in constant need of being discursively patrolled.

Focusing on a different type of danger and unruliness, one can observe the entwinement of breastfeeding and highly disturbing – and erotically charged – depictions of motherhood in contemporary horror films (MacNeill). In Brandon Cronenberg's *Infinity Pool* (2023) a feast of ultraviolence culminates in the forcible nursing of a man by a woman with blood-covered breasts; in Zach Cregger's *Barbarian* (2022) a monstrous "Mother" entity also forcibly nurses a man, while a breastfeeding tutorial video is shown in a loop in the background. Horror arises in the overlap between motherhood, sex, and violence: "A sense of the sexual also debases breastfeeding in horror. [These films] [...] all blur the lines between sex and motherhood. 'We have a cultural short circuit between the two, especially when we consider breasts [...] as both source and site of sexual pleasure', [Erin] Harrington said" (MacNeill). In the acclaimed series *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), breastfeeding is conspicuously associated with Lysa Arryn (Kate Dickie). In Season One, Lysa, who is violent, mentally unstable, and sex-starved, is seen breastfeeding her son Robin (Lino Facioli; the character is named Robert in the novels), who is around nine years old, a scene witnessed with embarrassment and consternation by Tyrion Lannister (Peter Dinklage). Lactation memories are also occasionally evoked by Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey), whose fierce motherly love is represented both as what makes her character occasionally less ruthless *and* as a powerful drive motivating her ruthless behavior. I also find remarkable that lactation is absent from any scenes involving Gilly (Hannah Murray) and her newborn son; a remarkable choice, also in light of a scene of erotic

lactation in George R.R. Martin's *A Feast for Crows* between Gilly and Samwell Tarly (played by John Bradley in the series).

Towards Reappropriation: Breastfeeding Narratives and Historical Articulation

The above examples begin to unveil the 'absent presence' of breastfeeding. These narratives manifest a difficulty in grappling with the complexity of it; they tend to represent it as disturbing, unruly, and threatening, while implicitly – sometimes even explicitly, albeit with palpable unease – recognizing its cogency as a practice around which many issues and open questions converge. Among such issues are the representation of motherhood and other traditionally womanly roles; medicalization and medical authority, often wielded by men; economy and the workplace; race and class; domesticity, sexuality, and violence; and, potentially, more (for instance, environmental concerns). In the above examples, breastfeeding is briefly made central and subsequently exorcized. It is exorcized through different strategies: by implying the necessity of controlling it; by implying the necessity of discontinuing it; by making it repulsive; by showing it and then conspicuously removing it from sight.

Other narratives, by contrast, unabashedly place breastfeeding in crucial positions in their own structures, articulating it and entwining it with ethical, social, racial, and historical complexity, so that its presence can neither be translated into messages of indictment, nor simply into idealized, individualized messages of decontextualized advocacy. I shall now consider three novels: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987), and Shanthi Sekaran's *Lucky Boy* (2017). Seen from the perspective of an articulated consideration of breastfeeding, of an attempt to reappropriate it as power and as socially meaningful practice, these works provide a critique of any isolationist, reductionist, stereotypical view and pathologization of the lactating body. The choice of literary narrative is not meant to create a rift between literature and other forms of expression – quite the reverse:

a thematic reading frame might, in principle, be expanded to include creative items from many different media and/or artistic domains.⁴

In these novels, breastfeeding is an act of nurturance and care occurring in extreme conditions. Death, in other words, is not in the nursing, but in the world around. In *Song of Solomon*, Ruth Foster Dead's four-year-long nursing of her son Macon is the bodily as well as symbolic correlative of her fierce protection of him. Macon's nickname, "Milkman", originates in a breastfeeding ritual that Ruth cherishes and defends as "fully half of what [makes] her daily life bearable" (14). This ritual – subsequently forgotten by him, and later uneasily remembered – is a case of what is nowadays called 'prolonged' or 'long-term' breastfeeding. Milkman's death-haunted story unravels the act of nursing well into his adult life, in his name but also in the effects of the (until the end, unacknowledged) protection that his mother (and his aunt Pilate) bestowed on him. Ruth's self-centered, hedonistic 'long-term' nursing choice is an act of nurturing that, paradoxically, injects life into her already-dead son. This protection is necessary in a world where, as the novel's characters well know, Black people, and especially black men, are perpetually under the shadow of death. The pairing of young Macon's nickname, "Milkman", and his last name, "Dead," is a striking poetic reminder of such a situation.

This injection of life as/through a mother's milk is both taken to the extreme and tragically reversed in *Beloved*. Born a slave, Sethe impossibly claims the life *and death* of her children as a part of herself. When *Beloved* was published, it was, Morrison herself remarked, running both parallel and alternative to those strands of feminism that saw choosing *not* to be a mother as an act of freedom:

Suppose having children, being called a mother, was the supreme act of freedom – not its opposite? Suppose instead of being required to have children (because of gender, slave status, and profit) one chose to be responsible for them; to claim them as one's own; to be, in other

⁴ Frampton (2005) analyzes and/or comments on several 'classical' twentieth-century literary works which include the motif of breastfeeding; besides Morrison, she goes back to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*. For a literary perspective, see also Gaard.

words, not a breeder, but a parent. Under US slavery such a claim was not only socially unacceptable, it was illegal, anarchic. It was also an expression of intolerable female independence. It was freedom. (“On *Beloved*” 282).

Breastfeeding in *Beloved* is part of this claim, and provides the novel with an incredibly rich rhetorical and stylistic repertoire. Sethe’s milk is the very flow that propels the narrative. Milk is behind the events that lead to Sethe’s escape from the Sweet Home plantation. There is also, of course, the milk expropriation that Sethe endured as an infant – the fact that she was nursed not by her own mother but by a wet nurse and only after the white babies had been fed (Morrison, *Beloved* 200); and the milk rape she sustains at the hands of Schoolteacher and his nephews. This deprivation morphs into Sethe’s fierce will to give her milk to the one it is meant for – her baby girl: “All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. [...] Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me” (16). *Beloved*’s tragic death at the hands of her mother both archetypically and historically conjoins nurturance and annihilation, while the nursing of Denver immediately afterwards raises the question of legacy:

“It’s time to nurse your youngest,” she [Baby Suggs] said.

Sethe reached up for the baby without letting the dead one go.

Baby Suggs shook her head. “One at a time,” she said and traded the living for the dead, which she carried into the keeping room. When she came back, Sethe was aiming a bloody nipple into the baby’s mouth. Baby Suggs slammed her fist on the table and shouted, “Clean up! Clean yourself up!”

They fought then. Like rivals over the heart of the loved, they fought. Each struggling for the nursing child. Baby Suggs lost when she slipped in a red puddle and fell. So Denver took her mother’s milk right along with the blood of her sister. (152)

In *American Pietàs*, Ruby C. Tapia maintains that images of death in US culture depend on racial paradigms, and that the maternal – especially in the sense of a confrontation with the iconography of the *pietà*, the Virgin

Mary cradling the body of her dead son – is an inescapable component of a racialized framework that both produces death and attempts to make sense of it:

Dead before birth by slavery's hand, held now in her mother's arms, Beloved's pieced-apart body and humanity are brutally realized, like history, like race [...]. Sethe severs her girl child from this world and holds her whole, kills and claims her in a devastating, impossible way. [...] Inhabiting the pietà's shadow, this revision [...] demands that, like Beloved's older [sic] sister Denver who nurses immediately after the cutting, *we take in the blood with the milk.* (71; my emphasis)

Taking in a sister's blood together with a mother's milk is tantamount to perinatally learning about a historical legacy of death, and learning as soon as possible about the inescapable necessity of living with such a legacy and fighting to transform it, breaking the cycle of its recurrence. Offering readings of mother figures in Morrison, both Andrea O'Reilly and Paula Gallant Eckard refer to Erich Neumann, especially known for his 1956 Jungian study *Die große Mutter: Der Archetyp des großen Weiblichen* (known in English as *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*). In Neumann's reconstruction, the archetypal goddess-figures that traverse human cultures have in themselves, in different proportions, both nurturing and destructive aspects: the Great Mother is, at least potentially, both a life- and a death-giver. One may regard several characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* – Ruth, Pilate, Reba, Sethe, Denver, Baby Suggs – as reworkings of a “Great Mother” archetype, i.e., mother or para-mother figures who dispense life and nurturance against the overwhelming odds of a historical legacy of death. In my view, the maternal archetype subtends these texts not as a pre-cultural or supra-cultural terrain, but as a culturally inflected discourse that is consciously reworked to attempt a rethinking of history. The fact that this attempt is accompanied by a pervasive and complex presence of breastfeeding directly and indirectly confirms that breastfeeding, next to being a biological practice, is historical, relational, and political.

Sekaran's *Lucky Boy* centers on two women: Soli and Kavya, mothers to the same child, Ignacio, the novel's titular “boy.” Ignacio is born to Solimar

“Soli” Castro Valdez, a young Mexican undocumented immigrant living and working in Berkeley, California. When Ignacio is about fifteen months old, Soli is apprehended, imprisoned, and sent to a detention center to await deportation, while Ignacio is put into foster care and entrusted to Kavya and Rishi Reddy, a South Asian American middle-class couple. (The character of Soli is openly modeled on Encarnación Bail Romero, whose son was put up for adoption after she was arrested in an immigration raid in 2007.) Sekaran’s narrative outlines the ‘distant’ conflict between the birth mother and the foster mother, especially by means of juxtaposing – also in terms of narrative structure – their stories, desires, and struggles. No reassuring solution to the conflict is offered.

The presence of breastfeeding in the novel works at several levels, and is neither a neutral nor a univocal motif. Initially, it lends detail, credibility, and verisimilitude to the narrative of Soli’s motherhood. When the forceful separation of mother and child occurs, Ignacio’s abrupt, unchosen weaning is evoked by narrating what happens to the lactating mother. The narrative of Soli’s imprisonment lingers on her body, her breasts oozing milk that drenches her shirt. Put into solitary confinement for many hours, Soli resorts to drinking from her own breast to quench her terrible thirst. Focused through the lens of a surveillance camera, this scene is presented through a mixture of emphasis and understatement, emotion and distance (Sekaran 230). A nursing-related scene also accompanies the development of the relationship between Ignacio and Kavya. One night, in an effort to comfort him, Kavya offers her breast. The scene is two-faced, presenting what may be seen as a case of coterminous breastfeeding initiation and weaning, which is also the moment when the ‘new’ mother-son bond is cemented:

He took her nipple between his lips, latched on, and began to suck. [...] Kavya hunched over and bit her lip against the pain of cutting teeth, wondering all the while if maybe – anything was possible, where his desire met her hope, his mouth her glands. But eventually, he stopped sucking and unlatched. He frowned at the nipple, glistening now with his saliva. He rolled to the floor, then crawled to the bedroom door. That was it. He’d given up on her empty breast, and would never bother with it again. (282-83)

Finally, the 'lens' of breastfeeding can also be used to question the claim made by the political-institutional bodies involved – here, mainly the State of California, with its social services and legal apparatuses – as the primary regulators of Ignacio's life. Born in California, Ignacio has been declared a dependent of the State. Within the legal context of citizenship rights acquired by birth, the biological mother's body is forcefully disconnected from the child's. What becomes visible/tactile/evident in Sekaran's novel is the painful, even physical framework of this disconnection – as well as, meaningfully, the painful and physical framework of the new attachment created between Ignacio and his foster parents – primarily his foster mother. Both are constructed, as discussed above, through acts of breastfeeding.

To conclude, I wish to remark that in these novels, albeit in different ways, human milk is an objective correlative of nurturance, protection in vulnerability and politically-driven death hazard, and history as a space of – potentially and/or actually – conflictual embodiment and relationality. While the motif of lactation is connected to motherhood and parenthood, and accompanies several emotional representations of apparently 'private' dramas that the characters undergo, it also expands to encompass the (extreme) historical conditions in which these acts of breastfeeding, or *denied* breastfeeding, occur. In Sekaran, these conditions also hint at a shared (new?) form of vulnerability: "Why did people love children [...] born to other people? For the same reason they lived in Berkeley, knowing the Big One [earthquake] was coming: because it was a beautiful place to be, and because there was no way to fathom the length or quality of life left to anyone, and because there was no point running from earthquakes into tornadoes, blizzards, terrorist attacks" (349). Such narratives help us regard breastfeeding as a complex, multilayered, socially relevant matter, placing this embodied practice at the heart of an aesthetic and rhetorical network that recognizes its potential for broad historical and political reflection.

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Articles

The Thirteenth Amendment and Pan-American Emancipation

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ABSTRACT

The year 2025 marks the 160th anniversary of the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, which finalized the total and immediate emancipation of the entire enslaved population of the newly reunited nation. The motivation behind the Lincoln administration's emancipation policy was a combination of practical advantages and humanitarian idealism. The Emancipation Proclamation, issued in September 1862 and enacted in January 1863, played a crucial role in the Union's effort to thwart European intervention on behalf of the Confederacy. The response of European liberals, notably Giuseppe Garibaldi, signaled a shift of popular sympathy abroad for the Union cause. Emancipation also entailed provisions for enlisting free and enslaved African Americans in the Union armed forces. They contributed about ten percent of the army, a vital addition that came at a crucial time in the war. Their service also helped lay the groundwork for claims to full citizenship after the war. The idea of a Constitutional amendment to definitively end slavery in the nation emerged after Lincoln's landslide reelection in 1864, which Republicans viewed as a popular mandate for emancipation. The Thirteenth Amendment was the first of three Reconstruction-era amendments designed to enfranchise formerly enslaved people as full and equal citizens of the nation. Its rapid passage through Congress in January 1865 and its ratification by the states in December of that year were energized by a new commitment to the radical reconstruction of the South. By this act, four million humans were set free, the largest emancipation of its kind in history. It also

signaled the end of slavery in its remaining bastions, the Spanish Caribbean and Brazil in particular, which held close to two million workers in slavery. The Union victory, Abraham Lincoln's martyrdom, and the example set by US emancipation energized abolitionists in Spanish America, Brazil, Spain, and Europe to bring slavery to an end. Furthermore, US foreign policy under William Seward became deliberately antislavery during the Civil War. His successor, Hamilton Fish, exerted pressure on Spain to put slavery on the road to extinction. The impact of events, people, and ideas coming out of the American Civil War had immense and lasting influence on the world, not least in bringing slavery to an end.

KEYWORDS

Emancipation, Thirteenth Amendment, Lyons-Seward Treaty, Spanish Abolition, Latin American Abolition

In December 2025, the United States will commemorate the 160th anniversary of the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, which reads:

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction... Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

If the language was spare, the impact was enormous. This act preempted any legal challenge to the Emancipation Proclamation – issued by US President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863 – by definitively abolishing slavery nation-wide. Though other countries in Latin America and Europe preceded the United States, none before or after came close to the scale of this emancipation. It was the largest emancipation of enslaved Africans anywhere before or since that time. Two-thirds of the entire enslaved population of the Americas at the time was liberated by the Thirteenth Amendment.

Before this, most Latin American and European countries had followed some form of gradual emancipation. Some passed free womb laws that granted freedom to children born to slave mothers, prolonging slavery for up to fifty or sixty years. Others, like Britain, supplanted slavery with

semi-free apprenticeships. British emancipation also entailed generous monetary compensation for slaveholders.¹

Similar legislation for gradual emancipation was enacted in the Northern states of the United States; however, national abolition would represent a radical departure from these precedents. The Southern slaveholders' rebellion and the horrific trauma of the Civil War made such concessions to slavery no longer politically and morally acceptable. Therefore, emancipation in the United States would be massive, immediate, and uncompensated.

The Emancipation Proclamation

If the Civil War made abolition possible, it also made it necessary. Indeed, Lincoln first devised his plan for emancipation in the summer of 1862, issuing a presidential executive order justified by his constitutional role as Commander-in-Chief. Up until that time, Lincoln had publicly denied any intention of interfering with slavery in the states where it existed. As the war dragged on, the threat of foreign intervention grew. Britain and France, concerned about the prolonged disruption to the cotton trade and eager to see the United States dismembered, were moving toward a multilateral intervention scheme. Lincoln was worried the American public was not ready to pivot from a war to save the Union to one to emancipate the enslaved people. He realized that the European public was bewildered that the antislavery party was fighting to preserve a union with slaveholders without destroying slavery. Liberals abroad, not the aristocratic ruling classes, would support the Union if it made emancipation its unequivocal cause – if, in other words, it acted like the Great American Republic that so many held up as a model for Europe (Doyle, *Cause* 216-17).

Lincoln tried to persuade the slave states that did not join the rebellion (Kentucky, Delaware, Maryland, and Missouri) to legislate emancipation by promising federal inducements, but that effort failed. The military

¹ For an overview of international emancipation see Drescher; on British emancipation and compensation, see “The Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery.”

situation looked grim after General George McClellan's Peninsular Campaign to seize Richmond failed in the summer of 1862. "Things had gone from bad to worse," Lincoln told one confidant that summer, "until I felt that we had reached the end of our rope [... W]e had about played our last card, and must change our tactics, or lose the game! I now determined upon the adoption of the emancipation policy" (Carpenter 13-14).

Lincoln reckoned that the war-weary Northern public would finally be willing to accept abolition as the price of peace. His proclamation, drafted in September 1862, was an executive order, an edict not subject to congressional approval. Lincoln, as president, promised to abolish slavery in all those states and parts of states that remained in rebellion at the end of a hundred days. This way, he kept faith with his promise that he would do nothing to interfere with slavery but now made it contingent on the rebels to lay down their arms or suffer the consequences.

The preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of September 22, 1862, warned the South and promised the world:

That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.

Emancipation as Diplomacy

Lincoln understood the proclamation's diplomatic power. He immediately instructed Secretary of State William Seward to send copies of the preliminary proclamation to US diplomatic posts worldwide. At last, the Union would announce to the world that it fought for a higher moral purpose than to preserve the Union. It now fought for liberty and the rebels for the perpetuation of slavery.

Seward doubted that European governments would welcome the Emancipation Proclamation. At a stormy cabinet meeting in July 1862, he warned it would make the Union look desperate. Immediate emancipation would be seen as an invitation to a Haitian-style racial holocaust and would

throw the cotton economy into severe and lasting chaos. It might even hasten the impulse of European powers to intervene and end the war on humanitarian grounds.

Seward was right. The press, including a few liberal journals, predicted a massive “servile insurrection” and further descent into “barbaric” warfare without end. Britain’s Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, and Foreign Secretary, Earl Russell, conceived a scheme to offer mediation in the war, presenting it as a humanitarian mission to end a conflict neither side could win. Should the Union refuse, as they assumed, the European powers would be justified in siding with the South and recognizing the Confederacy as a sovereign nation. Seward made it emphatically clear that, henceforth, any move to aid the South or intervene in the war would be seen as an effort to rescue slavery from the sentence of death Lincoln had imposed (Doyle, *Cause* 216-22).

Seward expertly utilized the new moral leverage the proclamation gave him. He instructed his European envoys to ask: “Are the enlightened and humane nations Great Britain and France to throw their protection over the insurgents now?” “Will they interfere to strike down the arm that so reluctantly but so effectually is raised at last to break the fetters of the slave, and seek to rivet anew the chains which he has sundered?” “Is this to be the climax of the world’s progress in the nineteenth century?” The questions answered themselves (qtd. in Doyle, *Cause* 243).²

The final version of the Emancipation Proclamation included language promising able-bodied enslaved males they could enlist in the Union Army and warning that slave uprisings in rebel territory would no longer be the duty of the federal government to repress. Confederate President Jefferson Davis answered by issuing a black decree that promised immediate death to any white officers commanding black troops and to any slaves in the

² See also Mr. Seward to Mr. Adams. 26 Sep 1862. Department of State. Washington, n. 259. Office of the Historian. FRUS. <<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1862/d153>>; Mr. Seward to Mr. Dayton. 20 Oct 1862. Department of State. Washington, n. 237. Office of the Historian. FRUS. <<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1862/d336>>.

Union armed forces. Seward's prophecy of a race war seemed to be taking form.

During the hundred days between the September proclamation and the January 1 deadline, the mood in Europe grew warmer toward Lincoln's new war for freedom. Nowhere was this more poignantly demonstrated than in England. The workers of Manchester gathered in the Free-Trade Hall on New Year's Eve 1862 to declare solidarity with Lincoln and the Union cause, which had now become their own.

You, as Commander-in-Chief of the Army, have appointed to-morrow, the first of January, 1863, as the day of unconditional freedom for the slaves of the rebel States. Heartily do we congratulate you and your country on this humane and righteous course. We assume that you cannot now stop short of a complete uprooting of slavery. ("Letter from the Working Men" 198-201)³

Historians usually give Britain center stage in any discussion of the international context of the American Civil War; however, let us not overlook the crucial role of Italians in shifting transatlantic public opinion in favor of Lincoln, the Union, and emancipation. In the summer of 1862, as the Great Powers of Europe were conspiring to intervene in the American Civil War, Giuseppe Garibaldi and his red-shirt army of followers mounted a march on Rome. Two years earlier, Garibaldi led *I Mille* (The Thousand), an army of volunteers, to topple the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and bring Southern Italy into a unified Italian nation under the auspices of King Victor Emmanuel II (Riall).

Garibaldi wanted to continue the 1860 campaign to Rome, designated as the future capital of the unified Italian nation. That meant challenging Pope Pius IX, whose temporal kingdom was defended by a French garrison. Victor Emmanuel II ended Garibaldi's northward march outside of Naples. Two years later, Garibaldi aroused Italians to reignite the Roman question. *Roma o Morte!* Garibaldi's army of Red Shirts shouted. They landed in

³ Originally published in *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Jan 1863; for Lincoln's eloquent reply see "To the Working Men of Manchester" 63-65.

Marsala just as the 1860 campaign began and moved across Sicily, by ship to Calabria, and up the Italian peninsula toward Rome.

Fearing war with France, King Victor Emmanuel II sent the army to halt the march. At Aspromonte, a mountain in Calabria, shots were fired, and Garibaldi fell severely wounded in the ankle. He was taken to a prison near Spezia and remained in bed for weeks, recovering from his wounds. The international press was on fire with reports of Garibaldi, the gravity of his wound, his possible death, and rumors as to how the Italian government would punish him. Dozens of public demonstrations broke out in Europe, the most spectacular being the Hyde Park demonstrations in London. Public rallies in the park turned into violent melees between workers demonstrating solidarity with Garibaldi and Irish Catholics favoring Papal Rome (Riall 317-29; Fiorentino 211-20; “Garibaldian Riots;” Gilley).

From his hospital bed, Garibaldi issued a public letter “to the English Nation,” calling on Britain to take the lead in the struggle for universal emancipation and human progress. He wrote that England had been the refuge of Europeans from autocracy and tyranny. He urged Britain to rebuke Napoleon III and his imperialist designs in Mexico. “Call the French nation to cooperate with you.” Then, he turned to the American Question:

Call the great American Republic. She is, after all, your daughter, risen from your bosom; and [...] is struggling today for the abolition of slavery so generously proclaimed by you. Help her to escape from the terrible strife waged against her by the traders in human flesh. Help her, and then place her by your side at the great assembly of nations – that final work of the human intellect. (“Garibaldi to the English Nation”)⁴

Garibaldi’s march on Rome and his bedside appeals to European powers helped cause a ministerial crisis in the French government. To appease Catholics and his devout empress, Eugénie, Napoleon III replaced the foreign secretary, Édouard Thouvenel, who was perceived as being soft on France’s defense of Papal Rome, with Édouard Drouyn de Lhuys, an

⁴ See also Doyle, *Cause*, esp. ch. 9.

ultramontane Catholic fully committed to defending the pope in Rome (Case and Spencer 330; 347-51).

The Garibaldi affair effectively upended France and Britain's immediate plans to intervene in the American conflict that autumn. News of the Emancipation Proclamation came to public consciousness in Europe just as the Garibaldi *imbroglio* came to a head. From then on, it would be difficult for any European power even to contemplate taking sides against the struggle to end slavery. That struggle was far from over, and the promise of emancipation hung in the balance for the next two and a half years.

Emancipation as Wartime Exigency

Lincoln was careful to justify the Emancipation Proclamation as a presidential wartime measure. He acted "in time of actual armed rebellion against the authority and government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion." The language made clear that enslaved people, as of January 1, 1863, "shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom." The national government was going to protect their freedom.

The final version of the proclamation added language meant to calm fears of racial conflagration that had circulated in the press during the previous one hundred days. "I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defence; and I recommend to them that, in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages."

However, the following clause invited freed people to serve in the Union military. "I further declare and make known, that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service." Free blacks in the North were already

joining the Union military; now, they would be joined by those liberated by Lincoln's edict.

Once accepted as willing and capable soldiers, African Americans played a crucial role in the Union's victory. An estimated 179,000 served in the Army, about 10% of the total force. Another 19,000 served in the Union Navy, and thousands more black men and women served in non-combatant roles. As death tolls mounted and resistance to the draft stiffened, the Union military's "sable arm" played an incalculable role in filling the void and relieving pressure on the war-weary Northern public. Their service to the Union significantly strengthened public and congressional support for emancipation ("Black Soldiers;" Cornish).

Among white Union soldiers, most joined out of a sense of duty to their community and nation, but not to sacrifice themselves for the betterment of enslaved people in the South. Chandra Manning's meticulous investigation of ordinary soldiers concluded that Northerners began with an idealistic view of their purpose. They fought to preserve the Union and uphold the republican experiment in self-government as an example to the world. As the war progressed and these young Northern soldiers encountered slavery for the first time, many developed a humanitarian and religious sense of compassion toward the victims of slavery. Some wanted to punish the slaveholders. Others saw that emancipation would redeem the nation and remove a glaring contradiction to its republican ideals. One Irish immigrant wrote that the war set "the defenders of freedom, the champions of Liberty" against those "enemies of humanity, Liberty, and God, who would tare to attoms [...] the best Government that the world ever new" (Manning 151). For whatever reason, they understood that ending slavery would hasten the end of the war they were so weary of fighting.

From Wartime Expediency to Constitutional Amendment

It seemed clear that emancipation was helping win the war. It also opened deep divisions in Northern society over the purpose and cost of the war and the place of African Americans, free or enslaved, in the nation. In the 1864 presidential election, the Republicans made emancipation a central

focus of their campaign to reelect Abraham Lincoln. Democrats nominated General George McClellan, the failed leader of the Union Army whom Lincoln had relieved of command. McClellan and the Democrats called for a return to “the Union as it was,” meaning the restoration of slavery.

Voters gave Lincoln a decisive victory. Union soldiers voted for Lincoln against their former commander by a margin of three to one. Lincoln also took the election as a mandate for emancipation. He insisted that the Republican Party included it as a goal in the 1864 party platform. Lincoln’s stunning election victory provided the ideal opportunity to transform a wartime presidential order into a permanent part of the Constitution. Once the war was over, the president feared, recalcitrant Southerners would challenge the legitimacy of the proclamation in court or Congress (Foner 312-14; Vorenberg, esp. ch.7; McPherson 706; 841-42).

The usual path to enacting a constitutional amendment requires approval by two-thirds of both houses of Congress and three-quarters of the states. The first ten amendments, known as the *Bill of Rights*, were drafted as a bundle to garner support for the Constitution in 1789 and ratified two years later without difficulty. Only two additional amendments had been added before 1865, both involving comparatively minor, non-controversial matters. The Eleventh Amendment (1795) limited the scope of the federal courts. The Twelfth Amendment (1804) arranged for the President and Vice President to be elected together.

Seward agreed to lead the campaign for the Thirteenth Amendment through Congress. Steven Spielberg’s movie version of the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment may exaggerate the sordid nature of vote-swapping and deal-making. “Laws are like sausages,” German leader Otto von Bismarck allegedly said. “It’s better not to see them being made.” Lincoln played a forceful role in persuading individual members of Congress to support the amendment. “I leave it to you to determine how it shall be done,” one congressman recorded Lincoln telling him, “but remember that I am President of the United States, clothed with immense power, and I expect you to procure those votes.” There was immense pressure, arm-twisting, and the exchange of political favors. Still, the idea that this amendment was the product of bribery is a legend its enemies propagated to delegitimize it (Shapiro, “Quote . . . Misquote,” Shapiro, *The Yale Book*; Vorenberg 198-204; Stahr 338-47).

Congress had debated the idea of an amendment to end slavery since the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863. A year later, the Senate Judiciary Committee devised the language for a joint resolution. The Senate approved the resolution in April 1864 by a vote of 38 to 6. The vote in the House fell short that June. Pressure was mounting from all directions on Northern Democrats to support the amendment. Women played a crucial role in building public support. The Women's National Loyal League led a massive petition drive that garnered over half a million signatures in support of emancipation (Vorenberg; "The Civil War: The Senate Story").

On January 31, 1865, the amendment came before the House for a final vote. The galleries were packed with citizens, including many blacks and women, waiting in a charged atmosphere for the results. The final tally was 119 to 56 in favor, with 8 absent, exceeding the necessary two-thirds majority. The House erupted in joyous celebration (Vorenberg 205-08).

The popularity of the Emancipation Proclamation led Northern states to compete to be the first to ratify it. Illinois urged the legislature to ratify before Seward had even sent official notification of its passage in Washington. Republican strongholds in New England and the Midwest were quick to join the rush to ratify. Democrats in New York and border states objected to the federal usurpation of authority over the states and the implications the amendment had for further political and civil rights for blacks. Ratification slowed as more conservative states balked. Lincoln's assassination left many doubting whether his successor, Andrew Johnson, was committed to the cause of emancipation, but Johnson proved to be reliable. Finally, in early December 1865, Georgia put the ratification drive over the top – Seward certified passage of the Thirteenth Amendment on December 18 (Vorenberg; Foner, *Fiery* 316-19).

Opponents of the amendment were correct about its implications for future measures to assure citizenship, voting rights, and civil rights for the freed people. Republicans in Congress were already busy drafting civil rights legislation and debating the right of freedmen to vote. The Thirteenth Amendment was sweeping in purpose and radical in effect. In one stroke, it abolished slavery immediately without any provision for gradual emancipation and no concession for compensating slaveholders. It put to rest the stubborn claim that the states had the sole right to

determine whether slavery was lawful. The amendment cast slavery out of the republic and made freedom the national standard. It also began a revolutionary program to transform the South and America. Two additional Reconstruction-era amendments followed, the Fourteenth Amendment granting birthright citizenship and equal protection under the law, and the Fifteenth Amendment denying states the right to restrict voting rights on the basis of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. The Civil War and Reconstruction opened the possibility of genuine revolutionary change in American society. It truly was the Second Founding (Foner, *Second Founding*).

Historians have focused more on the defeat of Reconstruction's revolutionary aspirations than on its undeniable and lasting impact on the nation and world. Slavery was thriving as an economic institution in America and the Western Hemisphere. Southern slaveholders put it all at risk to preserve slavery once Lincoln and the Republicans won control of the federal government in 1860. The Confederacy endured four years of horrific sacrifice to hold onto slavery, and they accepted its end with deep and abiding resentment.

The death of slavery in the United States also spelled the end of slavery in the Spanish Caribbean and Brazil, the two remaining strongholds of slavery in 1865. The Thirteenth Amendment definitively emancipated about four million enslaved people, which constituted more than two-thirds of all enslaved people in the Western Hemisphere. About 368,550 of these people resided in Cuba (1862), 41,746 in Puerto Rico (1862), and 1,510,806 in Brazil (1872) (Corwin 156; Bergad 120-21; 177).

The Civil War set off an international wave of turbulence in those colonies and empires still sanctioning slavery. Rumors of conspiracies and slave uprisings rippled throughout the Atlantic during the war. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation clarified that the Union fully intended to make the war an excuse for emancipation. Officials in Brazil, Spain, and Spain's Caribbean empire watched with trepidation as events in the United States pointed toward the end of slavery there.

Robert Shufeldt, the US consul-general in Havana, reported to Washington soon after the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation was made public: "Among the negroes themselves I have no doubt the effect

of the war is well canvassed and I am told that they already mingle within their songs the significant refrain 'Avanza Lincoln, Avanza! Tu eres nuestra Esperanza!'" (Onward Lincoln, Onward! You are our Hope!) (Shufeldt to Seward 46; Graden, 199-202; 209).

Many Cuban whites hoped for Lincoln's success as well. Cuba, "the Ever-Faithful Isle," remained loyal to Spain when all the South American colonies fought for independence out of fear that rebellion against Spain would invite a slave rebellion against them. Cuba would go the way of Haiti and "become African." The US example emboldened many Cuban whites to protest the corruption and exploitation of their Spanish rulers. "The time in which Cuba and Puerto Rico trembled before the thought of becoming African is over" (qtd. in Martinez-Fernandez 46), a group of Cuban reformers wrote to Queen Isabella II in July 1865 (Corwin 142-43).

Cubans, free and enslaved, would flock to the harbor in Havana to learn news of the great war being waged to the North, knowing that its outcome would somehow change their future. When the ships brought news of Lincoln's death, Cubans responded with great emotion to the consternation of Spanish officials who forbade any references to Lincoln as the *Gran Emancipador* or say or print anything that might be subversive to slavery.

Lincoln's assassination brought an extraordinary wave of grief over the island. "Men and women wore, each man on the watch and each woman on the waist, black ribbons with the Union eagle and the portrait of the martyr," one Cuban recorded. Portraits of Lincoln could be seen on the walls of mansions and humble shacks; "the emancipator's effigy was a symbol, a flag, a means of expressing deeply felt aspirations in an oppressed colony and a land of slavery" (Santovenia 465).

The United States had already enacted a policy to end the Atlantic slave traffic that would effectively doom the future of slavery in the Spanish Caribbean. Early in 1862, William Seward reached out to Lord Lyons, Britain's ambassador to the United States, for a treaty committing the United States to cooperate with Britain in suppressing the slave trade. Much of the traffic was being carried out in ships registered in the United States because it alone refused to allow the search and seizure of enslaved Africans.

The Southern states had obstructed any effort by Congress to remove this embarrassing situation. Once they seceded from the Union, Seward moved deliberately to align the Union with Britain's antislavery stance before the world. If domestic policy on emancipation had yet to be settled, US foreign policy from this point forward was decisively antislavery.

The treaty had a rapid and devastating effect on the slave trade. The traffic between Africa and Cuba dropped sharply from an estimated 25,000 in 1860 to less than 7,000 by 1864 and down to only 143 in 1865. It was the death knell for slavery in Cuba, which continued to depend on the slave trade to replenish its heavily male population of enslaved labor (Milne 511-25; Drescher 328-29; Corwin 147; 181 and ff.; Marques 244-60; Murray 244).

Spain's Slow Path to Emancipation

Spain was the last European nation to sanction slavery in its colonies abroad, and international pressure to do something about it grew after 1865. There were feeble signs of antislavery sentiment in Spain during the 1850s. A Spanish translation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* were published, and some dramatizations appeared on stage in the 1850s (Corwin 154-61; Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire*; Schmidt-Nowara, "From Aggression" 136).

However, there was no organized, public-facing antislavery movement until the Spanish Abolitionist Society suddenly appeared in 1865 as the American Civil War concluded. It was telling that the leadership of this organization came mainly from Puerto Rico and Cuba. Among the leadership were Julio Vizcarrondo and his American wife, Harriet Brewster, who came from Puerto Rico to Madrid in 1863 determined to arouse Spain's leading citizens to act against slavery. The society organized late in 1864 and held its inaugural public meeting the following April, just as the American war ended.

Another leading figure in Spain's nascent abolitionist movement was Rafael María de Labra, a Cuban-born immigrant who became known as the "Wilberforce of Spain." Labra was a great admirer of Lincoln and

America and he praised the Republicans for choosing to reconstruct rather than restore the war-torn nation (Arroyo Jiménez; Ferris; Corwin 177-79; Davies and Sánchez).

By silent agreement, the Spanish Cortes had not dared to broach the slavery question since 1838, nearly thirty years before. That changed on May 6, 1865. Antonio María Fabié, a historian and author, told his fellow deputies that “the war in the United States is finished, and being finished, slavery in the whole American continent can be taken as finished” (Corwin 162-63).

The government responded slowly. The following November, it set up the Colonial Reform Commission (Junta de Información de Ultramar), whose purpose was to address the need for reform involving governance and trade policies affecting Cuba and Puerto Rico and the future of slavery in light of mounting international opposition to the slave trade.

It took nearly a year before the Commission met in Madrid. It began by addressing such reforms as encouraging the natural reproduction of the slave population, coercing free blacks into the workforce, and recruiting Chinese coolies to work the sugar plantations. The delegates from Puerto Rico had finally had enough of this disingenuous reform talk. At the third session, they announced it was time for this “ill-fated institution” of slavery to end. The Cuban delegation was far more proslavery, and its members answered with a familiar litany of the horrors of emancipation: economic ruin and race war on the Haitian model.

The antislavery delegates, in response, warned the others on the Reform Commission that if Spain did not act to end slavery, the United States was planning to boycott imports from Cuba and Puerto Rico, with devastating consequences (Corwin 203).

The Colonial Reform Commission eventually recommended an immediate end to the slave trade, freedom for all children born to enslaved mothers, and compensation to the owners of 450 pesos per emancipated slave. The Commission further recommended several reforms for Cuba and Puerto Rico’s colonial governance, including representation in the Cortes and equal civil rights for colonials and Spaniards. The Commission’s report to the Spanish government was ignored.

In October 1866, a group of political and military leaders met secretly in Ostend, Belgium, to organize a revolution against Queen Isabella II and the Bourbon monarchy which had ruled Spain since 1700. They were fed up with the corruption and moral depravity surrounding the throne and disgusted with a series of imperialist misadventures in America during the American Civil War: the unsuccessful recolonization of Santo Domingo, the failed invasion of Mexico, and the humiliating efforts to reassert Spanish influence over its former colonies in South America.

The failure of the Colonial Reform Commission was the final straw for the Spanish revolutionaries. In September 1868, the coalition of Spain's revolutionaries seized control of the government, drove Queen Isabella II into exile in France, and proclaimed a liberal government based on universal male suffrage and a "democratic monarchy." It became known as the Glorious Revolution, a bow to the peaceful overthrow of England's King James in 1688. However, the democratic spirit of Spain's revolution owed more to the United States than to Britain. For Spanish liberals, America was the foremost model of human progress, liberal government, and, not least, emancipation. Juan Prim, Emilio Castelar, and other Spanish revolutionary leaders greatly admired Abraham Lincoln and his bold decision to end slavery (Ferris, *Imagining "America"*; Ferris, "A Model Republic" 51-79).

Cuba Libre

Within days of the revolution in Spain, simultaneous revolutions broke out in Cuba and Puerto Rico. Both proclaimed independence from Spain and, with less precision, promised freedom to enslaved people who joined the revolution. Manuel Cespedes, Cuba's rebel leader, later waffled, promising freedom only if the revolution succeeded. Most Cuban rebels, however, realized they had no hope of surmounting the well-armed Spanish forces without US aid, and no chance of that unless they issued an unequivocal proclamation of independence. They met in the small town of Guáimaro and drafted a constitution that established a genuine republican form of government and abolished slavery wholly and immediately. In a few

words, Article 24 struck down slavery: *Todos los habitantes de la Republica son enteramente libres* (Constitución de Guáimaro; Doyle, *Age*).

The Guáimaro Assembly agreed to directly solicit support for the Cuban Republic from the incoming president, Ulysses S. Grant, and even invited annexation. The last act of the assembly was to adopt the banner under which Narciso López and his band of filibusters fought in the 1850s as the official flag of the Republic of Cuba. This was yet another bow to the United States and the idea of “making Cuba become part of the splendid American constellation,” in the words of one advocate of annexation (Doyle, *Age* 163-65; Pirala 673; Zambrana 45; Guerra 81-82; May).

The Spanish government in Madrid was slow to move toward the abolition of slavery in its Caribbean empire. President Grant appointed Daniel Sickles, a Union veteran and Radical Republican, as the US minister to Spain. Secretary of State Hamilton Fish instructed Sickles to offer US mediation in the civil war that had erupted in Cuba, stipulating the abolition of slavery as one of the preconditions for peace. Juan Prim, representing the new Spanish government, agreed to grant Cuba independence only when the rebels laid down their arms. Cubans could then end slavery on their own accord. “That is your glory in America, the reward of your philanthropy, and we do not wish to deprive you of it.” In truth, the liberal government in Spain faced stiff opposition to letting Cuba or its slaves go free (Doyle, *Age* 216-21).

Prim wanted to make the slavery question one for Cuba, Puerto Rico, and America to answer. Fish ramped up pressure on Spain, instructing Sickles to let Prim know that if Spain did not act to end slavery, the United States would take sides with the Cuban rebels. News of this threat was leaked in the press, and the US effort to mediate peace fell apart. American enthusiasm for the revolution in Cuba grew apace.

Finally, in May 1870, the Spanish Cortes debated a bill proposed by Segismundo Moret y Prendergast that would grant freedom to all children born to slave mothers, all enslaved over the age of sixty, and to all those who fought with Spain against the revolutionaries in Cuba and Puerto Rico. Emilio Castelar criticized Moret’s timid gradualist approach and held up Lincoln and American emancipation as the model. “Pause a moment to consider the man who wiped out this terrible stain which blotted out the stars of the American banner,” he implored the Cortes.

Moret reminded the Cortes that Lincoln would have preferred gradual emancipation because he wanted to avoid the horrible civil war America endured. Castelar admitted that Lincoln offered gradual emancipation, but the slaveholders refused “as they shut their eyes here and oppose every profound and radical change. And immediate abolition came.” Lincoln, Castelar continued, “was convinced that all hope of compromise was gone, that gradual steps are impracticable in reforms demanded by justice and humanity.” Castelar then rhapsodized about America’s Reconstruction:

The United States, having converted its slaves into men, have devoted themselves to turning those men into citizens. [...] And today, gentlemen, those beings who were formerly not even men, are freer than the first of the sons of Europe [...] Those men who were like beasts of burden, wretched as the reptiles that crawled among the cotton and the cane, are free men, are American citizens; they sit in the Congress and the Senate of Washington. (*Diario de Sesiones*, 20 Jun 1870 8989; Castelar 35)

Castelar’s appeal for emancipation on the American model went unheeded, and the Moret bill became law on July 4, 1870 and was called *Ley de Cuatro de Julio*, a nod to America, whose impatient diplomats were not appeased. Fish disparaged the law, saying, “I can scarcely believe that it will command the support of the liberals of Spain, under whose auspices the revolution of 1868 was made. The total emancipation it contemplates is postponed far toward the middle of the next century.” The law “may rather be called a project for relieving the slave owners from the necessity of supporting infants and aged slaves, who can only be a burden, and of prolonging the institution as to able-bodied slaves.” This law must not be the end of the matter, only “the entering wedge for the eventual destruction of a pernicious system of labor” (“Presidential Message” 12-17).

Moret answered by reminding critics of America’s slow progress toward emancipation and pointing out that Brazil still lagged behind Spain. Impatience with the Moret Law and steady international pressure from the United States and Britain, in particular, led Spain to enact immediate emancipation for Puerto Rico in 1873. Abolitionists, like Castelar, rejoiced. “We are brethren with the Americans in the cause of abolition

[...] We belong to the race of Christ, Washington, Spartacus, and Lincoln because we have fearlessly pronounced the word liberty and the definitive redemption of the slaves.” The Cortes answered with “great and prolonged applause” and shouts of *¡Viva España!* (Corwin 284-87; *Diario de Sesiones*, 21 Dec 1872 2542-43).

Brazil Follows

Brazil watched Spain give way before the antislavery tide without taking any deliberate action to end slavery. The American Civil War and Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation had shaken confidence in slavery’s future at the highest levels of Brazil’s government.

Brazil, like Spain, did not have a robust antislavery movement or political faction in the government. Nonetheless, the American Civil War stirred individuals to raise their voices. Aureliano Candido Tavares Bastos, a young law student in São Paulo, was enthralled with America as a model for Brazil’s future. Slavery, he was convinced, was a burden to human progress everywhere. Through his publications and political speeches, Tavares Bastos used the American Civil War to stir up serious debate on the future of slavery (Saba 82-84; 117-20; 124; 127; Bergad; Bethell 113-44; Conrad; Toplin).

The Union’s ultimate victory and Lincoln’s death moved several in Brazil’s political leadership to speak out against slavery. In June 1865, Francisco Gê Acayaba de Montezuma, Viscount of Jequitinhonha, a senator from Bahia de Salvador, a stronghold of slavery, spoke before Brazil’s senate. Brazil must honor Lincoln by removing “the cancer that weakens us,” he told the Senate. When another senator protested, Jequitinhonha explained the “great cancer” he referred to meant “the institution of slavery” (Saba 116-17).

Louis Agassiz, a Harvard scientist visiting Brazil, reported a conversation with a prosperous slaveholder in Rio de Janeiro who bluntly told him that slavery had reached its end. “It finish with you; and when it finish with you, it finish here, it finish everywhere.” Brazilians everywhere seemed to

grasp that the outcome of the US Civil War meant the end of slavery in their country (Agassiz and Cabot C. Agassiz 49; Bernstein 87-104; Saba).

Joaquim Nabuco, the leading voice of Brazilian antislavery, confirmed the indispensable role of Lincoln's example to Brazil. "Through what Lincoln did, owing to the great light he kindled for all the world with his Proclamation, we could win our cause without a drop of blood being shed," he wrote years later. "We all owe to Lincoln the immense debt of having fixed forever the free character of American civilization" (Nabuco 1; 4; Jardim de Oliveira 149-51).

In his annual speech from the throne in 1867, Brazil's Emperor Dom Pedro II called on the government to address the question of slavery. Still, it was not until Spain acted that Brazil's Senate finally confronted slavery's future. One year after the Moret Law passed, Brazil's senate debated a similar "free womb" law, known as the Rio Branco Law, named in honor of its sponsor, José Maria da Silva Paranhos, the Visconde do Rio Branco.

Senator Zacarias de Góis, from Bahia de Salvador, a stronghold of slavery, explained how international events had led to this reform. "Slavery had come to an end in the United States [...] the Spanish government is also ready to end it in Cuba. While the Great Republic [the United States] had slaves [...] the issue could be ignored." "We were shielded," another senator interjected.

Once the United States ended slavery, Zacarias continued, "We had no more excuses." "With Brazil alone as the only slave country in America, it was impossible to keep such an institution alive among us. [...] There was no need for a war against us to push us toward emancipation; the world laughing at us was enough; becoming the scorn of all nations [...] was enough" (*Annaes do Senado* 29-30; de Bivar Marquese 223-24).

Zacarias understood how emancipation in one country both inspired and compelled others to follow. Slavery was finished in Brazil because it was finished in the United States, Spain's Caribbean colonies, and everywhere else in the Americas. In the same way, the gradualist measures of Spain and Brazil gave way to total emancipation in Puerto Rico (1873), Cuba (1886), and Brazil (1888).

Conclusion

For nearly four centuries, African slavery had shaped the economy, society, and ideology of the Americas and the Atlantic World. Slave rebellions and antislavery societies, political reformers, and religious leaders had struggled to end slavery. Some predicted slavery would die of its own accord. Yet, enslaved labor remained a profitable source of enormous wealth – and lasting shame everywhere – until it finally came to an end in the American hemisphere.

The failures of Reconstruction's radical vision of building a biracial democratic society after the Civil War are well known. The destruction of slavery in the United States and across the Americas was, however, a noble and lasting achievement that no one can deny.

Slavery in the Americas had withstood countless rebellions, mountains of abolitionist sermons and tracts, and earnest efforts to reform. There were notable results in curbing the transatlantic traffic in slaves yet only limited success in ending slavery. During the wave of revolutions that swept the Americas and Europe after 1776, slavery was excoriated as a barbaric relic of the past, the antithesis of Enlightenment ideals of human freedom, natural rights, and equality (Israel; Davis, *Revolutions*; Davis, *The Problem*).

Several US states and several Latin American republics ended slavery by the 1820s. However, the overwhelming majority of the enslaved remained in the remaining strongholds of the plantation economies of the US South, the Spanish Caribbean, and Brazil. Abolitionists attacked slavery as a relic of the barbaric past, yet there was little sign of it giving way to the liberal ethos of free labor, natural rights, and the march of human progress.

Slavery as an idea was rapidly losing ground by the mid-nineteenth century. Still, as an economic and political force, the Slave Power in the United States (and its counterparts in Spain and Brazil) wielded enormous influence. In *Mastering America*, Robert Bonner argues that slaveholders exerted significant influence over key elements of the federal government throughout the antebellum period. In *A Vast Southern Empire*, Matthew Karp reveals that the Slave Power was in firm control of US foreign policy, through which they planned to build a powerful proslavery phalanx extending into Latin America. In the South, the price of slaves was rising,

and the enslaved population experienced steady natural growth, unlike any other in the Americas. Southern slaveholders also mounted a strong proslavery ideology and cast abolitionists as the enemies of peace and freedom. Slavery showed no signs of abating.

Indeed, slavery might have continued for generations had the South acceded to Lincoln's election and worked within the Union to mitigate abolitionism. Instead, Southern slaveholders chose to secede from the Union and form a nation that would perpetuate slavery forever. The war that ensued compelled Lincoln to turn slavery against the rebellion. The Emancipation Proclamation appealed to European public opinion, disrupted the enemy's workforce, and provided a fresh supply of soldiers eager to fight for their freedom. The collapse of the Slave Power in the United States was the death knell for slavery everywhere in the Americas.

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Subverting Immigrant Autobiography in the US

Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* and Louis Adamic

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ABSTRACT

This essay attempts to demonstrate how Louis Adamic's material and intellectual influence, as well as his textual model, contributed to the writing of the Filipino American foundational text, Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* (1946), a classic of Asian American literature. Starting with the renowned friendship between the two authors and emphasizing Adamic's support in guiding Bulosan through the ethnic expectations of the US editorial market – with the suggestion of the autobiographical genre –, this essay argues that Bulosan's employment and subversion of the immigrant autobiography was partly modeled on Adamic's semi-autobiography *Laughing in the Jungle* (1932), a heterodox European immigrant autobiography centered on class issues, social struggle, and the deconstruction of the American dream. The essay offers a brief comparative recognition of immigrant autobiographies written by European and Asian immigrants and their different canonical understanding through the classic works by William Boelhower and Elaine H. Kim. Then, drawing from archival materials and intertextual analysis, the essay argues that *America Is in the Heart's* structure, the narrator's skepticism toward assimilation policies and his attachment to the country of origin, are indebted to Adamic's influence because of formal and thematic similarities with his semi-autobiography. Nonetheless, the US colonial history

of the Philippines and the author's background rooted in rural Pangasinan, set Bulosan's text apart from both the European American and Asian American autobiographical "traditions" and thus from the model of Younghill Kang – even though the two undergo the same racial prejudice by the editorial market. *America Is in the Heart* subverts the immigrant autobiographical genre by re-signifying the concept of "America," juxtaposing American ideals with the harsh realities of violent exploitation and discrimination experienced by Filipino migrant workers. In doing so, it reframes "America" as a symbol of solidarity between racialized workers against the fascist corporate manifestations that worried Adamic in the 1930s.

KEYWORDS

Carlos Bulosan, Louis Adamic, Immigrant Autobiography, Filipino Diaspora, Ethnic Expectations

Introduction

Filipino American literature's solid tradition, which today encompasses – to mention a few recent names – Jessica Hagedorn, Ninotchka Rosca, Gina Apostol, Sabina Murray, and Elaine Castillo, gained international recognition with the publication of two pivotal anthologies: *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974), and *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (1993). Both include, respectively, an excerpt and a posthumous short story by Carlos Bulosan (1913-1956), who is deemed as the forefather of Filipino American literature (Hagedorn 27). Even though Filipino literature in English started the decade after the US colonial occupation of the Philippines in 1898, Bulosan was the first to cover the Filipino migratory experience in the US with a semi-fictional autobiography – or semi-autobiography –, *America Is in the Heart* (1946). However, the absence of an autobiographical tradition of the Filipino diaspora in the US forced Bulosan to search for autobiographical narrative models among diasporic authors from other countries, such as Korean American Younghill Kang and the Slovenian American writer and activist Louis Adamic. After a brief examination of the European and Asian American immigrant autobiographical patterns, this essay will show how Adamic's material and intellectual influence,

as well as the model of his semi-autobiography, contributed to the writing of *America Is in the Heart*. Bulosan's meetings with Los Angeles writers in the 1930s led him to make the acquaintance of historian and attorney Carey McWilliams, who introduced him to Louis Adamic. It was ultimately Adamic who advised Bulosan to subvert the conventions of the immigrant autobiography from within. Moreover, the comparison between Bulosan's text and Adamic's semi-autobiography *Laughing in the Jungle* (1932) shows several intertextual similarities that suggest Bulosan's attentive reading of Adamic's work. *Laughing in the Jungle* is based on Adamic's own migratory experience from the province of the Austro-Hungarian empire and illustrates the pitfalls of assimilation into the US dominant culture, exposing the implicit power imbalances of melting-pot policies. In this sense, Adamic's text represented an anti-model of the European immigrant autobiographies in the US (Boelhower 49-56). The fictional device of the gap between author and alter-ego employed by both Adamic and Bulosan acquires political value, allowing for a reading beyond *America Is in the Heart*'s apparent assimilationist enthusiasm and showing a critical re-signification of the Filipino workers' aspirations in the US. This essay tries to deepen the analysis of the renowned friendship between the two authors, which has never led to comparative readings before. Michael Denning's compelling study *The Cultural Front* (1998), which analyzes both Adamic's and Bulosan's works as cultural emanations of the Popular Front, lacks a comparison between the two authors.

The Anti-Model of Louis Adamic

Bulosan's debt to Adamic can be found in chapter 38 of *America Is in the Heart*, where the narrator-protagonist Allos/Carlos¹ describes an

¹ The narrator-protagonist is called Allos until chapter 17, where his older brother Macario calls him Carlos. The name change occurs in dire circumstances and symbolizes the initiation to the American experience: "Carlos! He had changed my name, too! Everything was changing" (Bulosan, *America* 130).

intense period of literary exploration that fueled his engagement in the struggles for Filipino workers' union rights. While in Los Angeles, he makes the acquaintance of the Japanese poet Yone Noguchi, as well as with John Fante, McWilliams, and Adamic. The latter, says the narrator, "because of his phenomenal success, overshadowed the others" (Bulosan, *America* 266). But there are other instances that show the profound influence of the Slovenian American writer. For example, in a 1942 manuscript entitled "In Search of America," which has been partly published posthumously with the title "My Education" (Bulosan, *If You Want* 15-20), we read this passage which was entirely edited out except for the last question:

I was fascinated by Louis Adamic. Here was a pattern for me. As an immigrant he brought with him a well-defined political heritage, but when he wrote of America there was some note of detachment. Yet when he wrote of his native Yugoslavia there was a great feeling of attachment and joy. It was only when he had stayed long enough that he was able to assimilate the living spirit of America. Am I not an immigrant like Louis Adamic? (Bulosan, "Manuscript" 13)

Bulosan's admiration for Adamic stems from the latter's ability to "stay long enough" in the US to put on paper a critique of the specter of assimilation, which, for Asian immigrants and Filipino colonial subjects, often revealed the most violent outcomes. The key elements that Bulosan took from Adamic and employed in his work are a "well-defined political heritage," a veiled skepticism and "detachment" from America's deceptions, and a "feeling of attachment and joy" for his country of origin – even though both authors' rural provenance sparked off idiosyncratic feelings toward their countries. Adamic conceived a new transnational identity where his politically self-conscious narrator maintains a complex bond with the country of origin and is therefore less inclined toward accepting total assimilation – *i.e.*, Americanization – to a dominant culture that often enacted anti-immigrant policies. In the early 1930s, the immigrant protagonist as a detached exile was a relatively new subject for the European immigrant autobiographical tradition (Enyeart 29-31).

The previous decades saw the publication of several European immigrant autobiographies which embraced the great narrative of Americanization and could be considered *exempla* of more or less traumatic assimilation, such as those written by Jacob Riis, Mary Antin, Edward Steiner, Marcus Eli Ravage, Horace Bridges, Edward Bok, and Constantine Panunzio. These authors wrote for two implied readers: the dominant WASP society, to which they wanted to show their conformity, and the newly arrived immigrant (Sollors 42; 58; Boelhower 51; Smith and Watson 88-90). The autobiographical genre is especially prone to promote assimilationist narratives because it embodies the elements of *Bildung*, personality formation, and, in the above-mentioned authors, of national identity formation. On the epistemological level, the above-mentioned authors added both an ethnic dualistic element and the collective dimension to Benjamin Franklin's self-making model (Boelhower 35-45; Denning 274-77). As Paul J. Eakin claims, "identity formation [...] is socially and (more specifically) discursively transacted" (61-65), namely, the most effective way to claim the self is in relation to the other: the self is asserted – assimilated – if the others recognize it as such. Thus, the best discursive way to assimilate to a given society is to narrate the self in relation to that society: this also explains the US editorial market's interest in assimilationist immigrant autobiographies. Adamic's semi-autobiography is ingeniously structured as an immigrant autobiography, which granted the book a place in the publishing market and the author a Guggenheim Fellowship, but its discourse challenges the assimilationist narrative (Tuerk 114-37).

Adamic's career started with contributions to periodicals such as the socialist *Haldeman-Julius Monthly* and Henry Louis Mencken's *American Mercury*, but gained national and international attention with the publication of *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America* (1931; 1934), a non-fiction book praised by Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis.² Adamic's writing career was fostered by his activism for ethnic and racial equality, which sparked his founding of the Common Council for

² Bertolt Brecht's poem "How the Ship Oskawa was Broken up by her own Crew" ("Abbau des Schiffes Oskawa durch die Mannschaft," *Svedenborger Gedichte*, 1939) was inspired by an episode narrated in *Dynamite* (Olivieri 17).

American Unity, whose literary emanation was the periodical *Common Ground*, first issued in 1941, which included contributions by Pearl S. Buck, Langston Hughes, and Eleanor Roosevelt (Enyeart 68). The author's seminal interest in the ethnic condition, however, must be found in his semi-autobiography. *Laughing in the Jungle* narrates the protagonist's childhood in Carniola (Habsburg Empire, now Slovenia), his oceanic travel to the US, his working and military experiences in the 1910s-1920s New York, Panama, and Los Angeles, and the parables of other Balkan immigrants that he encountered along his journey. Overall, the text conveys a precise message to the implied readers: "the whole American success idea [...] was headed, sooner or later, toward some such fate [...] – a crash in the dark" (Adamic, *Laughing* 329-30). This demonstrates the author's awareness of the assimilationist genre's propagandistic function, to which he provided a counternarrative: the narrator's experiences and the people he encountered show that "any effort to become an 'American' resulted in death" (Enyeart 29).

The same awareness can also be found in Bulosan's text, which conveys its own version of the Filipino American autobiography. Bulosan's alter-ego's political consciousness is formed in the US by a gradual acknowledgment of the racial discrimination of Filipinos in the US and by the realization that their condition has not improved from the feudal and colonial yoke they suffered in the Philippines. The text begins in Pangasinan, Northern Luzon, where the narrator's father retreated after the Philippine Revolution (1896-1898), and where his family lived "at the margins under American rule and Southern Luzon political might" (De Leon 203). Thus, the first fundamental difference in Bulosan's text compared to the European immigrant autobiography and Adamic's anti-model is that the narrator moves from the archipelago to the mainland within the same empire – an absolute novelty in the 1940s, even within Asian American writings. *America Is in the Heart* was the first major published semi-autobiography to narrate extensively the transnational migratory experience of an Asian colonial subject within US imperial structure.

Autobiography and Asian America

Bulosan was not the first US colonial subject – nor the first Asian immigrant – to write about the migratory experience, but it could be argued that he was one of the first to publish an (anti)assimilationist semi-autobiography, with few to no Asian American textual models.³ For historical reasons, in fact, the autobiographies written by Asian immigrants took another trajectory compared to those written by European immigrants: the assimilationist narrative simply could not be easily employed by minorities that were not eligible for US citizenship for the most part until post-1945. Late nineteenth-/early twentieth- century Asian American autobiographical authors, such as Yan Phou Lee and New Il-Han, who Elaine H. Kim calls “ambassadors of goodwill,” focused more on ethnographic descriptions of their own cultures to counteract the *Yellow Peril* stereotype, than on assimilation experiences (Kim, *Asian American Literature* 25-26). A closer attention to the assimilationist immigrant autobiography can be found in the works by Sui Sin Far (Edith Eaton), but her British descent on the mother’s side and her cosmopolitanism prevented her from enduring the same discriminations experienced by most Asian workers (Smith and Watson 123). The first waves of Asian immigrants, in fact, came from rural classes who practiced literary forms related to folk oral traditions (Kim, “Defining” 94). Moreover, Asian American autobiographical writings in the US varied based on the power relationships between the US and the country of origin, which shaped the layers of assimilation and/or discrimination. In fact, given the peculiar colonial condition of the Filipinos, Bulosan’s semi-autobiography can be distinguished from the contemporary Helena Kuo’s *I’ve Come a Long Way* (1942), which still conformed to the “ambassadors” genre and sprung the subsequent stereotype of the “model minority” (Vastolo 39-41; Kim, *Asian American*

³ Even though the complicated notion of Asian America was born out of 1960s and 1970s activism (Nguyen 3-31), here, the references to an Asian American “tradition” and to its “textual models” allude conventionally to what Kim retroactively conceives as the literary corpus written by Asian immigrants in the US, specifically in the first decades of the twentieth century (23-57).

Literature 24-33). The first self-conscious work about the shortcomings of the melting-pot on the Asians came from Kang's autobiographical *East Goes West: The Making of an Oriental Yankee* (1937), which, as Sunyoung Lee points out, was not

the candid account of a hardworking immigrant who, through his unwavering belief in the American dream, comes to attain it. [...] The subtitle [...] might read as an antiquated version of today's term 'Asian American,' but [...] is in fact that process of deconstruction – of simplistic nationalism, of naive faith in America's gleaming promise, of a stable, color-blind identity – that is implicit in the construction of a new sense of home (368; 383).

Allos/Carlos praises Kang's work because of the insights into 1920s Korean resistance against Japanese colonization, which encouraged the narrator to fight for justice (Bulosan, *America* 265).⁴ However, Bulosan is also aware of the class gap between him and Kang, as his alter-ego asks: "Why could not I succeed as Younghill Kang had? He had come from a family of scholars and had gone to an American university – but was he not an Oriental like myself? Was there an Oriental without education who had become a writer in America?" (265). In regard to this issue, Kim claims that "the similarities between the two men are not as important as the differences" (*Asian American Literature* 44): whereas Kang gradually becomes disillusioned with the state of his country of origin, distancing himself from the immediate fate of his compatriots while still praising them, Bulosan is aware that his own ideal of "America" is strictly linked to the fate of the rural classes in the Philippines and to that of the US Filipino workers (44). Moreover, while *East Goes West* focuses on the East Coast, *America Is in the Heart* is mainly set along the West Coast.

⁴ It is very likely that Bulosan is also hinting extradiegetically at his own moral support to the 1942 Hukbalahap rebellion against the 1940s Japanese occupation of the Philippines (San Juan Jr. 158-60).

(Inter)Textual Similarities and Urban Dwelling

Even though, for cultural, geographical, and historical reasons, Adamic's background is in no way closer to Bulosan's than Kang's, the protagonists of *America Is in the Heart* and *Laughing in the Jungle* share similar political attitudes and, most importantly, the texts share a similar overall structure and thematic features. Both texts are almost equally divided into a first portion, which covers the protagonists' childhood in the country of origin until the moment of departure for the US, with a frequent use of Slovenian and Ilokano words that gradually disappear in the second portion, which narrates about the protagonists' strong commitment to literature, experiences of exploitation, along with the torments inherent to the exiled, diasporic individual. Moreover, other conformities can be found when the texts narrate similar migratory patterns. In chapter 14 of *America Is in the Heart*, soon after Allos/Carlos' landing in Seattle, the protagonist is warned by Julio, a Filipino worker who had arrived before him: "all roads go to California and all travelers wind up in Los Angeles. [...] But not this traveler. I have lived there too long. I know that state too damn well. [...] It is hard to be a Filipino in California" (112). A similar warning is issued to the protagonist of *Laughing in the Jungle* by Peter Molek, a Slovenian return migrant: "America the jungle swallows many people who go there to work. She squeezes the strength out of them [...]. I was there too long, [...] I worked too hard" (17-18).

The weather conditions and circumstances in which the protagonists arrive in Los Angeles are also described in similar ways. In chapter 16 of Adamic's text, we read: "on arrival in Pedro, early in December, southern California was having a spell of so-called 'unusual' weather. [...] After the wind died down, it continued to rain" (*Laughing* 198). Bulosan opens similarly chapter 17: "I reached Los Angeles in the evening. An early autumn rain was falling" (*America* 127). Adamic's protagonist walks through Downtown in the evening as well: "toward evening I was walking down Main Street again, sniffing at the stew of human life [...]. I came to the Mexican quarter. I passed through Plaza Park [...], and across the street from it a Mexican barker shouted the virtues of an old Charlie Chaplin film" (*Laughing* 200). Bulosan's protagonist walks the same streets: "I went

to Main Street, turned to the north, and found the Mexican district. [...] In the old plaza [...] a shaggy old man was preaching to a motley crowd" (*America* 127). Both cross paths with a white-bearded old man: "an old man with a straggly white beard [...] handed me a printed invitation to the Midnight Gospel Mission located a few blocks away" (Adamic, *Laughing* 201); and here is Bulosan: "the church was empty. [...] I saw an old man with a white beard coming in the door, and I thought he saw me" (*America* 128). Both protagonists' arrival in Los Angeles is eventually met with a traumatic incident: Adamic's protagonist is beaten up and robbed in the bathroom of a restaurant, while Allos/Carlos witnesses to the shooting of a Filipino during a police raid in a poolroom. In both cases the unwelcoming incidents are never counterbalanced nor redeemed later in the book. These intertextual similarities also signal a shared narrative pattern of immigrant workers' urban dwellings, coping with the paradox of the LA streets as a place of estrangement, danger, and hopelessness, yet also the only ones they are allowed to inhabit. "Urban centers [...] served as recreational ports" (De Leon 183) for Filipinos coming back from the fields. In the cities they were confined to poolrooms, taxi-dance halls, and were exposed to the moral dilemma of gambling, which put them "in visual contact with other workers in Chinatowns and integrated them within a highly visible extralegal economy" (189). Similarly, recreational and extralegal activities are an integral part of the Balkan characters' lives in Adamic's book, such as Lenard Podgornik, who "spends his days in libraries [...], frequenting poolrooms and socializing with Wobblies", while delivering liquor for bootleggers to feed his family and pay taxes (Enyeart 31). In both texts, the characters' restrictive urban life constantly reveals the material, social, and cultural shortcomings – if not outright impossible applications – of melting-pot policies.

The Filipino Condition

Juxtaposing the two texts requires, nonetheless, clarifying the significant differences in the political status and sociocultural conditions of the two authors. The Philippines' colonial history and the racial discriminations

suffered by Filipino migrants are structurally inherent to *America Is in the Heart's* diegesis, especially in the protagonist's education and political consciousness formation. Filipinos' political status in the 1930s was a legal peculiarity. Since 1902, when the Philippines became a US unincorporated territory, Filipinos were "wards" or "nationals," who could theoretically move freely in the US even though they were not recognized as having major rights. From 1935, however, when the Tydings-McDuffie Act granted the Philippines a limited governmental autonomy, McWilliams explains that Filipinos in the US "could not be deported because they had not entered as immigrants, nor could they be excluded. Yet they were not eligible for citizenship. But when they travelled abroad, they used United States passports" (x). This hybrid status had dire consequences not only on the legal side – they could not hold properties nor marry American citizens –, but also on Filipinos' fraught identities, causing disillusionment in those born under American rule who could not claim a US nor a Filipino national identity, especially for those – like Bulosan – coming from nonmetropolitan Northern Luzon.⁵ Bulosan's alter-ego's constant swing between illusion and disillusion is the first step in the deconstruction of the assimilationist narrative, exposing in many ways the discrepancy between, as Epifanio San Juan Jr. puts it, the US *ideal* – "America, land of equality and prosperity" (138) – and its *reality* for Filipinos: "the social wasteland called 'United States'" (160). Finally, Bulosan himself talks about the disillusionment of the ideal on his arrival: "I did not know that I was coming closer to American *reality*" (*If You Want* 15; my emphasis).

This peculiar Filipino condition is reflected for the first time in the literary genre of *America Is in the Heart*. The Filipino literary tradition in English did not have a model for the autobiographical immigrant experience in the US: José Garcia Villa devoted himself to writing poetry, while Bienvenido Santos only started publishing in the 1950s. Bulosan underscored the absence of

⁵ For a general understanding of historical empire relationships between the US and the Philippines see Kramer. For a comprehensive understanding of the colonial "Filipino condition" and its legacies see Bonus and Tiongson Jr. For a reading of *America Is in the Heart* as a subverting text of the colonial and metropolitan commodified stereotypes of Ilokano people and Igorots, see De Leon 201-09.

this tradition on *The New Masses* in the 1942 article “Filipino Soul: Story of a Great Culture,” where he reviews the last literary publications by Manuel E. Arguilla, Salvador P. Lopez, R. Zulueta da Costa, and Juan Cabrerros Laya. According to Bulosan, these authors were representative of the leading role of Filipino intellectuals in a time of war and colonization, and he hoped that their work could ignite a cultural and political awakening in the Filipino people: “these are times when the writer must enrich his sensibilities with the terrible realities which are being laid bare for every man to see, and when the chaos is over he will have a storehouse of materials to fill the needs of a great cultural revival” (“Filipino Soul” 24). Despite Laya’s and Arguilla’s autobiographical instances, none of these authors wrote an immigrant autobiography in the US.

Editorial Ethnic Expectations

On the literary genre of *America Is in the Heart*, Kim claims that the text is “both less and more than a personal history: it is a composite portrait of the Filipino American community, a social document from the point of view of a participant in that experience” (*Asian American Literature* 48). With “social document,” Kim is not referring to the text as a simple documentary chronicle, but to the inherent purpose of rousing sociopolitical consciousness. As already mentioned, the onlooker-participant perspective on a collective experience is also a feature in *Laughing in the Jungle*, as is the fragmentation of the text, a composite of previously published stories (Enyeart 29). The formal composition of *America Is in the Heart*, according to Bulosan’s friend P.C. Morantte, is “30% autobiography, 40% of case history of Pinoy life in America, and 30% fiction” (31-32). Morantte claims that in the early 1940s Bulosan repeatedly defined himself as “essentially a fiction writer” (125), but he also wanted to write a “socio-political book” (126) in essay form, which never saw the light, so he blended both fiction and socio-political thought in his semi-autobiography. *America Is in the Heart*’s hybrid form is also partly due to a compromise with the US editorial market, as was often the case with so-called ethnic writers. As Morantte recalls, in 1943 “Adamic remembered Bulosan from Los Angeles [...], in whose

talent he had faith. Carlos told me once about Adamic: 'He [...] told me to keep on writing. He believes in my talent.' This faith in Carlos was what prompted Adamic to suggest Bulosan's name to [...] Maxim Lieber" (132). Then Morante evokes a 1944 editorial meeting at the Harcourt, Brace & Co offices in New York City, in the presence of Adamic and Maxim Lieber, the agent for both Adamic and Bulosan, where they discussed the reviewing of *America Is in the Heart* and Lieber "cautioned [Bulosan] about trying to write as an intellectual" (144). Despite Lieber, Bulosan maintained both an intellectual attitude and a layered degree of fictionality in a text which, as mentioned above, was conceived in the early 1940s as a novel on the collective experience of Filipino workers in the US, as he writes in a 1941 letter: "I hope someday to write about Aurelio and my other brother [...]. I believe that the three of us live and are living a very tragic life. It is my responsibility to interpret this. It is also the life of every Filipino in the United States" (*Sound* 9). Bulosan, in fact, favored the fictional liberty and the collective dimension over the first-person narrative *Bildung* of the individual hero. As scholar Adrian De Leon explains, "Bulosan was a good listener. With Allos, Bulosan took on the many stories of his peers to tell a coherent story of Filipino America" (163). Yet, it was Adamic, again, who recommended Bulosan to write the book as an autobiography to secure a place in the publishing market (Kim, *Asian American Literature* 48).

The advice should not be interpreted as cynical marketing advice, but rather as a political strategy based on Adamic's experience as a published *ethnic* author and on his awareness of the ethnic expectations of the 1930s-1940s US editorial market. The editorial trends were in fact indicative of the fact that immigrant writers (or writers of immigrant descent) were often requested to write about their own experiences as *ethnic* subjects in the US. Thus, it was generally taken for granted that a literary work by an immigrant writer should always be factually autobiographical: it is precisely through this genre that, according to Adamic, the *ethnic* author should manifest his dissent and deconstruct both the genre and the assimilationist ideology from within, by exposing the racial structures and power dynamics which underlie the failures of melting-pot policies, as partly seen with urban ghettoization. One of the first to embody this misunderstanding was Kang who, according to Lee, "became an early victim of the still-prevalent

belief that the only contribution any writer of color could possibly have to make is the story of his or her own life” (368). Lee explains that these expectations were partly endorsed by his agent Maxwell Perkins, also the agent for F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe (367). Even though both Kang and Wolfe were autobiographical writers, Perkins deemed Wolfe capable of a “transformative power of the imagination” (367), whereas his attitude towards Kang was “much more matter-of-fact” (367), an attitude resembling Lieber’s warning to Bulosan not to “write as an intellectual.” Editorial ethnic expectations, at that time, were not a prerogative of the writers of color, since they also shaped the literary careers of Bulosan’s friends Adamic and John Fante (Bordin 167-77).

Subverting the Assimilationist Autobiography

By accepting the compromise to be identified as the factual protagonists of their autobiographical works, Kang, Adamic, and Bulosan ostensibly inserted themselves into the assimilationist narrative on a superficial level. But the fictional device of the gap between author and narrator, which is inherent in every autobiographical text, allows one to read beyond a supposed factual level in Bulosan’s text: “the subject/narrator is a construction primarily because Bulosan himself did not directly experience all [the] events, although collectively his ‘compatriots’ did” (Alquizola, “The Fictive Narrator” 211). This gap makes it even more evident that what the naïve Allos/Carlos believes, hopes, and dreams, is in striking dissonance with Bulosan’s detailed representation of the systemic exploitation of and racial violence against the Filipino workers (212-14). And yet, it is the narrator Allos/Carlos who counterbalances the naïve faith in US ideology with his final engagement in the struggle for Filipino US citizenship, which brings him to side with Communist militants and to praise dissident writers around the world, such as Maxim Gorki, Federico García Lorca, Nicolas Guillen, André Malraux: “from day to day I read, and reading widened my mental horizon, creating a spiritual kinship with other men who had pondered over the miseries of their countries. Then it came to me that the place did not matter: these sensitive writers reacted

to the social dynamics of their time. I, too, reacted to my time” (Bulosan, *America* 246). The dissident thought is also an integral part of *Laughing in the Jungle*'s narrator's intellectual formation, where he makes explicit and implicit references to the iconoclast, anti-establishment authors he read in the 1910s and 1920s, such as Upton Sinclair, H. L. Mencken, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis, who shaped his seemingly-nihilist perspective on the country: “Los Angeles is but a bigger and better Gopher Prairie. [...] And Los Angeles is America. A jungle [...] full of curious wild and poisonous growths [...] and wildcat business enterprises which, with their desire for quick profits, are doomed to collapse and drag down multitudes of people” (223-26). Adamic's radicalism grew during his 1932 trip to Yugoslavia, after the publication of *Laughing in the Jungle*, where he worried about the growing European fascisms and, back to the US, asked himself what the immigrant writers could do to prevent something similar in the US, as he argues in the much-discussed 1934 article “What the Proletariat Reads”: “It seems to me that a few powerful revolutionary books about America, if not too long delayed, would do more to unfit large masses of the middle class for fascist movements than almost anything else conceivable” (322). With this article, maintains Enyeart, “Adamic suggested that immigrants and ethnics could appropriate the notion of ‘American,’ redefine democracy, and impede the spread of fascism before it moved beyond its embryonic phase in the United States” (52).

Subverting *America*: A Conclusion

The re-signification of “America” and the antifascist perspective animate several passages of *America Is in the Heart*. Throughout the text, in fact, “America” becomes an ambiguous signifier, “a word whose meaning (can one still doubt it?) is subject to constant renegotiation” (San Juan Jr. 140), that can be read by both assimilationist and radical perspectives:

the reception of [Bulosan's] work as an assimilationist text is due partly to the surplus of meaning in the narrative; it contains a critique of both racism within American borders as well as colonialism outside

its borders, in opposition to the affirmation of the American people themselves as vessels for American ideals. (Alquizola, “Subversion and Affirmation” 206)

In fact, in the controversial closing of the book it is not clear if the narrator is celebrating chauvinism or stirring social activism:

It was something that grew out of the sacrifices and loneliness of my friends, of my brothers in America and my family in the Philippines – something that grew out of our desire to know America, and to become a part of her great tradition, and to contribute something toward her final fulfillment. I knew that no man could destroy my faith in America that had sprung from all our hopes and aspirations, *ever*. (Bulosan, *America* 327)

The generally positive reception after the publication of the book contributed to an enduring reading of this last passage, and by extension of the whole text, as an affirmation of 1940s Filipinos’ goodwill – many of them enrolled in World War II US army – towards all-American values and peaceful assimilation. This, Alquizola points out, sounds quite paradoxical because embracing American values at that time implied supporting Manifest Destiny ideology, which was at the base of the US colonial occupation of the Philippines (“Subversion and Affirmation” 201-06). The radical thought and dissident writers that Allos/Carlos had praised up to that point in the narration make it difficult to interpret the closing statement as an uncritical acceptance of chauvinist values. The crucial point of the passage lies in the re-signification of the signifier “America,” a new collective ideal that takes shape along the text. In chapter 19, after acknowledging the violence and legal racial discrimination perpetrated on Filipinos, Allos/Carlos says:

I began to wonder at the paradox of America. [...] Why was America *so kind and yet so cruel*? Was there no way to simplifying things in this continent so that suffering would be minimized? Was there no common denominator on which we could all meet? I was angry and

confused, and wondered if I would ever understand this paradox.
(Bulosan, *America* 147; my emphasis)

The resolution of the paradox comes in chapter 46, where Allos/Carlos is educating cannery workers about US history with biblical analogies, concluding that “America” is an “unfinished dream” that will not be realized until all the ethnic workers gain equal rights and abolish classes (312). Again, in chapter 46, Allos/Carlos acknowledges that the cannery workers’ oppression had a common denominator, the same that was shaking Europe: “it came to me that we were all fighting against one enemy: *Fascism*” (311). These idealistic echoes of the Popular Front 1940s progressive rhetoric should not elude the Filipinos’ colonial past which informs Bulosan’s text. Even though the Philippine-American War (1898-1902) is never mentioned in the text, and lacking an actual fascist regime in 1940s US, it seems plausible that the word “fascism” refers implicitly to something else: “the other name for US colonial violence is ‘fascism,’ and its genealogy includes Spanish Falangists and Filipino sympathizers, American racist vigilantes and police, and Japanese aggression – this last evoking what the text dares not name: US invasion of the islands at the turn of the century” (San Juan Jr. 143). The bitterness about the US colonial legacy is more visible in private, as in this 1948 letter: “I always write about that life [in the Philippines] beautifully, but when I take another background like the United States, I become bitter and angry and cruel” (Bulosan, *Sound* 59).

Interestingly enough, in Bulosan’s text, the signifier “America” has some resonance with the signifier “Filipino,” as in chapter 20: “it was not easy to understand why the Filipinos were *brutal yet tender*, nor was it easy to believe that they had been made this way by the reality of America” (*America* 152; my emphasis). Here, Allos/Carlos applies to Filipinos a similar oxymoron that he employed above to describe America: “kind/cruel” and “brutal/tender.” America’s contradictions are thus transferred on Filipinos’ skin, and even the sound of the word “Filipino” becomes a painful reminder of colonial abjection for Bulosan during the composition of the text, as he points out in a 1942 letter to his friend Dorothy Babb: “when I say ‘Filipino’ the sound cuts deep into my being – it hurts. It will

take years to wipe out the sharpness of the word, to erase its notorious connotation in America. And only a great faith in some common goal can give it fullness again” (Bulosan, *Sound* 18).

The Filipino characters in Bulosan’s text, in this sense, become symbolic commentaries of the shortcomings of US assimilationist ideology, the same way Adamic’s narrator regarded the Balkan characters that crossed paths with him in the US. In the last chapters of *Laughing in the Jungle*, the narrator asks himself if they would have been safer had they stayed in the Old Country: “among my fellow workers I came upon men who interested me, at least temporarily; some of them as individuals, others as tiny organisms – victims of conditions, case histories [...] and symbols, which to me were acute comments on life in the Land of Promise” (266; 326). The “detachment” that Bulosan admired in Adamic when he talked about America, along with his “attachment and joy” when talking about the country of origin, are to be found in Bulosan’s text in the greater collective ideal of America, which was not the same American ideal that led to Philippines’ occupation. The skepticism toward assimilation to a definite American ideal is what, finally, renders *America Is in the Heart* not a “characteristically Asian American genre of autobiography or personal history dedicated to the task of promoting cultural goodwill and understanding” (Kim, *Asian American Literature* 47), but “a new genre, the antithesis to the quest for Americanization” (San Juan Jr. 138).

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From the Mill to the Home

Women's Work and Separate Spheres in Henry C. Carey's Political Economy

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates how Henry Charles Carey (1793-1879), the most influential nineteenth-century US economist, conceptualized the social role of women, the economic relevance of their work within and outside the family and the power relationships between the sexes. The article seeks to overcome the shortcomings of historiography, which only rarely investigated the contribution of nineteenth-century US political economy to the ideology of domesticity and never took into serious account Carey's reflection on women's work. Placing Carey's early writings – especially his *Principles of Political Economy* (1837-1840), *Essay on the Rate of Wages* (1835) and *The Past, the Present, and the Future* (1848) – in the context of the history of capitalism and of the social history of women, the article argues that his political economy represented a relevant episode in the legitimation of women's subordinate employment in US manufactures, in the definition of a doctrine of separate spheres and in the conceptualization of the relationship between the home and the state. Overall, the article maintains that, far from theorizing a greater equality among sexes, Carey's political economy conceived the maintenance of sexual hierarchies as both a result and a necessary condition of capitalist development, with women having to remain subordinate to men whether working in the mill or in the home. Despite his support for an overall improvement in the condition and the treatment of women, then, Carey believed that such improvement could never undermine the patriarchal structure of US society. In

highlighting the gendered dimension of Carey's political economy between the 1830s and 1850s, the article shows how he theorized an inextricable connection between capitalist development and patriarchal relations in the family.

KEYWORDS

Henry C. Carey, Political Economy, Home, Women's Work, Separate Spheres

In the early-nineteenth century, the emergence of a distinctly US political economy happened in a context of capitalist transformation that fundamentally reshaped the economic and social functions of the family, as well as the relationship between men and women. However, historians have rarely investigated the way in which the first US economists understood this redefinition of gender roles. This article studies how early-nineteenth-century US political economy conceptualized the social role of women, the economic relevance of their work within and outside the family and the power relationship between sexes. It does so by focusing on Henry Charles Carey (1793-1879), the most influential US economist of the time, placing his writings between the 1830s and the 1850s in the context of the history of capitalism and the social history of women. In the past few decades, scholars provided new readings of the role of gender in the history of economic thought, both by highlighting the contribution of women to the field and by unveiling the gendered dimension of economic theory (Pujol; Bodkin; Nyland and Dimand; Becchio). However, they mostly focused on classical liberalism, on British and European thinkers or on the twentieth century, while overlooking the contribution of nineteenth-century US economists. At the same time, historians who reconstructed the emergence and the significance of the US ideology of domesticity in the early-nineteenth century (Cott; Kessler-Harris; Ryan; Epstein) failed to grasp the contribution of political economists in legitimizing the separation of spheres. Moreover, while only a few scholars of Henry Carey's work acknowledged his reflections on women (Conkin 293; Sklansky 87-88), others treated him as a theorist of gender equality (Helleiner 154).

This article aims to overcome the shortcomings of historiography by offering a first contribution to the investigation of women's role in nineteenth-century US political economy. It argues that Carey's political

economy represented a relevant episode in the legitimation of women's subordinate employment in US manufactures, in the definition of a doctrine of separate spheres and in the conceptualization of the relationship between the home and the state. It shows that, far from theorizing greater equality between sexes, Carey conceived the maintenance of sexual hierarchies as both a result and a necessary condition of capitalist development, with women having to remain subordinate to men whether working in the mill or in the home. In doing this, the article also seeks to contribute to the intellectual history of US capitalism, by showing the inextricable connection between capitalism and patriarchy theorized by one of its most important nineteenth-century apologists.

The Coming of Capitalism, Women's Work and the Ideology of Domesticity

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the coming of capitalism to the United States was not only crucial in introducing new hierarchies in terms of class and race, with the emergence of an urban proletariat in Northeastern cities and with the intensification of exploitation in slave plantations in the South, but also in terms of gender. By reshaping the productive relevance of the domestic space, capitalism decisively impacted the relations of power between men and women in the family. In the Northeast, the spread of manufactures, both water-powered mills in the countryside and workshops in urban settings, forced the concentration of labor in bigger workshops and gradually took production outside of the domestic spaces in which it had hitherto predominantly taken place (Wilentz; Laurie; Sellers). In other words, early US industrialization brought a slow but steady decline of the household as the fundamental productive nucleus, which was partially held back by the significant recourse to outwork by manufacturers but continued steadily in the first half of the century.

While this complex and often non-linear process started to deplete the home of its productive function, leaving it as a place of reproductive labor only, at the same time it forced working-class women, particularly young and unmarried ones, to go to work outside the home in order to contribute to the family's subsistence (Kessler-Harris 25-28). Early industrialization

thus brought about a widening of class distinctions. Whereas most women became “mill girls” working for wages, while continuing to be burdened by the family’s reproductive labor, some could become “ladies” (Lerner) by staying at home to engage only in those activities that came to be increasingly regarded as women’s specific duties.

Thus, since men’s independent work resisted longer to the pressures of competition, women constituted the vast majority of the early manufacturing workforce in the United States, particularly in textile production, in which their specific competencies proved useful. However, the mechanization of production soon determined a decomposition of the labor process and the introduction of more repetitive tasks that determined a de-skilling of female labor, a reduction in women’s wages and the overall worsening of their situation (P. Foner 20-37). Particularly after the crisis of 1837, the conditions of working women drastically deteriorated and continued to do so until the late 1850s. The exploitation of women as a low-paid and de-skilled workforce in the mills (and as an unpaid workforce at home) constituted a crucial factor of early US industrialization (Kessler-Harris 46-60).

Working women reacted to this process by actively participating to the first labor insurgencies between the 1820s and the 1830s, starting to strike and organize for higher wages and shorter hours (P. Foner 38-54; Roediger and P. Foner 44-64). Moreover, the exit of women from the home was accompanied by an increasing activism, both in anti-slavery and in other reform movements. In fact, women, both black and white, both middle and working class, constituted the rank-and-file of the abolitionist movement (Sinha 2-3) and this militancy was crucial in laying the grounds for the emergence of a women’s rights movement later in the 1840s, giving them a critique of personal dominion that could easily be translated from the denunciation of the enslavement of African Americans in plantations to the denunciation of women’s subordination in the family (Dorsey; Sinha 266-98; Rudan 86-99). Despite being driven by white middle-class women and largely ignoring the condition of black and working women, the movement was still evidence of US women’s increasingly loud political voice (Kraus).

It was precisely the combination of these historical processes that made an ideological redefinition of their role more urgent. In particular,

the household that was gradually becoming a place of consumption, of non-labor for man and of reproductive labor for women, started to be increasingly described as a space of family and affections: as a “home” set against the outside world and sheltered from its dangers, in which women could perform their supposedly natural roles as wives and mothers. Thus, in the same years in which most women had to leave the home to be employed in manufactures, a new domestic ideology emerged in the United States, repropounding traditional visions of womanhood as the purer sex and the home as a sanctuary against the increasing competitiveness of the new market society (Kessler-Harris 49; Boydston).

Moving from an acknowledgment of the biological differences between men and women, this ideology of separate spheres aimed to naturalize their distinct social roles and the home as women’s proper space, as well as to re-legitimize their dependence on husbands, at a time when their work outside of the home and their increasing political activism threatened to challenge sexual hierarchies. The founding element of this doctrine was thus the ideological construction of the “home” as the physical space proper for women and of “domesticity” as the set of occupations to which women would be more inclined, as well as the opposition of the private space of the home to the public-political space of society and the state. In doing so, the domestic ideology reinforced women’s exploitation in workplaces, since it devalued their work outside the home and made it possible to consider their wages as only accessory to the family’s income, thus justifying their compression (59).

The most clearcut formulation of this domestic ideology, which was starkly at odds with (and tried to react to) the US social and economic reality, was proposed in the 1830s by Alexis de Tocqueville in his pages on American women. In his view, Americans had understood that “democratic improvement” could not consist in removing the “wide differences between the physical and moral constitution of man and woman,” but rather in having each of them perform their specific task. Americans had applied “the great principle of political economy which governs the manufactures of our age,” that is the division of labor, through which they carefully distinguished “the duties of man from those of woman, in order that the great work of society may be the better carried on.” For Tocqueville, then, democratic equality could not erase a difference that seemed to be “eternally

based in human nature” but had to value it by functionally separating and hierarchically ordering the social roles of men and women (Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. II, 224-25). Democracy, then, must not bring about “the subversion of marital power,” since “in the smaller association of husband and wife, as well as in the great social community, the object of democracy is to regulate and legalize the powers which are necessary, not to subvert all power” (225). Thus, far from challenging patriarchy as a form of domination, American democracy had to regulate, legitimize and appropriate it as a necessary power, by naturalizing the social roles of men and women.

Between the 1830s and the 1850s the ideology of domesticity was popularized by a booming literature on housekeeping, on “true womanhood,” on child-rearing and on the religious significance of family life (Cott; Ryan; Epstein). These essays, journals, poems and novels were in many cases written by women, like Lydia Maria Child, author of *The Frugal Housewife* (1832), Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of *Godey's Lady's Book* magazine, and Catharine Beecher, sister of the more popular Harriet Beecher Stowe, who in 1841 published a *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, after having founded and directed the Hartford Female Seminary in Connecticut (Sklar; Cossutta 78-86). Under Tocqueville's direct influence, Beecher recognized the separation of spheres as an axiom derived from a Christian interpretation of American democracy. At the same time, she argued that this division of social roles left women with “a superior influence” in matters pertaining to their own sphere, like in “the education of their children, [...] in all benevolent enterprises, and in all questions relating to morals or manners” (Beecher 33). Thus, the separation of spheres took on a peculiar significance precisely because of the insistence on the pedagogical role of women. If women's specific task was to educate the future citizens of the American nation, the “peculiar responsibilities of American women” (37) to Beecher had a broader political significance that eventually broke down the fences between spheres, transforming the separation between the public and the private into a dichotomization of the public space itself (Baritono xli). In this sense, Beecher, like other contemporary thinkers, made an extensive and strategic use of the doctrine of separate spheres that identified a distinctly female public sphere of intervention on the issues of

education, welfare for the poor, philanthropy and charity, thus legitimizing a social and political role for US women (Baker; Lasser; Mocci).

Man's Improvement and Women's Work

It was in this context that Henry Charles Carey, a former publisher from Philadelphia, elaborated his political economy, in the *Essay on the Rate of Wages* (1835), in the three-volume *Principles of Political Economy* (1837-1840), which would soon become one of the most read economic texts in the early-nineteenth-century United States and in *The Past, the Present, and the Future* (1848). In these writings, he outlined a vision of the economic and social role of women (which historians so far failed to investigate) strongly influenced both by the increasing employment of women in manufactures and by the spreading ideology of domesticity.

Carey sought to demonstrate that individual improvement represented the truth of capitalist development. The "elementary proposition" of his political economy stated that "man desires to maintain and to improve his condition" (Carey, *Principles of Political Economy*, vol. I, 1). It was this refusal to opt for mere subsistence that in Carey's perspective distinguished humans from animals, driving them to labor and to cooperate for productive purposes. Moving from this premise, Carey reassessed the status of political economy no longer as a science of wealth but as a "science of improvement," aimed at finding the natural laws that allowed humans to better their condition and the "disturbing causes" that could prevent them from doing so (vol. I, x-xii; vol. II, 13). These laws could be found by overturning the principles of scarcity proposed by British classical economists.

On the one hand, against Malthus's principle of population, Carey argued that the growth of population could exponentially boost production, by increasing the possibilities of cooperation and technological advancement. On the other hand, against Ricardo's theory of rent, he maintained that land could yield increasing returns both extensively and intensively. These principles of abundance allowed Carey to identify a dynamic according to which industrious individuals could expand their possibilities of consumption and their capacity to access the ownership of property, gaining economic independence and following a path of upward mobility.

Carey's political economy thus depicted the United States as a classless society in which permanent distinctions based on birth did not exist, while individual conditions reflected a scale of talent and effort. To Carey, this representation was not only a way of rejecting the British principles of scarcity but also a way of legitimizing the new class hierarchies imposed by capitalism against the critique to wage labor brought forward by the first movement of white workers between the 1820s and the 1830s (Rossi).

However, the path of social and economic improvement traced by Carey's political economy, while being formally open to everyone, could actually be realized only by white and male workers. In his writings, in fact, not only did the path of improvement appear explicitly precluded to women, as well as to slaves and natives (and arguably to non-whites in general), but men's improvement appeared to involve and to rest upon the increasing subordination of women within the family, their intensifying exploitation within manufactures and the strengthening of sexual hierarchies.

Carey described in very different terms the consequences of economic development and technological innovation on male and female labor. In fact, while the introduction of new machines allowed the latter to perform the most repetitive and unskilled tasks, in which "attention is more required than bodily labour" (*Principles*, vol. II, 140), it gave the former the possibility to perform more skilled and remunerative jobs. Thus, the employment of women in mechanized manufactures to Carey was important not only to put to work individuals who otherwise would remain idle, as already argued by Alexander Hamilton in his *Report on Manufactures* (1791), but also and most crucially to free men from the need "to compete with machinery" and to allow them "to apply their powers in other ways that are more productive" (Carey, *Essay on the Rate of Wages* 88). Thus, the fact that women represented the vast majority of the workforce appeared to Carey as the cause of the superior productivity of US manufactures compared to their British counterparts. "The improvements that have been made in machinery in the United States," he wrote, "have enabled [...] to employ female labour for many purposes for which male labour is still required in England" (85). This had allowed US manufactures to develop a superior "economy of labour," which consisted in a specific division of tasks based on gender. Given that "the labour of men is so much more valuable," in US manufactures "none are employed except as superintendents, mechanics,

&c., and thus nearly the whole of factory employment is left for females" (*Principles*, vol. II, 153). In the United States, then, "the power of the male operatives" was not "wasted" in simple and repetitive tasks like in England (*Essay* 72). In other words, in Carey's view the mechanization of production was crucial to introduce a sexual hierarchization of the workforce in which women could be confined to the most unskilled and low-paid jobs, while men could devote themselves to the most creative, directive and remunerative ones.

It was therefore the devaluation of the work of women, who were presented as incapable of creativity and invention, that allowed Carey to justify their subordinate position in employment, as well as their low wages. In fact, since according to Carey's wage-fund doctrine the level of wages was a consequence of the level of productivity, the fact that "the labour of men" remained "generally more productive than that of women" (72) explained and legitimized wage differentials between sexes. Thus, in the same years in which his father Mathew, himself a well-known economic thinker, was denouncing working women's increasing poverty, including in their hometown Philadelphia (P. Foner 41), Henry celebrated the conditions and justified the low wages of women employed in US manufactures. More broadly, the far higher number of women (as well as a far lower number of children) employed in US manufactures was presented by Carey as a decisive factor of the country's economic and moral superiority. In his view, women's subordinate, repetitive and exploited work constituted the material condition of possibility for man's improvement.

Every man [...] endeavours to improve his own mode of operation [...], the consequence of which is, that machinery is rapidly improved, the labour of females is substituted for that of males, and the latter are required only in those higher employments, where everything tends to induce habits of reflection, and to produce that desire of improving his condition which most stimulates the inventive faculties of the labourer. (*Principles*, vol. II, 155-56)

Moreover, not only the possibility for men to rise socially was predicated upon women's exploitation, but to Carey it was also the necessary premise for women's confinement to reproductive labor after marriage. In fact, he

explained, the more men improved their condition, the more, “when they marry, the necessity for the employment of their wives and young children in factories is unknown” (*Essay* 88). Thus, Carey envisioned economic development as a process in which women had to work in manufactures before marriage, but had to stop immediately after it, devoting themselves to domestic labor. In this way, while allowing individual paths of improvement for men, industrialization would favor the participation of women in the productive workforce until a certain age, only to make it unnecessary after marriage, thus guaranteeing both women’s undervalued contribution to the accumulation of capital and the performance of their domestic duties within the family. In other words, for Carey US manufactures could represent a sort of apprenticeship for working-class women: a place where they could learn the discipline and the subordination crucial for their future role as wives. It was not by chance, he noted, that in Lowell out of one thousand women employed only eleven were married, since it was precisely this distinction between different phases in the life of women, that allowed US manufactures to guarantee “female chastity” even for women working outside the family and to maintain a “state of morals” far superior to that of English factories, where wives and mothers were forced to work (88; 141).

Far from granting equal opportunities, then, the improvement outlined by Carey’s political economy proved to be a sexed concept, justifying on the one hand the confinement of married women to the domestic space, and on the other the stratification and hierarchization of manufacturing labor on a sexual basis, upon which in those same decades US capitalism was grounding its accumulation in the Northeast (Kessler-Harris; Rockman 355-59; Beckert 188-90). To Carey, then, capitalist development and the accumulation of wealth rested upon a widening sexual division of labor and upon women’s increasing subordination and exploitation.

In the same years, Francis Wayland (1796-1865), a Baptist minister and president of Brown University, expressed an even more explicit devaluation of women’s work. In his *Elements of Political Economy* (1837), Wayland argued that mechanization determined a hierarchization of the workforce thanks to which occupation was provided “for females and for children” and through which manufacturers could “pay for each portion of the labor

no more than it is actually worth.” This, according to Wayland, allowed to “greatly diminish the cost of production” (77-78). Moreover, later in the treatise, he justified women’s low wages insisting on the fact that “a large portion of the laboring class of females are supported, in part, by their relatives,” which allowed them “to labor for a price far less than the actual cost.” In Wayland’s perspective this was the reason “why the price of female labor, especially of that labor which requires but little skill, and which can be done at home, is so low” (340-41). Thus, in Wayland’s writings, as in Carey’s, the doctrine of separate spheres allowed to treat women’s wages as only accessories to the family income, implicitly delegitimizing women’s work outside of the home and at the same time justifying their low pay.

Capitalist Development, the Home and Women’s Duties

A decade later, in *The Past, the Present, and the Future* (1848), Carey went back to reflecting on women’s social role in the context of an expanded theory of economic development. Through an allegory of progress, Carey described the story of “the first settler, the Robison Crusoe of his day” who started working “alone” on poor soils, lacking instrumental capital but “provided however with a wife” (9). It was precisely the presence of a woman at his side that gradually allowed the first settler to emerge from a life of mere subsistence. In fact, in addition to acting as his “helpmate” in labor, the settler’s wife would give him children, who would help him “in removing the obstacles by which his progress is impeded.” Thus, the settler would acquire the crucial advantage of “combination of exertion”, which would gradually allow him to develop new instruments of work, to cultivate new lands and to obtain a greater yield from those already cultivated, thus increasing his overall “power of accumulation” (10-13).

Despite being primarily driven by man’s actions, this potentially limitless growth of wealth to Carey involved a change in the condition of women as well. In fact, while in the earliest, poorest and most savage stages of society, the woman was nothing but the man’s “slave, ever ready to prostitute herself to the stranger for a mouthful of food,” instead “the man who cultivates the rich soils of the earth” saw in her “the source of

his greatest happiness,” to whom he turned “for solace in the hours of affliction.” The growth of wealth, then, tended to bring “an improvement in the condition of woman” and to balance the relationship between sexes, giving “to the weak woman power over the strong man” (262-68). Thus, Carey recognized the woman’s productive and reproductive labor as essential to making men’s improvement possible, while describing economic development as a process that produced greater equality between men and women. However, the meaning of this equality signaled Carey’s adhesion to the contemporary discourse on domesticity.

In his perspective, in fact, the improvement of the condition of women clearly consisted in the possibility for them not to work outside the home after marriage and to devote themselves to reproductive labor in the family. To Carey, while the “poor” and “savage” man forced his wife to work in the fields or, like in England, in factories even after marriage, in contrast the wealthy and civilized American man, thanks to his economic and moral improvement, allowed her to devote herself solely to domesticity. “He labours, that she may rest. He economizes, that she may enjoy the comforts and luxuries of life,” Carey wrote, concealing the burdens of domestic labor (262). It was precisely their confinement to the home, then, in relieving them from the drudgery of productive labor, that, in Carey’s perspective guaranteed to US women an exceptional quality of life (271).

Carey reiterated the idea that insofar as women had to work outside of the home, they could do so only until marriage, legitimizing women’s subordination in the family as a way of preserving them from the hardness and moral risks involved in factory labor. In fact, having become a wife to a husband, in Carey’s opinion, a woman could finally follow her supposedly natural inclination towards domestic, reproductive and care work. The goal for women, in this respect, was to “obtain a home in which to devote herself to the performance of those duties for which she was intended” (272). Thus, the degree to which women could avoid wage labor outside of the home and the degree to which the home could become the specific place for women represented for Carey a crucial measure of economic and social development.

While according to Tocqueville (whose pages on the American woman are clearly echoed in *The Past, the Present, and the Future*), it was the affirmation

of a distinctly American interpretation of equality that produced men and women as functionally separate and hierarchically ordered individuals, to Carey it was economic development itself that increasingly distinguished the public, productive sphere of men from the private, reproductive one of women, gradually widening their separation. Improvement, then, was the process that allowed man to literally maintain the woman in the home, both in the sense that he guaranteed her subsistence and in the sense that he ensured that she did not leave it. If the United States to Carey was exceptional for its advancement in economic development, it was also so because of the extent of the separation of the spheres. Accordingly, the definition of the home as a private space of ownership in which men could exercise their power of self-government, appeared to Carey as the very culmination of men's path towards individual improvement.

With each step in the progress of wealth and population, there is in each little community an increasing number of persons possessing each his *own* land, and *his own* house, upon which he concentrates his exertions for *his own* physical improvement; and *his own* wife, and his *own* children, in whom centre his hopes of happiness. (*The Past* 289-90)

In this respect, the family, enclosed within the space of the "home," was for Carey the fundamental unit of society and had to be prioritized above all others, by individuals as well as by public policies. The family stood "at the beginning of trade" and the "home" in which the family lived was the space of an exchange between the husband, who offered "his services in the raising of food and the materials of clothing" and the wife "employed in the preparation of food for the table, and the conversion of raw materials into clothing" (Carey, "What Constitutes Real Freedom of Trade" 130). This sexual division of labor in the family grounded, in Carey's perspective, the social division of labor.

Moreover, the home was described by Carey, as by Tocqueville and Beecher before him, not only as a functionally distinguished space, but also as a hierarchical space, dominated by men's power and grounded upon women's subordination. For Carey, within "his own home" each man was the "sole master: except so far as he defers its management to its mistress, whose control, within doors, is most complete; but there she stops" (*The*

Past 276). The home was the domain of specifically feminine occupations, but it could not be a space for women's power, since they had to govern a home that remained under man's absolute control. Thus, in the same years in which writers like Catharine Beecher were strategically using the discourse on domesticity to claim a political role for women as mothers and educators of future citizens (Baker; Baritono), Carey repropounded a purely hierarchical interpretation of women's role in the family. The home was described by Carey at once as the space of man's freedom and independence and the space of woman's submission and dependence, and the former insofar as it was the latter, in a dialectical relationship that was not a contradiction, but rather the very structure of the concept of American freedom, concerning women as well as African Americans and natives (E. Foner). The capitalist development described by Carey, then, far from producing increasing equality between men and women, reinforced and naturalized sexual hierarchies within the home and throughout society.

From the Home to the General Home

It was precisely because of its separated and hierarchical character that the "home" could become, in Carey's view, the foundational element of society and the state, projecting onto them its power relations. It is relevant that the lexicon of home and domesticity entered powerfully into the political and economic semantics with which Carey conceptualized the building of society and the state. Indeed, in Carey's writings the lexicon of the "home" largely prevailed over the lexicon of the "nation," in a recurring domestic analogy of the political space. While this interpenetration of the political and domestic lexicon was due to a fundamental ambiguity of the English language, as well as to the still loosely defined character of the concept of nation, Carey openly and repeatedly played on this ambiguity as he theorized (and tried to enact) a strengthening of the state and the building of a national market through protectionist commercial policies.

In his view, in fact, in realizing the "association" and "concentration" of exchanges at the local level, economic development determined an increasing social and political "union" among individuals. This union

materialized first in the building of the "home" in which family members cooperated, then in the definition of a "community" in which several families exchanged, interacted and built institutions "for the maintenance of perfect security of person and property" and "for the settlement of differences." Finally, with the further expansion of wealth, the various communities would come together to establish exchange relationships, to build infrastructures that connected them, and finally to provided themselves with common rules that enabled them to form an ever-closer form of "union," up to the point when "a government is formed" (*The Past* 285-87). This political association, in Carey's perspective, had the shape of a "pyramid" that in many ways resembled the federal shape of the American state, in which superior levels had a decreasing relevance for individuals, with the "home" standing as the closest and most important form of union.

First stands the home. Next, the common home of the original community: and, lastly, the general home of the several communities. In the first, each finds his chief source of happiness. In the second, he finds means of augmenting that happiness, by combination with his neighbours [...]. In the third, he combines with more distant neighbours for the maintenance of roads which he sometimes uses, and for the regulation of affairs of general interest. [...] In time, [...] these little communities [...] are brought into connection with each other: and these numerous little pyramids now form a great pyramid, or State. (287-88)

In his political economy, then, Carey deepened a semantic interpenetration between the lexicon of politics and the lexicon of domesticity, suggesting the idea that the order and power hierarchy of the home defined a model for the construction of the social and political order. Thus, through this inextricable theoretical connection between the domestic and the political, highlighted by the domestic analogies of politics, as well as by the domestic micro-foundation of the state and society, between the 1840s and 1850s Carey tried to imagine the political space as being as hygienic, orderly and governable as that of the home, or, in other words, to conceive a domestication of politics and society. This was likely made all the more

urgent by the specters of the sectional conflict over slavery, of abolitionism and slave revolts, of strikes and class struggle, which increasingly threatened to fracture the United States and its social order.

Analogies between the State and the home were frequent in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. Among the most consequential, there was of course Abraham Lincoln's 1858 discourse on the "house divided" as a metaphor for the American nation torn apart by the sectional conflict over slavery. In the same years, Carey's disciple Erasmus Peshine Smith, in his *Manual for Political Economy* (1853) similarly wrote that "the true conception of a State is that of a Household, whose members have undivided interests" (149). Most crucially, however, other ideologues of domesticity proposed a similar semantic interpenetration between the home and the state. Catharine Beecher, for example, clearly interpreted the domestic space as a symbol of the political space, and housekeeping as a metaphor of government. Beecher's lexicon of domesticity was also strongly intertwined with the rhetoric of manifest destiny, which in those same years was ideologically legitimizing the US imperial expansion in the West, where the home could represent an element of order within a surrounding "wilderness" that needed to be domesticated (Kaplan). Thus, Beecher could describe women who performed their domestic duties as mothers and educators as crucial actors in the American imperial mission: as "agents" in the "building of a glorious temple" (*A Treatise* 38). Even if confined to the home, women's reproductive labor could be presented as foundational to the building of the United States as a republic and as an empire. This appeared crucial in front of the conflicts that, in the mid-nineteenth century, where threatening "the whole nation with a civil war," as Beecher wrote in her pamphlet *The Duty of American Women to their Country* (29). Since political divisions represented a problem of civic illiteracy, it was "in the power of American women to save their country" (64) through their pedagogic and domestic role, which could heal the nation by educating future citizens as to the importance of harmony and order.

In this conceptual movement from the domestic to the political, however, the search for a domestication of politics ended up undermining the separation of the spheres itself, overlapping them to make one analogous to the other. Thus, in a context of social crisis, the discourse on domesticity

took on a powerfully normative significance for political discourse, as the order of the home became an inescapable analogy for theorizing the stabilization of an increasingly conflictual political order. It was precisely the specter of civil war, which haunted both Carey's and Beecher's texts, which made it urgent for both to call for a domestication of the political space that would make it as harmonious, orderly, and governable as that of the home.

Conclusion

Between the 1830s and the 1850s, Carey's political economy was part of the ideological movement that aimed to naturalize the home as a feminine space and to re-legitimize women's dependence and subordination within the family, at a moment of increasing uncertainty for traditional gender roles. While concealing, delegitimizing and devaluing women's work outside of the home, then, the doctrine of separate sphere was instrumental in rejecting women's claim for equality in the mid-nineteenth-century United States.

However, as an economist, Carey was also aware of the importance of women's underpaid work in early US manufactures (while completely and willfully ignoring the work of enslaved women). For this very reason, he outlined a vision of capitalist development in which the mechanization of production would allow women to contribute to the accumulation of capital before marriage, and then to limit themselves to their roles as wives and mothers after it. Thus, describing women's trajectory from the mill to the home, from productive labor in manufactures to reproductive labor in the family, Carey legitimized both their exploitation by capital and their subordination to patriarchy. In doing so, he presented sexual hierarchy as a precondition of capitalist development – since the sexual hierarchization of the workforce and the devaluation of women's work were described as necessary to the overall accumulation of capital – but also as its result – since he argued that the growth of (men's) wealth would allow married women not to work, deepening the separation of spheres. In both respects, reflecting on the social and political conditions for US economic development, between the 1830s and the 1850s Carey theorized

an inextricable relationship between capitalism and patriarchal relations in the family.

It is true that, in the course of his long life, his vision of women's rights would not remain the same. For example, in his *Principles of Social Science* Carey argued that the recognition of "the right of the wife to the ownership of separate property, as well as her claim upon a husband's estate, in case of death" (vol. II, 374) was necessary to the advancement of women's condition. However, he still grounded the functioning of the "machinery of society" upon sexual, as well as racial hierarchies. Despite arguing that with "every stage of progress" the woman tended to acquire "increased importance," such importance appeared to be recognized only to the woman as a "wife" and "as being the mistress of the house, the companion of his joys and his sorrows, and the mother of his children" (vol. III, 368). In fact, with the diversification of employments, the woman could see her value growing and find "herself becoming more and more the equal of the man," but only insofar as demand grew "for her peculiar powers" (369). Thus, in Carey's perspective, women's improvement had to happen once more within the separate sphere of the home, within the realm of domesticity and within the patriarchal relation with the husband, in the end reinforcing their subordination based on gender.

Moreover, in the very conclusion of the *Principles of Social Science*, Carey addressed "advocates of women's rights" to stress that "the road towards elevation of the sex" laid only "in the direction of that varied industry which makes demand for all the distinctive qualities of woman." In other words, Carey warned, women's rights and gender equality could only be achieved by capitalist development. For this reason, rather than promoting women's rights, they should have supported those measures (such as a protectionist tariff) calculated to accelerate the accumulation of capital. In the same spirit, Carey also warned "anti-slavery advocates" that the abolition of slavery could only be reached through "that diversification of pursuits" and emphatically not through abolitionist agitation. Thus, published in 1860, on the very eve of the Civil War, Carey's invocations at the end of the *Principles of Social Science's* third volume took on a markedly conservative, anti-women's rights as well as anti-abolitionist meaning, in an attempt to oppose the increasingly ungovernable movements of those subjects that threatened to overthrow the US social order.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

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FORUM

World War II at 80:
Memory, Impact,
and the World It Left Behind

World War II at 80

Memory, Impact, and the World It Left Behind

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2025 marks the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II, one of the most dramatic and traumatic events in the history of humankind. Amid a year-long series of celebrations and commemorative events, the Editorial Board of *RSAJournal* believes it is appropriate to engage in a broader reflection on the enduring legacy of the war, the profound ways in which it has shaped the contemporary world, and what remains of its heritage. To this end, we have invited seven distinguished international historians of the United States to offer their insights on the war's lasting significance for both the United States and the world. Over the last few decades, their works have widely contributed to an in-depth knowledge of the complexity of WWII at large, and more specifically to the pivotal contribution the United States brought to the globe during and after the end of the conflict. This Forum brings together Raffaella Baritono (University of Bologna), John Bodnar (Indiana University), Ruth Lawlor (Cornell University), Andrew Preston (University of Virginia), Federico Romero (European University Institute), Emily Rosenberg (University of California) and Tom Zeiler (University

of Colorado Bolder) in a remarkable collection of brief and yet incisive reflections on various dimensions of the conflict.

Throughout these pages, we are reminded of the staggering human cost, the enduring trauma borne by survivors, the large-scale destruction of states, and the ultimate moral collapse of civilization culminating in the Holocaust. War World II was indeed a “Total War,” thrusting the world into a unique experience, that not only involved millions of soldiers from every corner of the globe, but also deeply affected civilian populations, including children, who widely and severely suffered the consequences of the conflict. Thanks to its ultimate victory and an untouched national territory, the United States emerged from the conflict as the leading power poised to usher in the “American Century” and establish a Pax Americana that would underpin the stability and lasting peace of the post-1945 Western order. A lasting liberal and multilaterally oriented project designed to survive even after the end of the Cold War, but often challenged and now profoundly revised by the second mandate of US President Donald J. Trump.

In the United States, World War II has traditionally stimulated a memory of the conflict as the “Good War,” a story mythologized by the 1998 best-selling book *The Greatest Generation* by journalist Tom Brokaw. During a decade of intense memorialization of the 50th anniversary of the WWII years, Brokaw boosted an epic narrative of American WWII veterans as embodiments of liberal individualism and patriotic virtue, emphasizing their capacity to reintegrate into civilian life through determination, ambition, and hard work. An exceptionalist narrative inevitably clashes with the harsh realities of wartime daily life as recounted by American combatants, who – far from being driven purely by patriotism – were primarily focused on surviving and protecting their comrades. This “epic” narrative often overlooks the profound impact that millions of American soldiers had on foreign societies and their natural environments.

The forum explores multifaceted issues related to gender, violence, racism, memory, the military, politics, and global governance. Each contributor offers a distinctive perspective on how these interconnected themes persist in shaping our understanding of the past and their lasting

impact on today's world. Indeed, this anniversary comes at a particularly critical juncture, as all the authors, implicitly or explicitly, recognize. A lingering question runs through this Forum: is the post-WWII order unraveling just now, are we experiencing its final demise, when all its pillars seem to be crumbling?

John Bodnar and Tom Zeiler delve into the memory of World War II as the “good” (and just) war not merely to retrace its history, but to uncover its fault lines and shed light on its darker aspects, while also exploring why certain narratives remained unchallenged until recent years.. Ruth Lawlor contributes to the understanding of popular memories of the war – and the fate of its “uncomfortable truths” – by exploring interesting “gendered narratives of defeat.” All three offer a compelling insight into the culture of memory of a conflict that – as Andrew Preston aptly puts it – “was the making of American hegemony” and established “globalism” as a paradigm for understanding and shaping world interaction and governance. The nature of the global order that was rewired after 1945 is the focal point of Raffaella Baritono, Federico Romero, and Emily Rosenberg’s essays. Focusing on Eleanor Roosevelt’s contribution, Baritono incisively examines the pitfalls and fractures of the postwar order through the lens of gender, race relations and colonialism. The last two of these authors delve into the archetypal postwar settlement – its core foundations, its crisis, and its potential eclipse. What is left of that rule-based order, concerned about “winning the peace,” and the “presumed lessons of WWII”? While the answer lies beyond the scope of this Forum, the question itself underpins all the contributions made here.

AUTHORS’ BIONOTES

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Eleanor Roosevelt and the Post-1945 World Order

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KEYWORDS

Eleanor Roosevelt, United Nations, Liberalism, Internationalism, Pacifism

In her daily column, *My Day*, on May 9, 1945, Eleanor Roosevelt informed her readers of the end of the war in Europe following Germany's unconditional surrender. She confessed:

I can almost hear my husband's voice make that announcement, for I heard him repeat it so often [...] Europe is in ruins and the weary work of reconstruction must now begin. There must be joy, of course, in the hearts of the peoples whom the Nazis conquered and who are now free again. Freedom without bread, however, has little meaning. My husband always said that freedom from want and freedom from aggression were twin freedoms which had to go hand in hand.

Looking ahead to the conclusion of the war in the Pacific, Eleanor Roosevelt emphasized that achieving a "lasting peace" could not be disassociated from the United States' global responsibilities: "Peace cannot be lasting

unless we accept our responsibilities toward the peoples in Europe and in Asia [...] That means that we must understand our fellow human beings throughout the world and must feel a constant responsibility toward them” (*My Day*, May 11). She warned that this responsibility is a collective one, as she articulated a few days later: “we must realize that being a citizen in a democracy entails greater responsibility than any other type of citizenship anywhere else in the world, for in a democracy there is no way in which you can put upon any other individual the responsibility which you should carry yourself” (*My Day*, May 19).

Eleanor Roosevelt, now a “private citizen,” continued to champion the political vision shaped by her extensive involvement in women’s movements, peace initiatives, and her role as First Lady from 1933 until Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s passing in April 1945. Her commitment was rooted in progressive liberalism, which sought to expand both the internal boundaries of democracy and the global reach of democratic ideals. In many ways, she articulated this vision of a new global order in her seemingly straightforward and “common sense” language, a perspective that resonated with intellectuals, politicians, and activists alike.

As Or Rosenboim argued, “in the 1940’s, the ‘global’ emerged as a new, all-encompassing space. The global was imagined as a point of reference for all other political units, embodying the tension between the oneness of planet Earth and the diverse communities that inhabit it” (272). It became a focal point for an intellectual and political discourse aimed at establishing connections between the realities of different political units while acknowledging the interrelations that would serve as the foundation for new institutional frameworks. Ideally, this should have led to the creation of the United Nations as a manifestation of a democratic global order grounded in the affirmation of universal rights as all basic human rights rather than merely as an institution dedicated to ensuring collective security.

Eleanor Roosevelt was not primarily a political thinker. Nonetheless, her insights offer a valuable perspective for exploring one of the post-1945 hypotheses centered on redefining order through the lens of universal rights. This vision aimed to place such rights at the core of a political order rather than merely a moral one, although it was ultimately destined to fail. Her reflections on rights, the role of the United Nations, and the

democratic global order – as well as her involvement in the early stages of the United Nations, particularly within the Commission on Human Rights – shed light on how the discourse surrounding rights was developed in the emerging landscape following the war. However, this commitment was not without its aporias and contradictions, particularly within a global and varied context. The tensions and conflicts arising within the new international organization, along with the dynamic between grassroots movements and associations on the one hand and national and international institutions on the other, were not only driven by the bipolar conflicts but also shaped by the asymmetrical relationships between the global North and South. Additionally, these dynamics highlighted the processes of exclusion and discrimination that served as significant obstacles to establishing democracies, especially in the United States.

Eleanor had supported the concept of a “New Deal for the World,” albeit within a critical perspective, fully aware that issues surrounding race relations and colonialism posed significant obstacles to its realization. Nevertheless, she confidently regarded the signing of the Atlantic Charter on August 10, 1941, with its reference to FDR’s Four Freedoms, as a pivotal step toward establishing an international political order that could harmonize social security with national security, protect fundamental freedoms, and expand democratic spaces:

We all listened breathlessly yesterday when the radio from England gave us a statement of the peace aims, drawn up by the President and Mr. Winston Churchill. There was nothing new, nothing which I had not heard many times before in conversation about our foreign policy. Yet, stated this way to the people of the world, one felt it was an important moment in the history of world progress. (*My Day*, August 16)

The outbreak of war reignited the hopes of internationalist associations and groups eager to seize a “second chance.” Eleanor Roosevelt emerged, almost naturally, as a central figure within the intricate network of political leaders, intellectuals, and civic and religious organizations who believed it was essential to lay the groundwork for a future that would foster and sustain peace. Her connections with women’s peace groups, fortified

during the battles over the World Court in the 1920s, her associations with organizations that prioritized internationalism, her politically significant role as First Lady, and her increasingly precise and assertive stance against Nazi-fascism – all contributed to Eleanor Roosevelt’s importance as an interlocutor. She served not only as a conduit to the President but also brought her independent political stature and the ability to influence public opinion, which was gradually shifting away from its isolationist tendencies.

Truman appointed Eleanor to the official US delegation for the inaugural United Nations assembly in London in 1946. This decision was partly intended to signal to segments of American civil society advocating for establishing a world organization founded on democratic principles, including a commission on human rights. However, the former First Lady soon confronted the reality that her aspirations for a unified world and the potential to create an international order grounded in the ideals of the Rooseveltian “four freedoms” would collide with the stark opposition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Additionally, there was the pressing need to appease nations like France and Great Britain, which were intent on preserving their imperial dominions.

Her tenure at the United Nations tested her ability “to feel free” and her ambition to advocate for the needs of civil society and the “little people” amidst the constant challenge of reconciling idealism with the harsh realities of policies often driven by national interests.

Not coincidentally, Eleanor Roosevelt, who served as the chairwoman of the Nuclear Commission of Human Rights and as a US delegate until 1952 – when she resigned following Dwight Eisenhower’s election – transitioned from a stance of “realist pacifism” to one of “realist internationalism.” This shift was shaped by her awareness of national security demands and obligations arising from the Cold War. From 1950 onward, with the formation of NATO, the Korean War, and escalating tensions within the UN General Assembly concerning colonial issues, Eleanor Roosevelt grew increasingly apprehensive about the waning of US leadership on human rights. Furthermore, she adopted a more critical stance toward the choices made by the Eisenhower administration and its Secretary of State, John

Foster Dulles, particularly regarding the US disengagement from the treaty ratification process, starting with genocide.

The “New Deal for the World”’s vision encountered its most significant challenges at the intersection of race and anti-colonial relations within the context of bipolar confrontation. Eleanor Roosevelt consistently cautioned that racial discrimination could undermine US objectives, emphasizing the link between domestic and international realms:

We are going to live in a world where people of many races are going to be close to us and are going to have equal economic opportunity whether a small group, temporarily powerful here, wishes them to have it in this country or not. [...] These men [those who opposed the policies of racial equality] are making enemies for us at the present time – not just of minority groups in this country, but of large majority groups throughout the world. (*My Day*, July 5)

On the other, she firmly believed that the United Nations, as recognized by African-American associations, could serve as a powerful platform for visibility and a source of pressure against prevailing national tensions, rigidities, and discrimination. However, just as it became evident in 1947 – when the NAACP and W.E.B. Du Bois presented their document *An Appeal to the World! A Statement of the Denial of Human Rights to Minorities in the Case of Citizens of Negro Descent in the United States of America* to the Commission on Human Rights, without the explicit endorsement of Eleanor Roosevelt – it became clear that the demands of power politics overshadowed the promotion of human rights. Her aspiration to amplify the voices of civil society within a democratic space, which should have been a hallmark of the new political landscape post-1945, had to concede to a reality that she increasingly perceived as a new constraint, perhaps even more formidable than the one she faced while serving as First Lady.

Despite the challenges that indicated the initial fractures in constructing the liberal order, Eleanor consistently urged President Truman and Democratic administration officials that the true struggle would unfold in Asia and the emerging post-colonial landscapes. She emphasized the importance of fostering relationships that could diminish the deep-seated mistrust and hostility stemming from years of colonial

rule. In her correspondence with Truman, she conveyed: “The race question has become a very vital one since much of the feeling is that the colored races are? against the white race. We are classed with the Colonial Powers” (“Letter to President Truman” 1015-16).

As noted previously, in 1952, following Eisenhower’s victory in the presidential election, Eleanor Roosevelt chose to step back from her role out of a sense of fairness, having supported his opponent, Adlai Stevenson. In the initial draft of her resignation letter, she emphasized the vital need for the United States to promote human rights: “In spite of our inadequacies the United States is at the forefront of the countries in the world in observing basic human rights and freedoms (“Letter to Eisenhower” 486). This leadership was to be carried out without undermining the strength of the United Nations. For Eleanor, the UN represented the essential platform for dialogue and communication, enabling a participatory exercise of American leadership within a diverse framework where the US hegemony would derive from the power of moral and political example rather than through the imposition of economic and military might. The United Nations provided the ideal space, as the progressive inclusion of new states allowed for tensions to be addressed there, which, if redirected outward, could ultimately lead to prioritizing power struggles over politics, particularly in the form of military conflict.

Unfortunately, her perspective remained largely unheeded, and failure to follow her recommendations may have contributed to the challenges faced by US leadership from after World War II until the present day.

AUTHOR’S BIONOTE

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The American Memory of World War II

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KEYWORDS

Identity, Memory, Pain, Trauma, War

The public remembrance of war in any nation is usually contentious. When societies attempt to craft memories of brutal conflicts, they enter a minefield of conflicting feelings and opinions. In looking at the vast array of memory activity – films, memoirs, memorials, and commemorative ceremonies – that often make up public reflections on warfare, widespread agreement is elusive. Government officials, movie makers, ordinary citizens, war veterans, and writers invariably participate in enterprises which are wide in scope and multifaceted.

The American memory of World War I is no exception. Today the myth of the “good war” dominates the nation’s memory of the conflict. This myth portrays the war as a highly righteous endeavor that not only ended in victory for democracy over fascism but highlights experiences that brought out the best in the American people. The many proponents of this legend not only savor the defeat of evil regimes but see the war as a time when citizens displayed a sense of ethical values and patriotism that still resides at the core of American national identity. The romantic nature

of this fable not only reinforces virtuous views of the nation but manages to erase many of the bitter realities that mark the experience of the war itself. The elevation of myth over experience, however, was not accidental. Over time memory makers promoted this view not only to enhance a sense of national greatness but to tamp down the widespread expression of criticism and pain expressed by the generation that experienced the conflict firsthand. These alternative voices insisted that the human cost involved in terms of loss and trauma in a war should not be forgotten. After a full immersion in violence, Americans wanted to ensure that they be seen as a people inherently patriotic, principled and devoid of gratuitously violent tendencies. Explicit descriptions of state sponsored brutality and suffering invariably threatened such dreams.

The central problem of war memories has always been about the extent the traumatic could coexist with the heroic and how such ideas reflected upon the identity of the nation itself. As Jenny Edkins has insightfully argued, state responsibility for “grievous losses” can undermine the bonds of loyalty people can feel toward their nation and eviscerate hopes that their country can offer them safety and a stable future (5-15). This issue was by no means confined to the United States. In nations where the fight was lost and casualties heavy like Germany and Japan, for instance, it became difficult to recall the war in an objective way. Germans wrestled for decades after 1945 with not only their responsibility for the Holocaust but the accountability they bore for bringing so much death and destruction to their own citizens. It was not until 2005 that they were able to build a “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” in the middle of Berlin.

In Japan, haunted by starting a conflict that brought human slaughter not only to their homeland but to the peoples of East Asia, a desire to escape questions of culpability colored efforts at remembrance. Officials prevented the teaching of war realities in schools for decades. Memorial planners in Hiroshima, the site of atomic devastation, elected to name a memorial site the “Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park” with the intent of spreading a message of peace and escaping questions of mass slaughter. They conveyed the legacy of the dead in the form of a memorial cenotaph. Discussions of accountability remained elusive.

America's debate over remembering World War II also revolved around the tension between the fallout from state-sponsored violence and the quest for a righteous identity. Critical judgements and feelings of sorrow and loss vied for attention with more honorable and less reflective feelings. The force of national commemorations focused on the need to justify the sacrifice and repair the damage the war brought to people's lives. Memoirists saw trauma as an object of forgetting. Such a project, of course, could not be conducted with ease. People – especially in local communities and in private homes grieved and lamented the loss of loved ones. In the literary sphere, soldiers home from the war wrote widely circulated novels and memoirs that chronicled the horrors of the conflict and offered overly critical accounts of America's capacity for violence. This is not to say there were no expressions of popular pride in the American victory. Veteran organizations repeatedly talked about the victory in glowing terms, often placing tanks in front of their buildings next to a flagpole as memorials. General Dwight Eisenhower's book on *Crusade in Europe* (1948) praised the military planning and civilian war efforts that helped insure the defeat of Germany. In a sense these positive stories were therapeutic in that they tended to omit much of the confusion and pain that was at the heart of countless subjective experiences.

Veteran writings did not see the war simply as a successful crusade. Popular novels by veterans like Norman Mailer – who served in the Pacific – upended visions of a glorious victory by offering the public a critical account of soldier attitudes. He featured profiles of warriors who were driven by violent impulses both to kill the enemy and, in their personal lives, harm women. In his 1948 book, *The Naked and the Dead*, the central premise was that the war in the Pacific revealed an astounding capacity for aggression on the part of the Americans. James Jones, another war veteran, authored novels that featured a highly contemptuous appraisal of Army leadership. In his novel, *The Thin Red Line* (1962) Jones cast soldiers as disillusioned by the violence they saw. Older men looked at new recruits (as) simply as cannon fodder rather than as heroic fighters.

The grand memorials of the postwar era were much more about heroism. The most famous one from the early postwar era was the Maine Corps memorial to the battle of Iwo Jima erected near Washington DC in

1954. Ever since it has remained one of the most popular and recognizable memorials of the American war effort. The monument consists of an image of American soldiers raising a victory flag after a fierce battle against the Japanese. It was based on a news photo that was published by the military to offer people back home a sense that victory was at hand at a time when overall casualties were running high. In fact, at the time of the photo, actual victory at Iwo Jima was far from certain. The striking feature of this aesthetic rendition of warfare was its failure to reveal the tremendous human toll of the encounter. One third of all marines killed in World War II died at Iwo Jima. The memorial itself did not mention this fact; it concentrated on the “uncommon valor” of the troops (Marling and Wetenhall).

Years later research revealed that the personal feelings of the men depicted in bronze and their families were far from persuaded that valor was the only way or even the best way to describe their sense of what happened. The family of one soldier became so upset over all the patriotic ceremonies after the war that celebrated their dead son’s sacrifice that they stopped going to such events. Their remembrance was dominated by the pain of his death, and they refused to turn it into something more heroic. One of the men pictured in the statue, a native-American, died alone days after the dedication of the memorial, a victim of alcoholism and despondent over the fact that victory and sacrifice had not led to more justice for his people in their own country (Bodnar 87-89).

A similar pattern unfolded in the commemoration of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the site of a Japanese attack upon a naval base that drew the United States into World War II in both Europe and Asia. Americans vowed in 1941 never to forget Pearl Harbor, where 2,000 Americans died, and they never did. A memorial to the USS Arizona, a ship sunk by the Japanese with some 1,100 sailors on board, was erected in 1963. The aesthetics of the memorial attempted to achieve a blend of tragedy and triumph. A gleaming white structure was built over the sunken hull of the ship which was clearly visible under the water. Bubbles rising to the surface reminded tourists of the human remains entombed below. Architects designed the roof of the visitors’ structure over the ship to be low in the middle and high at each end to represent a drawn longbow ready to spring

back. The implied message was that the nation was bent by the attack but sprung back to vanquish the enemy. In this representation of bitter war realities, traces of death were more visible than they were at the Iwo Jima site. The names of the dead were placed inside the visitors' room above the ship. During the 50th anniversary celebration of the attack in 1991, however, veterans paraded through the streets of Honolulu with smiles to a cheering audience that sang "God Bless America." It was a celebration. Eventually the trope of victory was reinforced near the Arizona site when the battleship *Missouri*, upon whose deck the surrender of the Japanese took place in 1945 in Tokyo Bay, was placed nearby. Now tourists could see the beginning and end of the victorious struggle in the Pacific.

Years later the pain of the families that lost men in Hawaii leaked into the public consciousness. The discovery of DNA caused the Department of Defense in 2015 to launch an effort to identify the mass of bones that had been recovered from other ships destroyed in the Japanese assault. As scientists began to collect DNA samples from families who lost relatives at Pearl Harbor, they were able to find a match with some of the bones. This was dramatic because the families of these casualties never knew what happened to their relatives. News reports began to appear throughout the nation of such discoveries and official ceremonies in which surviving family members received containers with remains and learned what truly happened. It soon became clear that many of these people had suffered for years not only from the loss of loved ones but from the uncertainty of knowing their fate. Accounts revealed that grieving mothers waited for years after the war for a "knock on the door" from missing sons. Others wept in public as they took possession of what was left of their kin. One family kept a "wooden heart" as a private memorial of their loss. Others held on to wartime telegrams indicating that their relatives were missing in action. Wooden hearts and a mother's grief are seldom the stuff of war memorials. They convey a suggestion of skepticism over the war effort and disrupt hopes that a nation's war reminiscences can be more about noble victories and heroic citizens than brutal actions and enduring pain.

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Ambivalent Endings

Sexual Violence in the Italian Memory of World War II

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KEYWORDS

Rape, Colonialism, Memory, Occupation, Postwar

The popular memory of Italy's defeat in the Second World War is dominated by the metaphor of racial and sexual defilement, with the city of Naples frequently depicted as the epicenter of national humiliation (Escolar; De Paola, "Sexual Violence, Interracial Relations and Racism"; Glynn).¹ The Italian fascist writer Curzio Malaparte's auto-fictional account of the occupation of Naples by US and French forces, published in 1949 as *La Pelle*, was one of the first works to portray the city in these terms. In scenes both hyper-real and patently absurd, the book describes the plight of Italian women forced to sell their young children into sexual slavery; the

¹ The travel writer and intelligence officer Norman Lewis, whose "first-hand account" of the war was published in 1978, did much to publicize this image in the Anglophone world (123). See Lewis.

boys are purchased by ominous-looking Moroccans, while the girls take up residence in brothels frequented by the occupation forces. Gesturing at this social breakdown, one local tells a US Army officer that “women have lost the war, too.” But the American disagrees: “Only the men have lost the war,” he insists. “Only men” (Malaparte 58-59).

Malaparte’s narration reserves roughly equal disdain for the destitute mothers who – in his view – have enabled their own degradation, the skulking colonial soldiers who take advantage of their immiseration, and the hapless Americans who have entered a world they barely understand. His observation that “all conquerors need to see these things to convince themselves they have won the war” suggests that military victory is ambivalent: it needs to be realized through the transformation of women into spoils of war (36-37). The insight is a compelling one, capturing something about the way both victors and vanquished alike experience the moment of war’s end – and perhaps something about how it is remembered, too.

Indeed, Italy’s defeat *was* ambivalent. The sudden ouster of Mussolini in July, 1943, deprived the Allied forces of striking the decisive blow themselves, while the subsequent German invasion and occupation forced them into a year-long slog from Salerno to Rome. A popular insurrection in Naples in September, followed by a wave of “red” protests across the rural South, showed that securing the peace might be harder than winning the war (Gribaudi; Forlenza). For Italians, the Allies’ decision to hand the reins of military government to Pietro Badoglio – Mussolini’s commander-in-chief – in February 1944 must have seemed like a strange continuity rather than the abrupt break that the transition from war to post-war is often thought to entail.²

As a result, there are multiple ways to tell the story of the end of Italy’s war, including whether it should properly be marked by the capitulation of 1943, the formal end of the world war in 1945, or perhaps even 1948, the

² On Badoglio’s role as a “genocidaire” of Italian imperialism, see Alexander De Grand, esp. 131-32. Scholars writing across different contexts have increasingly begun to trouble the boundary between war and peace in the “shatter zones” of empire. See Martin Thomas; Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell.

year when elections for the new Italian republic showcased the fruits of US and Soviet policy to partition the European continent, with Stalin agreeing to “rein in popular insurrectionary sentiment” (Buchanan 8) in Rome and elsewhere in exchange for a free hand in Eastern Europe (Buchanan; Pons).

When it comes to gendered narratives of defeat, however, there is less variation: allegations of mass rape by Alphonse Juin’s *Corps Expéditionnaire Français* in the aftermath of the Battle of Monte Cassino in the summer of 1944 – known colloquially as the *Marocchine* – loom disproportionately large. Most controversial in such accounts is the question of whether French commanders of North African troops gave these soldiers a “blank cheque” to rape in exchange for their service in the colonial army (Baris 54-7).

The story of the *Marocchine* was made internationally famous by Alberto Moravia, whose 1957 novel *La ciociara* (*Two Women*) was adapted into an acclaimed film in 1960. Highly melodramatic, the tale has had a long afterlife: in 2015, on the 70th anniversary of the Second World War’s formal end, the composer Marco Tutino adapted it for an opera which premiered in San Francisco that summer. Despite the politically-charged nature of the story, reviewers accepted the opera’s claim to depict “war’s horror at high pitch,” understood as savage violence meted out by *indigènes*. Indeed, although a *New York Times* critic panned the opera’s lack of subtlety in comparison to the film, he urged those interested in understanding the “true costs of war” to see Hector Berlioz’s *The Trojans* instead; the mass suicide of the women of Troy depicted in that production seemed to him to offer a more plausible expression of the “tension and horror” of war (Wolfe). Clearly, whether in Ancient Greek mythology or twentieth century Europe, Malaparte’s conviction that military defeat should be understood as the conquest of women remains persuasive to many audiences.

The opera also suffered from the addition of a “good war” re-framing (not evident in the film) in which an American officer appears at the last minute to redeem the Allies – who have done little to stop the portrayed rampage of the Moroccans thus far – by calling for a halt to the violence even as French officers remain indifferent to the carnage. There are real-life examples like this in the historical record, evidence of metropolitan soldiers’ understanding of rape as uniquely uncivilized violence. For example, in January 1945, in the Vosges, American GIs Darl F. Barton

and Lester Campbell were convicted of the murder of Moroccan soldier Ali Ben Mohmoud, which they carried out at the head of a crowd “look[ing] for the Arab” who was said to have raped a local barmaid the night before. The woman brought the Americans to Mohmoud’s living quarters, where Campbell shot him in the stomach and Barton fired at his head (*United States v. Technician Fourth Grade Darl F. Barton*, 212; *United States v. Private Lester Campbell*) – a lynching in all but name. The French Army would later carry out similar extra-judicial executions of North Africans held responsible for sexual violence during the advance into Germany (Lawlor, “The Stuttgart Incident”).

It was not the first time that such atrocity stories were foregrounded during major anniversaries. During the 60th anniversary commemoration in 2005, the writer and journalist Romano Bracalini similarly invoked the memory of the *Marocchine* – this time for explicitly political rather than ostensibly artistic ends. He penned a virulent essay about the failure of political authorities to acknowledge Allied atrocities during the invasion and occupation of Italy, writing that “[t]he sexual violence of Moroccans against white European women, as well as the bestial instinct of illiterate peasants enlisted for pay in the villages of the Sahara and Atlas, was a kind of ‘promotion’ that elevated them to the rank of ‘dominators,’ of absolute masters of the lives of the defeated.” Their violence, Bracalini claimed, constituted “an elementary testimony of ‘possession’ that rescued them from the condition of pariahs [who had been] colonized by whites.” Not content to confine his racist tirade to historical matters, Bracalini drew a straight line between the occupation of Italy by colonial soldiers and the migration of North Africans to the country in the present, which he similarly saw as a form of invasion. “In the popular fantasy ‘Moroccan’ became synonymous – and remains so today – with bestial ferocity,” he claimed, and were viewed as “recidivist[s] and habitual rapist[s].” Indeed, he insisted, “[t]he exploits of Moroccan immigrants in our country have not erased the bad reputation of [these] rapists and slackers” (my translation).

Bracalini’s comments – especially his claim that permission to rape the white enemy was a psychic payment awarded by metropolitan officials to downtrodden colonial subjects *in lieu* of real civic freedoms – mirrored recent political debates. In 1996, Senators Bruno Magliocchetti and Michele

Bonatesta had appealed to the Italian parliament to consider women who had been raped as victims of war entitled to compensation. As in Germany, the Italian government (like the US military) did not treat sexual violence as a war injury, and the Senators' petition was an effort to rectify this injustice (Dr Kitz; Saadeh). Yet their appeal was surprisingly narrow, given that Italy had been occupied by British, American, French and German forces; rather than demand compensation for all the victims, however, it drew attention solely to those who suffered at the hands of Moroccan "soldiers of fortune, in search of prey to subdue" ("Disegno di Legge n. 1081" 2). The appeal repeated several tropes common to descriptions of racialized sexual violence almost everywhere: according to the senators, the colonial troops had been "brought to Italy with the promise that in this way they would obtain the independence of their country" (2); they were said to have raped some 2000 women and 600 men including a parish priest, "impaled alive" any relatives who tried to defend the women, raped some young girls upwards of 200 times, gave syphilis to 20 percent of the victims and gonorrhoea to 80 percent (2).³ The desecration of innocents (religious figures, the elderly, children), the mutilation of bodies, and the contagion of tropical diseases – like "incurable (African) syphilis", in the words of one American correspondent – are the mainstays of such accounts (Devers).

Both Magliocchetti and Bonatesta were members of the National Alliance (NA), the successor political party to the Italian Social Movement (MSI), founded in 1946 by leaders of the Republic of Salò, the German-backed puppet state established in Northern Italy after Mussolini's ouster. Bonatesta had previously been a member of MSI, elected to the Senate in 1992 before joining NA when it replaced MSI in 1995. As scholars of post-war politics in other former Axis countries have shown, the unredressed legacy of wartime sexual violence remains an active rallying point for politicians on the right (Roebuck), but they serve a strange function because they allow the crimes of all the Allied armies to be displaced onto colonial soldiers (and, in the US Army, Black soldiers) specifically and often exclusively, thus eliding a series of contradictions that are otherwise

³ Similar descriptions of disease and defilement can be found in accounts of the Rape of Berlin as well, especially when attributed to "Oriental" soldiers. See Grossman.

unmanageable in postwar politics. These include the inconsistency of liberation narratives – which frame nearly all public commemorations of World War II – with the violence that accompanied military occupation and political reconstruction, raising uncomfortable questions about the ultimate purpose for which the war itself was fought.

As such, while the uses to which polemics like these are put vary across national contexts, in Europe they are generally inflected by a claim to uphold the mantle of Christian civilization in the face of new onslaughts from abroad – the “oriental hordes” of 1944 and 1945 repurposed for the present day in what scholar Stephanie de Paola has termed the “usable pasts” spun from potted histories of Allied sexual violence (Bartov 85; Eastland; de Paola, “Between Past and Present”). Indeed, Bracalini went so far as to claim the Moroccans in Italy behaved more cruelly than the Nazis. Lest this rhetoric seem uniquely fascist, however, we should remind ourselves that such sentiments were also central to the liberal consensus which framed the notion of ‘Western’ civility in contrast to Soviet ‘barbarism’ during the Cold War (Thorne) – though to say so in national commemorations was very difficult until quite recently. Indeed, there remains a confluence of interests between national elites across the political spectrum who are interested in women’s legal status as victims of wartime sexual violence only insofar as it advances an agenda directed towards the continued subordination of women and former colonial subjects alike (Giardino; Buchanan and Lawlor).

Historical incidences of sexual violence – and mass rape especially – are difficult for both victors and vanquished to incorporate into popular memories of the Second World War. Such violence is sordid precisely because it betrays a total lack of distinction between combatant and civilian and targets all members of a population as irredeemable fifth columnists, with particular ferocity reserved for women. Not only have post-war states not dealt adequately with the suffering caused by these acts of violence – neither did the Allied War Crimes tribunals or the Geneva Conventions – but even the history of the *Marocchine* itself remains shrouded in mythology, lacking the archival research that has helped us to better understand similar allegations of mass rape in places like Stuttgart, Berlin

and Nanking (Gershovich; Maghraoui, “The Moroccan ‘Effort de Guerre’”; Maghraoui, “Moroccan Colonial Soldiers”; Maghraoui, “The Goumiers”).⁴

At the same time, such exaggerated accounts of mass rape are obviously also a convenient fiction. When sexual violence is treated as exceptional – was it more indiscriminate or brutal than the bombing unleashed upon European and Japanese factory workers, many women (including enslaved Jews and Koreans) among them? – it can take on mythical qualities which function to further a clear set of (usually regressive) political goals. For the Allies themselves, it was useful to displace the blame for war crimes onto black and colonial soldiers because it reinforced the rationale for continuing segregation and colonial rule. For the former Axis powers, doing so helped to fashion a mythic foundation upon which the modern post-fascist state could be built and made compatible with the source of their ultimate defeat: the mighty force of US imperialism and the world order brought into being as a direct result of Washington’s intervention into the war. For both, most importantly, this historical sleight of hand avoided any reckoning with what fascism and liberalism shared in common – or, as Trinidadian Marxist George Padmore put it, the “indistinguishable” nature of “aggressive fascist imperialism” and “old-established democratic ‘peace-loving’ imperialism” (Padmore).

In a very real sense, then, difficult memories of an ambivalent end to a hard-fought war are actually resolved by the story of the *Marocchine*, which is why it retains such utility for commentators today. Malaparte was surely right when he said that such sensational accounts of atrocity act as an anesthetic, masking uncomfortable truths about the meaning of war – in both victory and defeat.

⁴ The best recent work that exists on the subject remains incomplete, as Moshe Gershovich acknowledged in his effort to interview some of the Moroccan soldiers who had fought at Monte Cassino. A recent paper on the *Marocchine* by Matthew Chippin concludes that current “historical writing on this subject is both incomplete and in need of reassessment” (2). On the treatment of sexual violence in the Geneva Conventions, see Van Dijk.

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Ruth Lawlor teaches diplomatic, military and global history at Cornell. She has published widely on law, gender and imperialism in the Second World War, and her book on sexual violence and the US military justice system is forthcoming with Oxford University Press.

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World War II and US Global Power

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KEYWORDS

United States, Globalism, Franklin Roosevelt, Pacific, Henry R. Luce

World War II was the making of American hegemony. The United States became a global great power in 1898, with its victory over Spain in the Caribbean and the Philippines, and it was clearly the world's preeminent power by 1919, when Woodrow Wilson set about reordering the international system in an American image; only internal opposition from the US Senate was able to stop Wilson's momentum. The United States had also been the major economic player long before World War II: its explosive growth made it the world's preeminent industrial nation by 1900 (if not before), and Wall Street supplanted the City of London as the world's key financial hub in 1916-17. But World War II created the conditions for the United States to become not just a genuinely global superpower, but also the most powerful state the world had not seen in a long time, certainly not since the peak of British imperial power in the late nineteenth century and perhaps not even since the days of the Roman Empire.

World War II had such a transformative effect on American power not simply because the United States led the Allies to victory, although victory was of course a necessary condition for hegemony. It was because, alone among the major contestants of the war, the United States emerged in a far stronger position in virtually every possible way.

The war (and not the New Deal) pulled the United States out of the Great Depression, and made the country once again very wealthy. Even before the US entered the war in 1941, it was acting as the “arsenal of democracy,” supplying the British, Chinese, and Soviet militaries with weapons, foodstuffs, and other war materiel to keep their war moving forward. Once World War II became an attritional war on a global scale – as it was in China since the summer of 1938, in the Pacific since late 1942, and in Europe since the winter of 1943 – it was only a matter of time before America’s preeminence in resources and economic output tipped the overall balance in the Allies’ favor. This also led to the revival of the US economy.

Not coincidentally, the United States managed to remain apart from the fighting even as it fought the war. Until World War II, Americans benefitted from a geopolitical condition scholars have termed “free security.” Security meant almost total freedom from foreign attack or invasion, and it was free in two senses: it was presumed, since Americans did not have to work hard to attain it, and it was remarkably cheap, indeed virtually free, in that the US military remained small except in exceptional times of war. During World War II, Americans, including historians and international relations specialists, assumed that free security was a relic of the past. The bombing of Pearl Harbor had revealed that it was an anachronism from a bygone age. But the strange thing was, a kind of free security endured, providing space for all sorts of other developments.

By 1945, Germany, Japan, and Italy lay in ruins, but even America’s major wartime partners – Britain, France, China, and the Soviet Union – were physically devastated, their industries largely incapacitated, their treasuries bankrupt, their budgets in serious deficit, and their workforces severely depleted since they had either been mobilized to fight the war or rendered incapacitated as a result of it. The situation in America was very different. This was because, uniquely, the contiguous United States was never a battlefield in the war, which meant that, again uniquely,

there were virtually no American civilian deaths. Worldwide, the frequency of ground invasion and aerial bombing in World War II meant that anywhere from 70 to 80 percent of the sixty million fatalities were civilians, but the contiguous United States was never invaded and only lightly, sporadically bombed. The most serious incident occurred when an incendiary balloon launched from Japan drifted across the Pacific and detonated in Oregon in 1945, killing six people at a church picnic – tragic, certainly, but minor compared to the kind of warfare every other major belligerent experienced. The wartime boom saw record-breaking levels of Depression-era unemployment drop to virtually zero. Just as importantly, the sophisticated technological innovations catalyzed by the exigencies of war, and the skilled workers and military personnel needed to apply them in the post war world, created a dynamic, agile economy that was perfectly suited to being adapted into a thriving peacetime economy. The consumer capitalism that defined American prosperity in the Cold War and beyond, and made the United States attractive to people around the world, was a result not only of its victory in World War II, but its unique geopolitical position in a world torn apart by war.

The American globalism that endures today – even Donald Trump’s supposedly “isolationist,” America First administration remains engaged around the world – was created by World War II. The war began as a regional Asian conflict in July 1937, when Japan attacked the walled fortress of Wanping that guarded the southwestern approach to Beijing. The European theatre then erupted with the joint German and Soviet invasions of Poland in September 1939. It then only became a *world* war in December 1941, when Japan attacked the naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and Germany declared war on the United States, thus uniting the two hitherto regional theatres of war into one gigantic, interrelated, global conflict. Because the Axis offensives made the war a global conflict, the defeat of the Axis countries had the potential to make the Allied victors truly global powers, an opportunity which only the United States was uniquely capable of seizing.

What made the United States a truly global power was that it was dominant in both the Atlantic and the Pacific. But it was America’s Pacific power that was novel, and it was mastery of the vast Pacific that made the United States truly hegemonic. The war started at Wanping, went global

at Pearl Harbor, and came to an end at Nagasaki. President Franklin D. Roosevelt grasped the importance of Asia and the Pacific to the future of American power. In 1940, he and US military officials had decided on a Europe-first strategy, and they reiterated that commitment to Europe after the Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor in 1941. But FDR himself undid it in November 1942 when, facing mounting losses in the Solomon Islands campaign in the southern Pacific, he ordered the joint chiefs of staff to give equal weight to both theatres of war. This meant that the United States and Britain were the only nations fighting a genuinely world war – tellingly, none of the Axis powers did – but the declining British were eclipsed by the Americans in both regions, and by the end of the war Great Britain was no longer in command of even its own destiny.

A United States that was paramount worldwide was already on the cards before the United States joined the war. In February 1941, the publishing baron Henry R. Luce urged his fellow Americans to enter the war not simply to destroy German Nazism and Japanese imperialism, but to create “the American Century.” The war, Luce saw, offered Americans an opportunity to recreate world order in their own image: liberal, capitalist, prosperous, open. An American Century emerging from the ruins of war would ensure an enduring international peace.

Luce’s vision was uncannily accurate, but only partially so. The other power to emerge stronger from the war was the Soviet Union, despite the utter devastation it had suffered at the hands of Nazi Germany. Europe was divided, and would remain so until 1989. The Chinese Revolution in 1949 meant that the Asian-American Century would also only be partial, with Korea, Vietnam, and China itself partitioned along with Germany and Berlin. And while Vietnam and Germany were eventually reunited, Korea and China remain divided to this day. Luce’s vision of a peaceful, consumerist American Century was partial in another sense too: the Cold War may have avoided another great-power war, but it was hardly peaceful, and prosperity only extended into certain corners of the globe. More recently, the People’s Republic of China has posed a challenge to American global power in ways the Soviet Union couldn’t even imagine.

The main question facing Americans and the world today, then, is whether the effects of World War II are starting to wear off. If they are, could another global conflict be its final undoing – or its renewal?

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

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When Winning the Peace Still Mattered

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KEYWORDS

Postwar, Peace, Order, Hegemony, Governance

In historiography and even more so in the media and public culture in general, the post-1945 international settlement has been hailed and mythologized not only as the foundation of the “rule-based order” that is now vanishing, but as the unchallenged model for a durable and just peace. Of course, we had expected further acclaims during the 80th anniversary. Instead, we experienced the deliberate, systemic demolition of the few remaining pillars of that settlement by the Trump Administration. Thus, the anniversary was more funereal than celebratory.

For decades we have grown used to sanctifying 1945 not only as the year of victory over Nazism but as the year in which a sustainable peace structured on enduring institutions, buttressed by an affordable and workable system of international finance and constituted upon a set of moderately inclusive – and therefore self-reinforcing – democratic regimes was conceived.

There were several reasons for this, many of them self-congratulatory. The US celebrated its international dominance garbed in the mantle of

a farsighted, hospitable, benevolent hegemony, while (Western) Europe applauded its unprecedented harmony, prosperity, institutional rewiring, and cultural renewal. Other motives were, and are, more authentic and substantial. It was, after all, the only genuine, self-sustained postwar peace the modern era had experienced since the post-Napoleonic “concert of Europe.” It tackled the key issues that the 1919 Versailles Treaty could not countenance and built upon the painful lessons of the 1930s depression.

As our distance from that moment grew more significant, it also came to embody the increasingly relevant, and woefully nostalgic, message that “winning” the peace (i.e. designing, organizing and funding it) was no less important than winning the war. This should have become the dominant theme of any serious 80th anniversary retrospective, mired as we are in 1) forever wars with no peace imaginable, as in the Middle-East; 2) a bloody conflict about the future of Ukraine (and of Europe at large) that exposes the hard truth that the post-1989 settlement turned out to be as much a failure as a success; 3) the effective obliteration of any notion of a social compact by the workings of unfettered market competition, with the ensuing marginalization of democratic prerogatives by the ascending power and authority of private concentrations of capital; and 4) the shift from Western-dominated multilateralism to a less unequal but more antagonistic multipolar configuration of international relations.

All this calls – it seems to me – for a long-term, deeply contextualized, comparative evaluation of the order that was established in the post-WWII era. In 2024, I was asked to open the Italian Modern History Association (SISSCo) conference on “postwar.”¹ My assignment was to explore the concept as a defining, perhaps constitutive element in modern history. Since I have dealt with postwar settlements, plans, reconstructions and legacies throughout my career, and since other speakers were to deal with many other possible angles, I decided to focus on peace settlements. I was also encouraged by the recent spate of innovative research, particularly on the post WWI settlement and its antecedents.² I assumed that I could

¹ See <https://www.sissco.it/linee-dombra-realta-e-rappresentazioni-dei-dopoguerra-nelle-trasformazioni-dellea-contemporanea/>.

² Among the most illuminating, Jackson, Mulligan and Sluga 2023; Sluga 2021; Conway, Lagrou and Rouso 2019.

easily join the dots and breeze through it, but it turned out to be a far more interesting and instructive experience, in the first place for myself.

When considered in multiple, varying contexts the concept of postwar settlement loses its usual focus on peace-making. Anti-colonial wars ended with liberation; the (more or less) negotiated withdrawal of the colonial power led to independence, not a peace agreement. In Korea there was a ceasefire and reconstruction but no peace accord. After the US withdrawal, the Vietnam war ended in victory and unification, with neither agreement nor reconciliation. More recent wars – in Afghanistan and Iraq, in Sudan, Libya, Syria or Ethiopia – have seen a fluctuation of military activities rather than a clean break and a peace. The current Russian war in Ukraine may end in peace – or more likely a ceasefire agreement – but most contemporary conflicts seem to bypass, if not upend, the war/peace dichotomy and its neat temporal succession.

Rather than wars with a beginning and an end, they are cycles of belligerence with a varying degree of intensity – often metastasizing into neighbouring areas and loosely connected disputes. The incessant Arab-Israeli, then Israeli-Palestinian and now Israeli-Iranian conflicts are becoming emblematic of the modern reality of wars that morph but do not end. Ever more frequently, peace is not only difficult to arrange but seems to be no longer pursued or imagined, as notions of victory, defeat and renegotiated coexistence are replaced by permanent belligerence (alternately fierce or subdued, but never really overcome and replaced by peace).

As historians, we do not seem to have taken stock of this paradox. Although every war should logically be succeeded by a postwar moment (whether or not defined as such by the populations involved), historiography has conceptualized and investigated *postwar* almost exclusively in those instances in which it brought about systemic change and a lasting settlement. In short, the kind of postwar that emanates from “great power” wars and diplomacy; in empirical terms, the post WWI peacemaking and, most crucially, the post WWII settlement, which has grown to become exemplary and paradigmatic.

What made it so? First, the fact that it found sustainable solutions to the problems that had lacerated Europe, the single place all the great powers deemed crucial. The peacemakers of the late 1940s had learned

from previous failures that a European settlement required Franco-German reconciliation, as the Locarno Pact had suggested but had not accomplished. That in turn required a stable and secure environment, so as to pre-empt any temptation to create a continental hegemony or revanchism. If Germany was to be reinvented (or perhaps, in Konrad Jarausch's terms, "civilized") rather than subjugated, strong security was to be extended to all. What the UK and the US had unwisely refused to France in 1919 now became real with the Atlantic Alliance, which opened the door to Franco-German and, more extensively, European cooperation and integration. Coming on the heels of unconditional surrender, US protection provided a safe landscape in which West Europeans could reinvent their relationships (Bitumi).

The second key factor pertained to the rigid dichotomy between democracy and totalitarianism. It did not matter that Soviet expansionism was more conjectured than real. Its frightening possibility reordered national priorities, elevating international (i.e. Western) collaboration and coordination to a much higher role. If this was one key pillar of the peace, the other rested on the belief that bipolar antagonism should not be allowed to become a real, fighting war; a principle that was shared – not so paradoxically – in Moscow no less than Paris or Washington.

If Moscow ordered its bloc with top-down discipline and a single, rigid economic model, peace and collaboration in the West had multiple roots besides US strategic dominance. Social democratic welfarism, New Deal coordination and Christian corporatism converged in envisaging and building multifaceted national compacts that nonetheless shared a few key features. International control of capital movements as well as regulated trade liberalization; representation of workers', farmers' and industry's interests; public planning of infrastructures and basic services within a mixed economy. Democracy was constructed as an inclusive regime, governed from above rather than left to market dynamics, perhaps conformist rather than libertarian, but certainly far more rewarding for the middle and working classes than any previous or subsequent regime (Milward; Judt; Godard).

Thus, internationalism was substantially upgraded – both institutionally and ideationally – but neither detached from power politics, as best evidenced by the two-tier structure of the UN (Mazower), nor directed

towards post-national utopias. The nation-state reclaimed a pivotal role in steering the economy and cementing public allegiance, but it did so in tightly knit regional groupings and arrangements for defence, trade, and an increasing range of other activities and policies.

If the post-1945 settlement had a single distinctive feature, it was that no major area was ungoverned or left to private, spontaneous dynamics. National economic policies no less than international trade and finance; social provisions as well as tax regimes; interest representation and definitions of rights and obligations; and of course, international collaboration for peace and security. The post-1945 settlement was a state-centered one, because no other entity could bring and hold together the multiplicity of necessary actors, big and small (Mazower, Reinisch and Feldman; Mayers) Peace had to be planned, coordinated, legitimized and constantly reengineered...when governments and societies still thought that winning the peace mattered.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

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The End of World War II

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KEYWORDS

World War II, MAGA, Historical Memory, Rules-based Order, America First

For roughly eighty years, historical memories of World War II provided memes that circulated widely in American culture and helped to popularize a wide consensus about broad goals of US international policy. This essay briefly assesses several key components of this World War II-era historical memory and then addresses their surprising eclipse, and even reversal, amidst the rise of MAGA politics. Does the presidency of Donald Trump represent, in terms of Americans' widely-shared historical memories, the end of World War II?

A particular set of keywords suggests the complex of World War II historical memories that shaped American postwar culture and policy. "Infamy" was, of course, the word that President Franklin Roosevelt invoked in his first speech announcing the attack on Pearl Harbor. Prolifically embedded in wartime posters and wartime speeches, "infamy" connoted surprise attack by a perfidious enemy. For decades, the word came to underpin a cautionary tale about the need for "preparedness," including

robust military spending and strong multilateral alliances – in the postwar period.

“Appeasement” joined “infamy” in warning Americans about the ultimate cost of a world in which dictatorships challenged disunited democracies. “Appeasement,” “Neville Chamberlain,” and “Munich” became familiar codewords that, without needing further explanation, signaled a larger story about the need to oppose aggressive authoritarian governments and to draw lines against their territorial aggrandizement. “Fascism” represented unalloyed evil just as “democracy” represented unalloyed good.

“Beggars-thy-neighbor,” though somewhat less common in popular culture, also circulated in historical narratives about the background to World War II. This phrase, used to describe the competitive economic policies of devaluation and trade wars that propelled the downward cycle into global depression during the 1930s, counselled against a go-it-alone global economic order. Beggar-thy-neighbor policies, as a matter of course, ended up begging everyone, producing a global cycle of impoverishment that provided fertile soil for the grievances upon which the dictatorships of the Axis countries thrived.

While these negative keywords suggested the dangers that led to the global catastrophe of World War II, another set of positive keywords came to circulate in American culture as emblems of how to construct and maintain a lasting postwar peace. The generation that had fought and died around the world in defense of people wanting to live free from cruel and genocidal dictators embraced the word “internationalism.” “Human rights” and a concern about “humanitarianism” assumed a new status as policy goals, especially as the brutalities of the regimes that launched World War II were fully uncovered. And in pursuit of internationalism and human rights, “alliances” of all kinds and in every region of the world flourished within the new US-led postwar system. Under pressures of the emerging Cold War, military alliances such as NATO emerged. And economic agreements to stabilize a new “liberal internationalist” order, such as Bretton Woods and post-Bretton Woods accords, GATT and eventually the WTO all contributed to America’s most important global objective – a “rules-based economic order” that would presumably provide

stability for growth and deter both national-state aggressors and corrupt actors within and outside of state jurisdictions.

For decades, these language legacies of World War II shaped historical narratives that circulated as almost self-evidently true. Who could disagree that the United States should stand against infamy, aggression, appeasement, and beggar-thy-neighbor policies? Who could oppose promotion of liberal-internationalism, democracy, human rights, humanitarianism, strong alliances, and a rules-based economic order? Political partisans disagreed over how goals should be manifested, particularly policies and exactly how optimally to serve the larger goals, but most Americans shared a broad consensus concerning the lessons shaped within these historical memories and keywords of World War II.

In some ways, the longevity of World War II's historical memory complex is a little surprising, given that eighty years have already passed. And during those years, Americans have had troops at war overseas for most of the time, most notably in Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan. Because none of these wars, except for the Persian Gulf War, ended with American victories, one might have expected new war lessons to have emerged more prominently. As Andrew Bacevich has affirmed, however, the World War II narrative that war works continued to prevail throughout the decades of countervailing evidence that US wars have not worked very well. Indeed, the repeated futility of America's post-World War II wars seemed to accentuate, rather than dim, the prominence of World War II narratives in popular memory. The emphasis in both political parties on celebrating and honoring veterans also helped to silence potential critiques of American wars. Why scrutinize uncomfortable outcomes when you can continue to celebrate the "greatest generation" and the "good war"?

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the World War II narratives found fresh and fertile ground in official US policy rhetoric. Again, a dictator's infamous attack on a neighboring country and the mass murders committed in Bucha shocked most Americans, many of whom donned the blue and yellow colors of the Ukrainian flag and rallied behind President Joe Biden's call to defend freedom against a dictator's aggression. Invoking strains from FDR, Biden promised that the United States would lead a strong European alliance to assist Ukraine for as long as it might

take. Meanwhile, relying on the dollar dominated global economic system that had prevailed since the end of World War II, Biden instituted an escalating array of trade sanctions and monetary measures to marginalize Russians in the global economy. Appeasement of Putin, Biden warned in speech after speech, would embolden this dictator and lead Europe into another World War. All of the familiar negative and positive keywords of the World War II historical narratives circulated widely.

In the shadows of these standard World War II-era tropes, however, a reversal was taking shape. During his first term as president, Donald Trump had advanced new terms and alternative stories: he and his so-called MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement had called for a policy of America First, a term that both recalled and updated the name that signified the 1930s opposition to American participation in World War II.

It would be misleading to draw a straight line from the antiwar America Firsters of the 1930s to MAGA because opponents of joining the war before Pearl Harbor constituted a highly diverse coalition. Only some of the complicated politics of the 1930s, which is often loosely identified as an antiwar America First movement, maps well into Trump's agenda some 80 years later. Still, it is useful to see MAGA's America Firsters, if not as direct descendants of their namesakes in the 1930s, then certainly as contemporary opponents of the standard celebratory tropes of World War II memory. In the America First world of Trump's advisers, US policymakers needed to start going it alone, rethinking alliances, military strategies, economic policies, and all the other components of the post-World War II liberal internationalist order. World War II verities, MAGA claimed, no longer served ordinary Americans and had been foisted on them by postwar elites.

Although analysts agree that the election of 2024 between the Republican candidate, former president Donald Trump, and the Democratic candidate, first President Joe Biden and then Vice President Kamala Harris, largely turned on economic issues such as inflation and on border/immigration policies, the memes of World War II era versus the MAGA America First challengers were certainly present in the campaign. Support for Ukraine provided the most obvious divide. Biden and Harris channeled FDR in calling Americans to support freedom against aggression by bol-

stering alliances and economic tools. By contrast, Trump's vice-presidential pick, J.D. Vance, ridiculed the idea that the United States should lead an alliance in open-ended support for Ukraine. Examination of the available finance, weaponry, and manpower, he wrote, showed that the math did not add up to the possibility of a Ukrainian victory, and internationalist elites were again spending US treasure in a lost cause.

After the election, the MAGA repudiation of the World War II verities became ever more striking. Some of Trump's supporters spoke admiringly of autocratic governments, prominent appointees tossed off Nazi-style salutes, and eugenic utterances again circulated in the halls of Republican power brokers. Any of these fascist-adjacent representations would have disqualified politicians in the post-World War II memory world. But MAGA had successfully flipped the script with many voters.

Policy actions, with new sets of keywords, spoke loudly about the U-turn. President Trump and Vice-President Vance lost no time in scorning America's post-World War II alliance system. Europeans, they said, had not paid their "fair share" of NATO costs; they had been "very unfair" to America on trade; they were part of a "woke agenda" that the US would now oppose. Humanitarianism, according to Vance, was the way that previous policymakers had sold bad policies to easily mislead, emotion-driven constituents. Aid and human rights institutions, once a bulwark of America's postwar security order, came under attack as Trump ordered the Agency for International Development closed and withdrew from the World Health Organization. Post-World War II national security agencies – the CIA, NSA, and intelligence offices embedded in other parts of the bureaucracy – were purged and brought under MAGA control.

Trump also moved to free himself from any rules-based economic order. His administration's international economic policies careened this way and that, side-stepping trade agreements with Canada and Mexico; undermining economic policies; threatening Greenland, Panama, Ukraine and other countries over which MAGA supporters had economic designs. Any systemic predictability fell in the face of off-and-on-again tariff threats; demands for mineral riches, port facilities, and development opportunities; coercive measures related to refugees and immigration; and personal grievances too numerous to be easily tracked. Stephen Miran, Trump's chair of

the Council of Economic Advisers even hinted at a plan to devalue the dollar as part of Trump's protectionist trade war stance. Further threatening the "rules-based order" of the postwar era, Trump promised to make crypto a national priority, appointing a "crypto and A.I. czar" and placing Howard Lutnick, a supporter of the crypto, as Secretary of Commerce. Crypto, of course, makes it easy for rogue states and criminal networks to move money across borders without hindrance.

The breadth and depth of the MAGA revolution in US foreign policy (as in domestic policy) remains to be seen. At this writing, we are only two months into Trump's second term, and the terrain of culture and memory will remain in contestation. But at this moment at least, it does seem astonishing how quickly the presumed lessons of World War II, once so widely shared within American culture that they seemed to exist as incontestable truths, have been cast aside by current US policymakers. On its 80th anniversary, World War II may indeed finally have come to a close.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

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Still the “Good War”?

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KEYWORDS

Good War, Internationalism, Nationalism, Greatest Generation, Democracy

In “*The Good War*”, the oral historian, Studs Terkel, explains why he placed quotation marks around his title. They were there to distinguish World War II from other conflicts, to clearly demarcate good and evil. Later generations, up to this day and including my students, venerate it as a Good War, too.

Yet they miss the irony. Terkel’s meaning was not an appeal to pacifism or conscientious objection, though he gave them a voice. Nor was he necessarily taking sides even if he was left-leaning (and investigated for being a communist as a result). He coupled “good” to “war” because the combination was so incongruous; war could never be good, regardless of the views of pundits then and now.

How could a war that slaughtered 65 million people, devastated millions of homes, farms, towns, and cities, and witnessed horrors from state-sanctioned rape to starvation to genocide to atomic bombs be deemed “good?” People back then were shocked by these outcomes, and they should be today as well.

Trivializing World War II as anything less than a bloodbath so great that there has not been another such conflagration in eight decades (though the war in Ukraine conjured up reminders) is a disservice to the very heroes that my students seek to emulate. Actually, it belies belief to think that the very *context* of a human experience that resulted in such carnage could be construed as good. One does not need to be an ethicist pondering morality and just war theory, a jurist concerned with war crimes, or even a military historian researching strategy, operations, and tactics to conclude that World War II – the most destructive event in recorded human history – was actually the worst war ever.

Of course, there are multiple ways to justify the notion of a “good war.” Proponents argue, correctly, that the war was necessary. Eradicating the evil of fascism, and its Nazi offspring and Japanese militarist cousin, required violence never seen before or since. The democracies were fighting for their very way of civilized life, and the immense sacrifices they made prevented a return to the Dark Ages. And there were major positive results of the good war as well. Germany, Italy, and Japan became peaceful, productive citizens of the world after their defeat. The United States not only came out of its isolationist shell but emerged as a global leader, spreading its democratic capitalist and moral values around the world, largely for good, and creating an international system that kept the peace while defeating, over the next near half-century, another evil in Soviet communism. Furthermore, this was total war, an unlimited conflict (unlike limited wars that later sparked controversy due to their vague objectives and inconclusiveness) in which the terrible adoption of atrocities was tolerated to defeat total evil.

These explanations for a “good war” are ingrained into the legacy of the Second World War, but this unconstrained war was also so dire that humanity recoiled from ever repeating it. That impulse became a guiding sentiment behind the successful postwar security, political, economic, and social institutions that prevented a third world war – this despite the specter of a nuclear conflict that could obliterate the planet.

The idea of a “good war” should also turn attention to the pre-war period. It is worth remembering, as historian John Bodnar argues, that while Americans united in the fight against aggressors abroad, they struggled against each other to get to that point. In short, they were ambivalent about joining the war. Like publisher Henry Luce, some celebrated the

opportunity but others expressed cynicism and regret. Memory studies help us understand the tragedy, making heroes out of a so-called "greatest generation" as if these people, no matter how courageous, were different from people who came before or after them. Yet Americans were not more exceptional than other combatants, except in that their stories are related by nationalists of liberal and conservative stripes bent on showing how American internationalism rose to the occasion in World War II, planting the seeds for Cold War vigor.

Yet there was a vast gulf between interventionists and isolationists as war broke out in Asia and Europe, with organizations like the America First Committee pursuing up to the Pearl Harbor attack a policy of separation from world affairs. Americans might have agreed on the dangers of tyranny but not on how they should deal with it. Thus, even well-intentioned liberals, with their faith in humanity's goodness, could fight for freedom by brutally killing (Bodnar 1-9). That inconsistency pulls back the veneer of the good war thesis.

All sides adhered to such thinking. Numerous accounts exist of Axis and Allied combatants who expressed qualms before, during, and after ferocious (even sadistic – see Americans taking trophies from dead enemy soldiers, including body parts) in military campaigns. In this war without mercy, people engaged in unimaginable behavior, entirely counter to their conduct had they stayed home. Think of college-aged kamikaze pilots heading to their death, or Allied bombers who discovered that their victims below faced a choice of remaining in basements to suffocate or running outside to be burned alive. There were plenty of bystanders, moreover, too terrified to resist concentration camps in their neighborhoods or stop Jews from being shipped out on trains. More evidence has become public about rape by US soldiers, of which black men became the scapegoats. The sobering fact is that while there was no government-mandated policy of brutality such as Germans, Soviets, and Japanese followed, like others, Americans often annihilated their enemies or possessed the mindset to do so.

To be sure, most of the world did not know at the time about such savagery, but the reality became clear as wartime turned to legacy building. Nonetheless, after reading popular accounts like US Marine E.B. Sledge's 1981 memoir, *With the Old Breed*, Americans still called the war a good one. The battle royale in 1995 that led to the cancellation of the Smithsonian

Museum's exhibit of the *Enola Gay* continued this mythology. The exhibit attempted to explain why the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima but veterans countered that it dishonored their service. The publication a few years later of television anchor Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation* reinforced the good war thesis, which was alive and well. Sentimentalism, romanticized imagery, and nationalist nostalgia prevailed.

That was unfortunate, because at a level of base injustice, some of the most decent leaders in the United States, like President Franklin D. Roosevelt and California's attorney general (and future Supreme Court Chief Justice) Earl Warren, accepted the internment of Japanese Americans. Warren later regretted his actions but not until the danger had passed. The same went for racism. The Double V Campaign by the Black community pushed for democracy abroad and at home. We now celebrate the war as a catalyst for racial change; both professional baseball and the US Army were desegregated after the conflict. But the legacy of Jim Crow persisted well after as the so-called "Greatest Generation" confronted racism abroad but did not bring that fight home effectively until a new generation took up the call for civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s.

My point is not to belittle Americans during World War II. Much good came out of a bad experience. Yet we should be careful not to put veterans on a pedestal because doing so cheapens their humanity by making them into a sort of Superman hero. Video games unfortunately do this, sanitizing the record with cool graphics.

Furthermore, that the war was actually hell for the heroes was borne out by reports from psychologists in the 1980s, when the Greatest Generation began to retire. No longer distracted by work, they now came to grip with their emotions. They had suppressed their wartime experiences; this was not a generation, like the Vietnam veterans, who talked a lot. For many, memories of their horrific experiences surfaced. Wives reported that since the war, their husbands awoke in the middle of the night screaming in panic, dread, or sadness. Therapy was challenging also because the media, politicians, and family so lionized them that it was hard to descend from their good-war podium. I discovered their mental states from oral history projects and from flying to Iwo Jima in 2005 with veterans who were accompanied by hero-worshipping friends and family to commemorate the

60th anniversary of that battle. Many of these former combatants, now in their eighties, were uncomfortable with the glorified reception.

Beyond personal struggles and culture wars is another pitfall of the "good war" concept. It not only trivializes war itself but it also downplays how war arrives at our doorstep in the first place. The failed wars in Iraq and Afghanistan might have provided some remediation in this regard. In addition, self-interested nationalist reactionaries, posing as populists, ignore the successful history of internationalism that resulted from the war. Disaster might be awaiting us. We worry about aggressors crossing borders, as Russia did in Ukraine and China might do with Taiwan. Regional expansion of those conflicts could lead to global war.

We are also concerned about the rise of fascism, autocratic conduct, and isolationist tendencies within many countries, including the United States. Those were the very elements that drove the world to war decades ago. And those developments are why, on this anniversary, we should question the goodness of any war and do our best to prevent a recurrence.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

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FIRST EDITIONS

Introduction to the Reader's Report of Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901)

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ABSTRACT

Introduction to William Belmont Parker's Reader's Report of Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901).

KEYWORDS

Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, Reader's Report, William Belmont Parker, Harvard University's Special Collections, Houghton Mifflin Company Reports, Chakkalikal, A Matter of Complexion

The decade of the 1890s has been given many names by historians and literary critics. Some refer to it as “the mauve decade,” an era defined by the scandals involving rich Americans, their decadence and personal affairs, which was the result of rapidly accumulated wealth after the abolition of slavery. But it is as the Gilded Age that most know the period. A term originally coined by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in 1873 focused our attention on the end of slavery and the rise of industry, a period when markets exploded with more goods and services than ever

before. But this was also a time when divisions between the rich and poor, black and white, became more severe. The 1890s had seen an avalanche of political and judicial defeats for black Americans. The defeat of Populism – a movement that had galvanized African American small farmers as well as agricultural, mining, and lumber laborers to ally with similarly situated whites to challenge white Democratic rule – had given rise to numerous reprisals throughout the southern region. Beginning in Mississippi in 1890, Southern Democrats systematically disfranchised black voters as well as large numbers of poor whites, drastically diminishing the political power of all blacks and working-class whites throughout the region. Achieved through legislative action, constitutional conventions, Supreme Court decisions, fraud, and manipulation and also, most dramatically, by physical intimidation, lynching, and mob action, disfranchisement further fueled the violence that had helped bring it about. With little likelihood of political, legal, or judicial reprisal, white Southern Democrats could act with virtual impunity to impose on African Americans the status of second-class citizenship that characterized what was to become, in Charles W. Chesnutt's lifetime (1858-1932), Jim Crow America – an era in which racial segregation restricted associations between individuals. Chesnutt's America was divided by a color line that separated its citizens into two distinct categories: black and white. Chesnutt resisted these distinctions by revealing the nonsensical nature of the categories through fictional stories about people struggling to make sense of them. Chesnutt's experience allowed him to question the logic of the categories, showing, ultimately, that they were limiting his experience and the experience of others who accepted their place within racial taxonomies thus allowing those categories to divide them from one another. Chesnutt set out to abolish such perceived differences so that those divided by them might live together in peace.

Between 1899 and 1905, Chesnutt published six books, including the first biography of Frederick Douglass. Perhaps no one knew the importance of speaking to both black and white audiences at once better than the great orator and slave-author. Douglass had died just four years earlier, on February 20, 1895, when Chesnutt published *Frederick Douglass* with the Boston firm of Small, Maynard & Company in 1899. It was a tiny book, small enough to fit inside the coat or pants pocket of a reader. A book that

you could carry with you, read on the train or on your lunch break. Despite its diminutive size, it was beautifully bound, with a black and white photo of Douglass as an elder, white hair and beard, swept back to reveal his proud, virile face. The photograph was given to Chesnutt to include in his biography by Douglass's family. It was protected by a thin onion skin sheet of paper that gave the book a certain sacred quality. Chesnutt revered Douglass as a great man and kept a framed photo of him in his study, where he composed his fiction and essays. He had, like so many African Americans of his generation, heard the great orator speak during one of Douglass's visits to Charlotte, NC, and never forgot the sound of his voice. It thrilled him to catch a glimpse of the man who had once been a slave and was now an American hero. Following his death, Chesnutt decided to break from his usual fiction-writing to tell the story of Douglass's life so that "the average American of to-day who sees, when his attention is called to it, and deploras, if he be a thoughtful and just man, the deep undertow of race prejudice that retards the progress of the colored people of our own generation" (viii). Chesnutt's books, like Douglass's speeches and life story, speak to the average American of today, regardless of color.

A Matter of Complexion: The Life and Fictions of Charles W. Chesnutt has a similar audience in mind, those of us in search of what we have in common, rather than what makes us different. Chesnutt entered the American literary scene around the time when Mark Twain had reached the peak of his celebrity with the publication of *Huckleberry Finn*, and Henry James had abandoned the United States for Europe. Falling somewhere between Twain's "Gilded Age" and James's "Awkward Age," Chesnutt presented another side of the American scene, one that borrowed from the insights of the literary giants of the time but forged a path of his own. Chesnutt's America is populated by mature, complex black and white characters engaged in intimate relationships, as friends, lovers, sisters, brothers, fathers and mothers, who struggle to overcome the racial identities thrust on them to live together and prosper. Learning of Chesnutt's life, through the books he read and wrote, alongside the relationships he forged, with his family, fellow writers, business associates, and friends, we can begin to imagine a new era in American history, one that we might call, having read Chesnutt: a "Future American" Age.

On December 22, 1900, just a few days before celebrating its 50th anniversary, *The New York Times* book review section, known then as “The Saturday Review,” included a half-page advertisement for “One of the Books of the Season.” The ad was paid for by Houghton, Mifflin and Company, the preeminent literary publishing house in the United States at the time. For the first time in its history, the firm was publishing a novel by a black author. Chesnutt had already published two collections of short stories with Houghton the previous year. *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* collected several of Chesnutt’s stories that had appeared in such illustrious forums as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Century Magazine*, both considered to be the pinnacle of literary success, in which the works of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Edith Wharton regularly appeared. But the publication of his first novel, *The House Behind the Cedars* in 1900, was a major literary event. It was a new kind of novel, one that directly challenged the landmark 1896 US Supreme Court decision that upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation under the “separate but equal” doctrine. Like Homer Plessy, who was the plaintiff in the case, Charles Chesnutt was born to a family of mixed racial heritage. His parents were from North Carolina but had fled for Ohio when their freedoms were being curtailed by North Carolina’s pro-slavery political forces. Several members of his family looked white but were considered “free people of color,” or just “free blacks”: these were the sons and daughters, granddaughters and grandsons, of illicit unions between white slave owners and black slaves who, over time, had been given the name of free people of color to denote their questionable ancestry. Chesnutt took after his free black parents, Ann Marie Sampson and Andrew Jackson Chesnutt. According to census reports taken before the war, the Chesnutts were known as “mulatto” and much later, as an adult, Chesnutt’s 1895 passport application describes his complexion as “ruddy,” his eyes “greyish,” and his hair “dark brown.”

Of course, these colors and categories reveal little about who Chesnutt was, but they do help us to see the importance of color and birth in determining what *kind* of a writer he was. Setting aside Chesnutt’s racial categorization and affiliation, leaves us with what Chesnutt accomplished. According to his publisher, Charles Chesnutt’s distinction derived not

from the fact that he was a black author but rather because “he is one of the first to write sympathetically and comprehensively from both viewpoints.” By “both” they meant that Chesnutt presented in his fiction the black and white viewpoints simultaneously, at a time when the division between these points of view was deep and unbridgeable. Charles Chesnutt was most likely the first American author with crossover appeal. He worked with George Washington Cable and Booker T. Washington, T. Thomas Fortune and Albion W. Tourgée. Chesnutt served as a conduit, bringing these disparate literary and political voices together, to constitute a singular movement in American cultural history that has for too long been sidelined by those who saw the United States from a single point of view, that of the ivy-league educated, Northern, wealthy American. Those who Henry James called – with both affection and scorn – *The Bostonians*.

Chesnutt's second and perhaps most important novel was published just a year after *The House Behind the Cedars*. Taking its title from a poem by the Victorian poet and essayist Charles Lamb, *The Marrow of Tradition* is about the 1898 Wilmington massacre and presents its incidents with alarming clarity. The Democratic counterrevolution in Wilmington was one of the more deadly of the period, leaving at least twenty-five, and possibly more than one hundred, African Americans dead in its wake and virtually ending black political participation in the city. Chesnutt read the news about these deadly events and was dismayed by the reports in the newspapers. They were lopsided and biased. Chesnutt decided to tell his own story about the massacre, but in the form of fiction. It was in this form, ironically, that Chesnutt believed he could not only reveal the truth about the massacre that had occurred so close to where he had grown up but also offer a solution to the ongoing racial violence of the time. Given the success of his previous novel, the editorial staff at Houghton Mifflin & Company were eager to publish the novel. They expected it, as the press's primary reader William Belmont Parker wrote in his report on it, to be “capable of wide popular success.” And so, it was published, just a few months after Chesnutt submitted it to Houghton Mifflin, in the fall of 1901.

As I show in my new biography of Chesnutt, *A Matter of Complexion: The Life and Fictions of Charles W. Chesnutt* (St. Martin's, 2025), the story of the

publication of *The Marrow of Tradition* is almost as fascinating as the novel itself. With a population of roughly twenty-five thousand, Wilmington was then the largest city in North Carolina. Chesnutt still had family there. During his years in North Carolina, he would make frequent trips to Wilmington along North Carolina's southeastern coastline. His wife, Susan, shortly after the birth of their first child, had spent a month in Wilmington, while he was busy in Fayetteville with work. She, perhaps more than her husband, loved the town. Situated on the lower Cape Fear River, it offered Susan a much-needed break from Fayetteville's sandhills. She felt comfortable there, enjoyed frequenting the shops and restaurants along the boardwalk with her friends and family. But all that changed on November 10, 1898, when a mob mainly of white men armed with rifles took to the streets of Wilmington, burning black-owned businesses, including the office of *The Daily Record*, North Carolina's most widely circulated black newspaper. Its editor, Alexander Lightfoot Manly, fled the city after being threatened by the mob for printing an editorial that acknowledged consensual sexual relations between white women and black men. For Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* was a way, he said, of overcoming his feeling of despair and reaffirming his "belief that the forces of progress will in the end prevail" (see Chakkalakal, *A Matter of Complexion*). Chesnutt started his second novel in September 1900.

The novel's plot is complex. There are several subplots, the timeline moves seamlessly between the past and present. This is not exactly historical fiction. Rather, it is a history of the present. The events and characters it presents had not yet become history; the novel writes them into history. This history begins with a familiar scene of a woman in labor, with her worried husband by her side, hoping for the best but expecting the worst. The urgency of the present moment is emphasized by the lush description of the setting. "The night was hot and sultry. Though the windows of the chamber were wide open, and the muslin curtains looped back, not a breath of air was stirring" (1). We know we are in the deep south by the "stifling heat," "the shrill chirp of the cicada and the muffled croaking of the frogs in some distant marsh" and the "heavy scent of magnolias" (1). To release us from the oppressive present, we are taken into the not-so-distant-past, when our characters were younger, without the burden of

their present situation weighing them down. In the past we meet a young Major Carteret, returning home from Appomattox “to find his family, one of the oldest and proudest in the state, hopelessly impoverished by war” (1). But amidst the ruins, Carteret finds love and a source of income from his wife Olivia Merckell. With her money, he started a newspaper, which he “had made the leading organ of his party and the most influential paper in the State” (2). We are back in the present. In Olivia and Philip’s home. Dr. Price and Mammy Jane, Olivia’s childhood nurse, join them. All four anticipate the birth of the Cartarets’ first child, a boy who will inherit the legacy of his parents and grandparents. The conjunction between childbirth and the founding of a newspaper is hardly a coincidence. Olivia is the source of the state’s future generations and its news. Though her husband functions as father and editor, without her wealth and body, Major Carteret would be nothing more than the victim of a lost cause.

By the time Chesnutt started writing his novel, the mixture of politics and nuptial relations had become a regular feature of American novels. Likely, Chesnutt had the novels of William Dean Howells on his mind, particularly his 1889 novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, that similarly wove together a real-life outbreak of political violence, a story of marriage and family, with the work of a magazine editor. Howells would pen one of the early reviews on Chesnutt’s novel that, according to several later critics, adversely affected both the novel’s sales and his literary career. More recent critics, namely Sydney Bufkin in her excellent reassessment of the novel’s critical reception, have complicated the role Howells’s review played in determining the fate of *The Marrow of Tradition*. In her words,

Viewing Howells as a stand-in for *The Marrow of Tradition*’s white readers results in a significantly flattened picture of the novel’s reception, one that accords Howells a taste-making power he did not necessarily have. Howells certainly had a great deal of influence in his position as editor and critic at the *Atlantic* and *Harper’s*, and as scholars have demonstrated he often used his position to promote little-known authors, including Chesnutt, whose aesthetic aims seemed in sympathy with his own. But that influence was also limited to an elite circle of literary magazines and, as critics have shown, often in tension with popular taste. *The Marrow of Tradition*, though, was reviewed in a wide

range of newspapers and magazines, ranging from elite magazines like the *Atlantic* and *Outlook* to daily papers, religious journals, and hobby magazines. Because the influence of monthlies like the *North American Review* was limited, we cannot necessarily expect all or even most of Chesnutt's reviewers either to have been familiar with Howells' review or to have necessarily been in sympathy with his opinion [...] Howells' notice was, in fact, highly atypical when compared to other reviews of the novel. (231-32)

Despite the critical praise he received, Chesnutt's novel did not become the popular success Parker and George Mifflin predicted for it. But it did make a great impact on the American cultural scene and – as the number of critical articles on the novel published in the last couple of decades suggests – continues to do so. Reading Parker's initial response to *The Marrow of Tradition* over a century later reveals a great deal about its critical reception and singular formal features.

Parker was a relatively new literary advisor at the press when Chesnutt's manuscript was placed on his desk by his boss, George H. Mifflin. Parker, like most at the press, was a graduate of Harvard University and well-versed in English literature. He would go on to write books of his own about Ralph Waldo Emerson and Sir Philip Sidney. The subject of Chesnutt's novel was new to this young editor, but the report reveals considerable sympathy with its themes. He opens the report by calling it "a novel on the color line into which [Chesnutt] has put unusual strength of feeling." That opening line tells us much about Parker's sense of literature. Chesnutt's novel was indeed "unusual" for the time. It took up the lives of people and events that were not usually the subject of literature. Parker offers an interesting plot summary of the novel in his report, though he gets a few details wrong. For starters, the novel is set in "Wellington, NC", intended to evoke recent events in Wilmington, not "Charleston, SC" But this is a minor mistake, though it does reveal a certain ignorance of contemporary events that most Americans at the time would have known. The report also reveals a curious contradiction worth noting. Parker starts out by insisting "it is not a novel with a hero, but a novel of a group of people whose lives were interwoven." He reverses this claim a few paragraphs later when he writes, "The real hero of the book is a negro doctor named Miller." The

shift from the novel's emphasis on group identity to the elevation of a single character who is a doctor *and* negro is certainly "unusual."

Dr. William Miller was a new kind of character in the world of American fiction. Not introduced until the novel's fifth chapter, Dr. William Miller appears on a southbound train next to his friend and colleague, Dr. Burns. The allusions to the recent *Plessy v. Ferguson* case are unmistakable. Chesnutt introduced Miller in relation to Burns to manifest their perceived racial difference only "dispose of this difference" almost immediately after pointing it out. As Chesnutt put it in his characteristic ironic tone:

Looking at these two men with the American eye, the differences would perhaps be the more striking, or at least the more immediately apparent for the first was white and the second black, or, more correctly speaking, brown; it was even a light brown, but both his swarthy complexion and his curly hair revealed what has been described in the laws of some of our states as a "visible admixture" of African blood. (49)

We learn more about Dr. Miller's backstory in the chapter. Insofar as he is the novel's hero it is because he occupies an entirely impossible situation. He is a doctor who has devoted his life to uplifting his race. In witnessing Miller's situation, readers sympathize with him and even see themselves as partially responsible for the tragic events that befall him. Dr. Miller is a good man who finds himself in a bad situation that neither his intelligence nor industry can remedy. Reading the novel leaves readers with the responsibility to avert the tragedy that befalls the good doctor. It is a responsibility that, for most of us, is too great a burden to bear.

When reading Parker's report on the novel, we should keep its form in mind. It is a reader report, written hastily. For this reason, I have retained the words Parker crossed out, indicating them with the strike through line. These crossed out lines give readers a better sense of Parker as a *reader* and reveal some of his confusion with the novel's plot and the way race operates in the novel. Men like Parker produced thousands of such reports while employed by the firm. These reports were presented at weekly 'pow-wow' meetings of the editors and advisors; the report determined whether the press would publish or pass on the manuscript. The press's decision to

publish *The Marrow of Tradition* was based on Parker's report. Fortunately for readers of Chesnutt's novels and stories, Harvard University's Special Collections has preserved these reports in their archives under the general heading "Houghton Mifflin Company Reports" and filed them by author and year so that we can still access them today. The reader's reports on all of Chesnutt's submissions proved especially useful to the story of Charles Chesnutt's life and work that I tell. I am especially grateful to Sydney Bufkin for sharing her copies of the report with me over a decade ago when I embarked on the writing of Chesnutt's life, and to Harvard University's Houghton Library.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

Tess Chakkakal is Professor of Africana Studies and English. She is the author of *A Matter of Complexion: The Life and Fictions of Charles W. Chesnutt* (St. Martin's, 2025) and *Novel Bondage: Slavery, Marriage, and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of Illinois Press, 2012) and co-editor of *Imperium in Imperio: A Critical Edition* (West Virginia University Press, 2022) and *Jim Crow, Literature, and the Legacy of Sutton E. Griggs* (University of Georgia Press, 2013).

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Reader's Report of Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901)

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University, bMS Am 2516 (9134)**

WILLIAM BELMONT PARKER

PARK STREET

Aug 16, 1901

MS. No. 9134

Received: July 29, 1901

By American Ex.

Title: *The Marrow of Tradition*

Author: Charles W. Chesnutt

64 Brenton St.

Cleveland, O.

Author's Instructions: None

Receipt of MS. acknowledged: July 29, 1901

Submitted to: W.B.P.

Reported by reader: 31 July

Character: See attached report.

Recommendation: To publish

Report Approved July 31, 1901

Author advised GHM

MS. Sent to Printers 6 Aug. Pow Wow.
(indecipherable signature)

(1)

In the "Marrow of Tradition" Mr Chesnutt has written a novel on the color line into which he has put unusual strength of feeling.

The scene is laid in Charleston SC though the city is not named and the time is ~~about~~ the past decade while the disfranchisement movement was going forward.

It is not a novel with a hero, but a novel of a group of people whose lives were interwoven. The book begins with the birth of a child to Cartaret a member of one of the old families & editor of the leading paper. The birth of his son increases Cartaret's desire for white supremacy and he enters into a conspiracy to bring it about. This leads him at once into the muddle of prejudice between the two races and ~~leads~~ forces him to foster misunderstandings. There are a thousand occasions and ~~at~~ he turns all of them to account in his campaign for white supremacy which means negro disfranchisement.

2

To bring this about seems to require getting possession of the city government which is in ~~the~~ hands friendly to the negroes. A revolution is planned therefore: The white ~~po~~ men are organized, ~~presumably~~ ostensibly to forestall a negro uprising, and on a ~~given~~ day suddenly take possession of the streets, ~~order~~ search all negroes and order all the prominent among them to leave town; and kill all who resist. This is the climax of the political movement of the novel. Along ~~th~~ with the political current has gone the current of individual fate. Cartaret, like many other ~~white men, was not wholly free of persuade~~
The real hero of the book is a ~~colored~~-negro doctor named Miller who was married to Cartaret's sister in law, the daughter by a negress of Mrs

Cartaret's father. This complication embitters many relations and is typical of the occasions for bad feeling between the races.

The doctor resists all efforts to drive him from the town.

3

Mrs Cartaret has, naturally, nothing but scorn for Mrs Miller – in spite of the fact that they had the same father and he had married the mother of his second child. But after the riot, when negroes were lying dead all about the city – and all was confusion Mrs Cartaret's child fell ill of croup. No doctor could be had. At last they appealed to Dr Miller. But his child had been killed by a chance bullet from a white man. He refused to go. Mrs Cartaret – in desperation – went to him. He still refused, pointing to his dead child. But softening promised to go if his wife asked it. So the two sisters met – the one appealing to the other she had despised and the doctor went to save the child.

A novel full of intensity, well though not brilliantly written and capable of wide popular success.

W.B.P.

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AUG 16

F^r

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A novel full of intensity, well though not brilliantly written and capable of wide popular success.

N. A. P.

IN MEMORIAM

Giovanna Covi (1952 – 2023)

Femminista appassionata, critica incisiva, educatrice instancabile e ardente attivista, Giovanna Covi ha insegnato per quasi trent'anni Letterature angloamericane all'Università di Trento, dove gli studenti la ricordano per “aver lasciato un segno indelebile nel nostro modo di vedere il mondo.”

Nata a Rovereto (Trento) il 14 gennaio 1952, Covi si era laureata in Letterature angloamericane all'Università di Venezia con una tesi su Sylvia Plath. Successivamente aveva conseguito un master e un dottorato di ricerca presso la State University of New York a Binghamton. Qui era entrata in contatto con un gruppo di pensatori e poeti radicali, tra cui William V. Spanos e Robert Creeley. Di quest'ultimo Covi fu traduttrice e divulgatrice.

Pioniera in Italia della disciplina accademica degli Studi delle donne e di genere, Covi ha gettato le basi per la costruzione di un'ampia rete europea di femministe accademiche e attiviste. La rivista *Feminist Europe*, che Covi contribuì a fondare e co-diresse per quasi un decennio (1997-2006), aveva come obiettivo principale quello di rafforzare i legami tra studiose femministe e comunità di donne attive localmente nei diversi Paesi europei.

Fortemente convinta della necessità di dare vita ad una “via europea” per gli Studi delle donne e di genere, Covi ha partecipato attivamente allo sviluppo di nuovi e diversi strumenti didattici atti a promuovere non solo l'istituzionalizzazione della pedagogia femminista nelle università italiane, ma anche la diffusione di una teoria e un approccio intersezionali allo studio della letteratura, in cui razza e classe contassero quanto il genere. La monografia *Jamaica Kincaid's Prismatic Subjects: Making Sense of Being in the World* (Mango Publishing, 2003) proponeva una rilettura femminista

in chiave intersezionale dell'opera di Kincaid, un'artista molto amata da Covi perché in grado di cogliere le manifestazioni sia locali che globali degli aspetti più propriamente materiali (economici, di genere e razziali) della vita caribica, senza mai tralasciare le qualità immaginative della sua prosa travolgente.

Non solo le letterature degli Stati Uniti e dei Caraibi anglofoni, con particolare attenzione alle scritture femminili e alle tematiche razziali, ma anche la teoria critica, in particolare gli studi femministi, postmoderni e postcoloniali, sono stati al centro della sua attività, che ha combinato ricerca e coordinamento di reti di donne non solo sul territorio locale, con il gruppo trentino della SIL, ma anche a livello transnazionale, con il progetto CRS (Caribbean-Scottish Relations) e il gruppo Travelling Concepts della rete tematica europea Athena. È stata inoltre tra le fondatrici del Centro Studi Interdisciplinari di Genere dell'Università di Trento e della rete accademica UNIRE contro la violenza di genere, progetto a cui si era dedicata con tenacia negli ultimi anni, realizzando numerose attività di sensibilizzazione sull'uso non sessista della lingua, oltre che seminari di formazione insegnanti e laboratori per studenti in numerose scuole della PAT, come testimoniano il volumetto *Io ci sono e lo dico* (2012) e la serie *Cittadinanza condivisa: Affetti e differenze* (2015-2018), che raccoglie materiali e buone pratiche implementate in scuole cittadine e periferiche.

Nelle sue mani, il femminismo non era solo una disciplina accademica o una teoria, ma diventava una chiamata all'azione, in cui la generosità e la solidarietà delle donne e per le donne, praticata sia localmente che globalmente, giocavano un ruolo chiave in un'ottica di sradicamento della violenza *tout court*. Il suo ultimo saggio "A Poetics of Merciful Solidarity: Practicing Nonviolence Through the Literary" (2024) rappresenta forse l'eredità più preziosa di questo suo impegno.

La ricordiamo con i versi intensi dell'amato Creely, che ben riassumono la ricerca di Covi di un mondo più giusto e più equo, la sua forte fiducia nelle parole e il suo rivolgersi alla scrittura ogniqualvolta la politica veniva meno al suo nobile compito: "I write to realize the world as one has come to live in it, thus to give testament. I write to move in *words*, a human delight. I write when no other act is possible."

Richard Thomas Kidder (1952 – 2023)

Nel settembre 2023 è improvvisamente scomparso Richard Kidder, a lungo socio AISNA e, fino al recentissimo pensionamento, americanista presso l'Università della Calabria.

Nato e cresciuto a Detroit, si era trasferito a Napoli dove ha sempre vissuto. Gli studi alla Michigan State University avevano lasciato il segno in una passione per la ricerca fatta di rigore al limite dell'ascesi. Non è impossibile che qualcuno si sia sentito intimidito entrando in quel suo ufficio all'Unical, quattro pareti scaffalate fino al soffitto con classici della teoria e della filosofia in lingua originale oltre alle letterature nordamericane. Più che il super-io del canone, quello sfondo metteva in scena il sommerso necessario dell'iceberg hemingwayano che sentiva imprescindibile per la *scholarship* letteraria – e forse oggi negletto. Di certo, per Richard la ricerca era – doveva essere – un impegno *difficile*.

In gran parte del suo lavoro, anche nella didattica, è palpabile un elemento comparatista. Aveva iniziato la carriera come anglista all'Orientale di Napoli, dove era uscito il suo contributo critico di maggior ambizione, *Scansions of the Archaic: Strategies of Renewal in Modernist Poetics* (Intercontinentalia, 1999), uno studio comparatistico sui Modernismi euroamericani, con sezioni su Apollinaire, Benn e Pound. Vico e Stephen Jay Gould si uniscono per evidenziare una postura che, radicata nel passato e nel primitivo conduce alla storia, dal tempo ciclico al tempo lineare, in una "immaginazione geroglifica" che abbraccia poesia e arti visive. Pensando a successivi sviluppi teorico-critici, un ritorno all'argomento sarebbe stato carico di promesse.

Ciò in parte era successo in articoli sparsi in pubblicazioni dell'Università della Calabria, accomunati dal rapporto tra scienza e letteratura, che in vario modo legano Henry Adams, C.P. Snow e il fondamentalismo creazionista con le generazioni dei Beat e la mistica cyberculturale. C'era stato anche un secondo volume, *Monsters to Order: Nanotechnology and Its Representations in Recent British and American Science Fiction and Popular Science Writing, 1985-2001* (Rubbettino, 2002).

Fra i suoi interessi spiccavano i generi del fantastico, e si era occupato di "Sleepy Hollow" (racconto e film) e di fantascienza. Nella *science fiction* aveva trovato spunti fortemente politici, a cui abbiamo assistito in alcuni convegni AISNA, dalla lettura pacifista di un romanzo del veterano del Vietnam Joe Haldeman (a Macerata) al rapporto con le retoriche della frontiera in Vernor Vinge e Neal Stephenson (a L'Aquila). Nel suo studio l'impegno ecocritico era crescente, con Ghosh tra i suoi ispiratori, e a Trento (in un panel che avevamo co-organizzato) si era concentrato sul cambiamento climatico e antropico del paesaggio dei Grandi Laghi.

C'era qualcosa di autobiografico in quell'intervento, e il contributo al convegno di Napoli sulle tracce americane in testi musicali e teatrali napoletani ne appare una faccia speculare, una biunivoca connessione tra Midwest americano e Meridione italiano. Forse un ideale alter-ego lo aveva trovato in un poeta dell'emigrazione rumena vissuto a lungo nella "sua" Detroit operaia, in un saggio il cui titolo potrebbe fornire suggestioni sul suo universo intellettuale: "I poeti lasciano l'America: Aspetti della figura dell'esilio in Andrei Codrescu" (*Quaderni del Dipartimento di Linguistica* 25 [2010]: 81-98).

Soprattutto, come suo collega all'Unical per molti anni sono stato testimone di una dedizione totale e assoluta alla didattica. Che il rigore del suo lavoro possa ispirarci tutte/i.

Salvatore Proietti

Anna Maria Martellone (1929 – 2024)

Anna Maria Martellone, scomparsa il 23 febbraio 2024, dell'americanistica storica italiana era la *Founding Mother*, come ha scritto Luca Codignola Bo. Insieme a storici illustri quali Giorgio Spini e Raimondo Luraghi, sottrasse questa disciplina all'egemonia dei non specialisti, conferendole dignità accademica. Studiosa delle migrazioni negli Stati Uniti, fornì un apporto notevole a un campo d'indagine in cui, al di qua e al di là dell'Atlantico, le sue ricerche sono diventate importanti punti di riferimento.

Difficile riassumere la sua vita professionale e personale: la prima narrata al convegno *Amerigo Vespucci, Firenze e le Americhe*, nel suo "Da Firenze a Firenze via Massachusetts. Una storia (americana?) di incontri" (Olschki, 2014). La seconda inizialmente vissuta tra due mondi: Boston, Cambridge e Firenze, "operazione abbastanza faticosa anche se culturalmente molto significativa", come lei stessa la definì.

Formatasi come modernista, si era laureata con Delio Cantimori con una tesi su Lelio Marretti, dedicandosi poi agli *Scritti politici di Edmund Burke* (Utet, 1963). Dei seminari seguiti con Cantimori, definito "gufo sapiente", nutriva un ricordo limpido che affiora nel suo breve scritto *Rapporto di seminario*, in cui ricostruiva l'atteggiamento intransigente del docente.

Nei lunghi anni americani, il suo pensiero era comunque rivolto a Firenze: "Pensavo da tempo che quell'andare e venire tra Firenze e il Massachusetts non poteva, non doveva, durare all'infinito, perché il senso dell'appartenenza è fondamentale [...]". E nella sua città rientrò, colma dell'esperienza statunitense, per assumere un ruolo di rilievo all'Università come docente ordinaria di Storia americana. Nelle sue ricerche, dopo una rapida incursione sui bramini bostoniani influenzata da Gaetano Salvemini,

passò a occuparsi degli immigrati italiani nel North End di quella città. La sua monografia *Una Little Italy nell'Atene d'America. La comunità italiana di Boston dal 1880 al 1920* (Guida, 1973) ha rappresentato un modello per gli studi di comunità sugli italoamericani utile per la storiografia italiana come per quella statunitense. In questo ambito ha fornito un contributo allo studio dell'immigrazione italiana negli Stati Uniti privo delle ricostruzioni autocelebrative e autocommiserevoli di parte della storiografia del tempo. Con l'importanza che nelle sue indagini ha attribuito all'immigrazione come carattere originario della storia degli Stati Uniti, e al senso dell'appartenenza etnica come terreno di ricerca per analizzare l'identità nazionale, Anna Maria Martellone ha aperto un filone di studi e dato un impulso rilevante allo sviluppo dell'americanistica italiana. Lo attesta anche l'impegno profuso nella direzione di quella che, negli anni Ottanta, era l'unica rivista accademica di settore, *Storia Nordamericana*. Non aveva però mai abbandonato il suo interesse per la storia delle idee, espressosi nei saggi sull'*Anglosaxdom* e, in una sorta di percorso intellettuale *coming full circle*, nella pubblicazione sull'*Archivio Storico Italiano* del vecchio lavoro, rivisto e aggiornato, su Marretti (2000).

Docente e studiosa attenta e puntuale, ha formato un gruppo di storici e storiche in grado di confrontarsi alla pari con i colleghi d'oltreoceano. Al contempo, ha saputo intessere una lunga vita ricca di esperienze artistiche a tutto campo (dalla letteratura alla musica, e al cinema) e di amicizie intellettuali tra cui spiccano personaggi illustri della sua Firenze e non solo, figure fino all'ultimo ricordate e rimpianti: da Francesca Sanvitale, conosciuta negli anni d'università, a Gianni Klaus Konig, da Ernesto Ragionieri a Luigi Schenoni, primo traduttore di *Finnegans Wake* in Italia. E su tutti, vivo e presente, l'amico di una vita Franco Cardini.

Dal 2024, l'Associazione Italiana di Studi Nord Americani, di cui era il "socio n. 1", le dedica il "Premio Anna Maria Martellone" destinato alla miglior tesi dottorale di argomento storico discussa annualmente in Italia.

Raffaella Baritono, Stefano Luconi, Gigliola Nocera, Elisabetta Vezzosi

Lina Unali (1936 – 2024)

Nella notte tra il 14 e il 15 agosto 2024, Lina Domenicangela Unali ci ha lasciati.

Già professoressa ordinaria di Letteratura Inglese presso l'Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata, è stata figura di spicco dell'anglistica e dell'americanistica italiana. Con le sue numerose e appassionate attività dal respiro internazionale, capaci di spaziare dalla critica letteraria alla scrittura creativa, ha contribuito a dischiudere canali di comunicazione tra Asia e Occidente. È stata *Instructor* e *graduate student Fulbright* presso la University of Washington (1961-62), professoressa incaricata all'Università di Cagliari (1970-1982), *Visiting Professor* presso la Nerhu University di New Delhi, India, negli anni 1980-1985. L'attività di *Visiting Professor* l'ha poi condotta alla National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan, nel 1985-86. *Fulbright scholar* presso l'Università di Harvard, nel 1971-1972, è stata docente per tre semestri presso la State University of Somalia, Mogadiscio negli anni 1988, 1989, 1990. Nel 2009 ha fondato il Centro di ricerca *Asia and the West*, oggi presso il Dipartimento di Storia, Patrimonio culturale, Formazione e Società dell'Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata.

Si è distinta come anglista e americanista, riuscendo a far dialogare le due discipline in opere critiche sempre innovative e di grande rilievo, testimonianza dei suoi molteplici interessi, dall'*Early Modern period* all'Ottocento inglese e americano fino alla letteratura asiatico americana. Si ricordano, tra le sue numerosissime pubblicazioni, *Mente e Misura. La Poesia di William Carlos Williams* (Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1970), *Stella d'India: Temi imperiali britannici, modelli di rappresentazione dell'India* (Edizioni Mediterranee, 1993), *Rapporto sulla Cina* (Editori Riuniti,

2013), *Beautiful China* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016) e *William Shakespeare amidst Monarchs, Revolutions and Actors* (Lago Sole Luna, 2019).

Come autrice di testi creativi, meritano una menzione speciale *La Sardegna del desiderio* (Ripostes, 1991), *Trilogia della Somalia musulmana* (Il Grappolo, 2001), *Viaggio a Istanbul* (Edes, 2009), *Andalusian General. A Narrative of Sardinia and Spain* (Edes, 2010), *My Digital Talk Story* (Editori Riuniti, 2015) e *Fiori sardi di Capo Spartivento* (Vitale Edizioni, 2020).

Ma è soprattutto come maestra che vogliamo ricordarla: ci ha insegnato che la verità va sempre perseguita, anche quando si fa tagliente come lama; ci ha insegnato ad amare ciò che appare diverso, senza averne paura; ci ha insegnato ad abbracciare qualsiasi destino, ingegnandoci per “cambiare il dato” (come amava ripetere) quando il fato sembra avverso; ci ha insegnato a credere fino a riuscire; ci ha insegnato a celebrare la vita, a rispettare ogni suo aspetto, a coltivare il corpo, l’anima, l’intelletto perché, memore della lezione di William Blake, tutto partecipa della stessa sostanza.

Vogliamo salutarla con affetto e gratitudine attraverso le parole di Emily Dickinson, immaginandola libera, nella sua amata Sardegna:

Unable are the Loved to die
For Love is Immortality,
Nay, it is Deity –

Unable they that love – to die
For Love reforms Vitality
Into Divinity.

Elisabetta Marino, per tutti i suoi allievi e le sue allieve

